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What Do the Gods See? – Essay by Attila Végh • The Figures of the Danaids in Babits and Nietzsche – Study by Attila Simon • A Sensual Nightmare – Johan de Boose on Jan Fabre’s *Peak Mytikas* • *The Tragedy/Song of Oedipus* – Alessandro Serra on His Own Production • “What Has Just Happened Is Already History” – Roundtable of Professional Guests at the 10th Theatre Olympics • National Themes and Renewing the Language of Theatre. Discussion on the New Staging of *The Viceroy Bánk* • Sándor Petőfi 200 • Gender Dynamics in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* – Study by Veronika Schandl • Hunger and Sea. Shakespeare’s *The Sonnets* and *Twelfth Night or What You Will* – Essay by Sándor Fazekas

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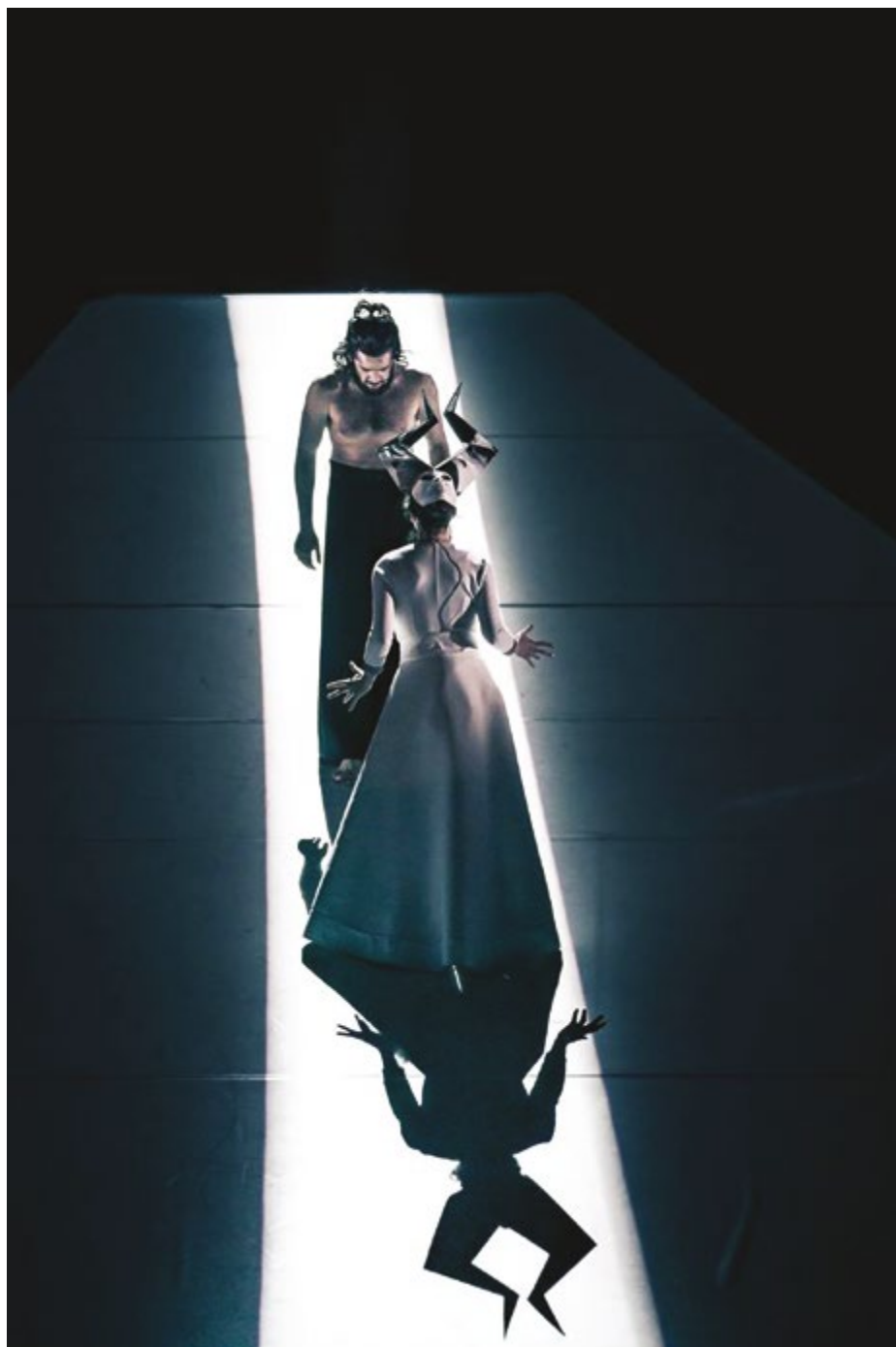
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inaugural



KATALIN MÉSZÁROS

“Theatre is the Place that Preserves the Emotional Memory of Humanity”

The Head of Media Communications of the National Theatre interviewed by Zsolt Szász

– At the press conference of the 11th MITEM, State Secretary for Culture Magdolna Závogyán and Government Commissioner for the Turkish-Hungarian Season Péter Hoppál praised the 10th Theatre Olympics. Both highlighted the mission of the theatre and how the event had put Hungary on the map of world theatre. A volume on this world event will be published in April this year. You are known to have followed the programme of previous MITEMs and the Olympics as well. As a “professional spectator”, what was your overall impression?



I don't know how much of a "professional spectator" I am... Last year, as Head of Media Communications of Budapest Operetta Theatre, I worked with my colleagues to get the word out about the Csárdásfürstin Festival at the Operetta within the Theatre Olympics. In addition to Attila Vidnyánszky's production of *Csárdásfürstin*, a Lithuanian and a French company performed the same masterpiece, and the Festival closed with the *Best of Csárdás Gala*, a joint cross-section of the performances of the Hungarian, French and Lithuanian companies. Is there a better example of cultural cooperation?



I was lucky enough to attend the first MITEM back in 2014: as an editor-anchor for MTVA, I covered MITEM performances with my colleagues in a daily festival news programme. I remember *Gogolrevizor* (Gogolgovernmentinspector), a production by the Moscow Art Theatre studio company, directed by Victor Ryzhakov, an emblematic figure of contemporary Russian theatre, whom I interviewed in Debrecen before the premiere of *The Hairdresser*. This grotesque, humorous and painful production has since become one of the National Theatre's most successful shows. It was also the first time I had encountered the world of Georgian director David Doiashvili, whose productions *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Cyrano de Bergerac* had already won the hearts of Hungarian audiences at the National, thanks to his extraordinary expressionist vision, bold use of music and cinematic visuals. Silviu Purcărete, one of the best-known creators of Romanian and international theatre, staged Shakespeare's *As You Like It* at the first MITEM with his regular collaborator, set designer Helmut Stürmer. Attila Vidnyánszky took part in that year's festival with two monumental, dynamic performances: *Joan of Arc at the Stake* and *Fabulous Men with Wings*. One could already feel the horizon opening and the world "flooding in": distant and/or ancient cultures and even astonishingly contemporary productions were presented among the festival performances; major international thinkers of the theatre and creators who spoke a different theatrical language arrived in our country. These artists are almost all regular guests at MITEM. For example, Valery Fokin (who was present in the first years) is currently rehearsing the *King Lear Show* with the National Theatre company.

Among the performances at the Theatre Olympics, I would like to highlight two of my favourite productions: one is *The Tempest*, directed by Alessandro Serra. I had already met him the previous year, when he staged another Shakespeare play: *Macbettu* in Sardinian dialect, with male actors and pantomime elements, in keeping with Elizabethan theatre. The witches were old women in black dresses and with bent backs, as if we were on the island of Sardinia... The other was Silviu Purcãrete's production of *The Scarlet Princess of Edo*, based on the Kabuki play by Tsuruya Namboku IV. The Romanian director created a European production incorporating Japanese theatrical traditions in the story of the Princess Sacura in the 1800s. Both productions were fine examples of cultural dialogue.

– But as the new Head of Media Communications at the National Theatre, you are now approaching this year's event as the expert in charge. What challenges do you see ahead of you? What initiatives does the National's new PR team have in place to ensure the success of the Meeting and to promote its visibility at home and internationally?

MITEM is already known to the domestic audience, they know that this year they won't have to travel to see Turkish, Italian, Bulgarian, Belgian, Basque, Spanish, Georgian and Greek performances. We are developing various collaborations to attract more and more young people, and we aim to work even more intensely with the embassies and cultural institutions in our country. This year there will also be a world theatre premiere, Alessandro Serra's *Oedipus*, for which we are planning to implement an international media campaign.



Shakespeare: *As You Like It*, National Theatre, Budapest, Hungary, 2013, d: Silviu Purcãrete (photo by Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nationaltheatre.hu)



Macbettu, from William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: written and directed by Alessandro Serra, Sardegna Theatre, Teatropersona Company, 2016 (photo by Alessandro Serra, source: nationaltheatre.hu)

This year, communication will also be supported by the actors of the National Theatre, who will host a company each. They themselves have chosen the productions and companies. Another important objective is for companies from different countries to get to know the National Theatre and Hungary through the eyes of Hungarian artists.

– *The predominance of ancient Greek themes and mythical prehistoric stories is quite striking in this year’s programme. We have already seen memorable productions on this theme at previous MITEMs. One need only think of Robert Wilson and Rimas Tuminas’ Oedipus, or Tadashi Suzuki’s productions (The Trojan Women; Electra) from last year’s Meeting. But we can’t fail to mention Theodoros Terzopoulos’ production of The Bacchae, staged in our theatre, which will be performed at this year’s Festival. But the biggest sensations are likely to be Alessandro Serra’s world premiere and Jan Fabre’s 8-hour production of PEAK MYTIKAS. How would you personally commend this theme to the audience? How can you promote it in order to arouse the interest of today’s people in a world that seems so distant?*

This year’s Festival will start with *Odysseus*, a production based on Homer’s work. Speaking at the MITEM press event, Bulgarian director Diana Dobрева said that such festivals give hope to humanity and that theatre is the place that preserves the emotional memory of humanity. This emotional memory offers the hope that we can escape evil and, as the Bulgarian director put it, “theatre can unite humanity in one big heart”.



Peak Mytikas (on the Top of Mount Olympus),
Concept & direction: Jan Fabre,
Troubleyn Laboratorium, Antwerp, 2023
(photo by Silvia Varrani, source: nationaltheatre.hu)

And is there a more topical theme than the search for Ithaca, Europe’s common past, its spiritual homeland? In Jan Fabre’s eight-hour production *Peak Mytikas (On the Top of Mount Olympus)*, the creators engage in a dialogue

with the ancient Greek gods, while reflecting on our war-torn world today... How can we bring *Oedipus* to contemporary audiences? How do we make Sophocles accessible to all? – asks Alessandro Serra. We, the festival organisers, correspondents of the event, and media representatives are working to make sure the artistic message of the foreign participants reaches the domestic audience and foreign representatives of the profession as authentically as possible.

Translated by László Vértés



cult and canons



ATTILA VÉGH

What Do the Gods See?

“Wondering is more beautiful than knowing.”
(A. V.)

The mask is a gateway to the soul. It closes on something, it opens on something. It shields the face, the personal, from watching eyes. When we don a mask, all that remains are our gesticulations, our movements. Wearing a mask is always a rite: I am forcing the world to acknowledge its infidelity. We can only be faithful to faces. The mask-born absence of faces reveals that society consists of faces, which are images of the inner vibrations of the Other. It would be impossible to create a society of masks. (At the same time, in a more subtle sense, everyone has their own collection of masks for a successful social life.) No one can remain faithful to an invisible soul. You cannot love someone who wears a



Terracotta model of a comic mask,
Hellenistic, Melos 200–50 BC.
British Museum, London
(source: teachinghistory100.org)

mask all the time. Mirror people, who constantly adapt to given situations, who constantly conform to real or perceived expectations, die unloved. Our face is the identifying mark of the secret constant that feeds our moments of life intangibly.

The mask shows a person enriched by the loss of personal identity: someone who has transcended their individual self. A spiritual *Übermensch*: we feel defenceless against them. The closing of the face-gate that shields them from us wounds us deeply: they can painfully see into our very core from their elevated perspective, from a higher plane of existence. Like a god.

Let us see what such a god can see. Creatures who are slaves to their response to life situations at every moment. Mirror people who all reflect the light of this god's

cold rule. Seen from behind the cover of facelessness, everyone else is vulnerable. They have one advantage over the wearer of the mask: that they are alive. They are sensitively included in the moment and create it as autonomous beings. They create their life situations, which the masked man is outside of, by clashing their secret constant, their self-identity in the common space of their coexistence. Two fields of force are opposed to each other here: on one side, souls forever somehow conforming to the world, and on the other side, a world created by the inner life of the souls. The two fields of force converge, flow into each other. We live in this estuary.

The mask elevates you from this landscape, detaches you from the tumultuous power of life's ongoing activities, and flings you into the realm of abstraction. The reason why the various gurus and psychics seem so inaccessible is that when viewed from behind a mask, all faces are laid bare, because from this perspective, from the side of faces, they have been able to halt the convergence of soul and world, and are therefore outside of the world. I say, like a god.

It is always in borderline situations that you wear a mask. (Or you expect the creation of such a borderline situation if you don a mask.) On the border of New Year's Eve and New Year, on the border of winter and spring, on the border of order and conspiracy, on the border of life and frenzy, on the border of life and death, masked individuals are hustling and bustling.

Life's major turning points – we, fellow-facers feel – must at all costs come from the outside, from above. From powers greater than ourselves. In the significant moments of our lives, we yearn to lose ourselves, to disappear into this feeling. We call this departure from ourselves, ecstasy.

To disappear, to become immersed in something shared, sublime, and boundless: I am propelled by this secret desire when I am seized by the communal ecstasy of a rite, a protest or a football match in a stadium, when I vanish into love, dissolve into the experience of nature, weep in the catharsis of art. To dissolve into the secret; to dissolve into the feeling that what I have just dissolved into is somehow, mysteriously, my deepest home.

In Hellas, Peisistratus establishes the Dionysian cult as law. The faces of the characters in this religious cult continuing to live on in tragedy are the masks of the god. The mask of Greek tragedy depicts a terrified man. It is an owl-eyed face with an agape mouth. Yet some masks do not show terror; only its milder form: wonder.

The windows of the face of the person in wonder open: their eyes widen, their mouth opens. They are transformed into a total receiver. The face of the person in wonder is similar to that of the terrified person because there is also something threatening in the unfamiliarity of astonishment. I surrender my senses to an unknown current in wonder as well. In the self-loss of ecstasy, I step out of myself towards the familiar unfamiliarity; in wonder, something unfamiliar settles in my inner home.

The wondering person stands at the border between the unfamiliar and the familiar. At the border between the human and the inhuman. Like the

superhuman, Nietzsche's Übermensch. In his essay *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense* Nietzsche condemns humanity for its anthropomorphism. He exposes the insignificance of our truths. "At bottom, what the investigator of such truths is seeking is only the metamorphosis of the world into man. He strives to understand the world as something analogous to man, and at best he achieves by his struggles the feeling of assimilation" he writes.

In Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*, we read: "We don't want to conquer the cosmos, we simply want to extend the boundaries of Earth to the frontiers of the cosmos." But do we have any other option? Is there another world, another space for us to live in, than the one we can know, feel and imagine within the boundaries of the world with a human face? And when Nietzsche is able to look at the very human world through the eyes of the Martian, when he therefore steps out into its imagined boundaries to classify all truth as conventional lies in the name of a higher truth, is it not merely a matter of turning the conventional notion of truth inside out like a glove? For if by truth I do not mean the same thing as anyone else, the same thing as Nietzsche condemns here, then I cannot understand the sentence. Trap of the Catch 22. I can of course imagine the supra-truth, the transhuman truth in whose name Nietzsche speaks, yet Nietzsche's stand on the edge of human existence still represents the first step into an infinite regress.

Circulus vitiosus, say the proponents of logic to such intellectual movement. Rite, I say. This circle dance is meaningless from the point of view of linear, logical thought. Or maybe it is just incomprehensible. What the spirit experiences in this waltz cannot be felt from the outside, from the onlookers' row of seats. Living in the rite is an eternal feeling. Being an onlooker is eternal thinking. The two together are wonder. The ancient Greeks are a people of wonder.



Solaris, 1972, d: A. Tarkovsky (source: mafab.hu)



The Rite, 1969, d: Ingmar Bergmann (source: pinterest.com)

In Ingmar Bergman's film *The Rite*, the artists are summoned by an official bureaucrat to investigate "the case". What the case is, we do not know. In the opening scene of the film, we see the investigator's face as he is examining the photographs of the suspects with a magnifying glass. Through the magnifying glass, we see his eyes. Owl-eyed Pallas Athena, knower of all things. In the photos, the costumed actors are wearing masks. The investigator wants to decipher these people. During the interrogations we learn nothing about the reason for the procedure. A Kafkaesque situation. The investigator tries to understand the actions, motives, and lives of the artists. However, from the perspective of ordinary bourgeois life, all of this is chaos. Artists are not ordinary people. They may be gods, they may be heroes, they may be madmen, they may be mentally ill. Or all of these together. Their lives are a mystery to the 'normal' person. Finally, the investigator wants to see the performance that is the subject of the case. The three actors appear in costume in the interrogation room, and the rite begins. They put on masks. Nothing has started yet, but in the presence of the masked beings, the investigator is slowly collapsing: he begins to sweat, becomes a child again, stammers about his fears, trembles.

The rite is as follows. One actor holds up a bowl filled with blood to the rising Sun. Behind the bowl stands an actress wearing a goddess mask. The face of the goddess is reflected in the blood. As the Sun rises, the actress drinks up the blood. She drinks up the face of God. The space is filled with divine presence. The investigator collapses dead.

A mask is a face which God has stroked the personal features off. And vice versa: God is a metaphor for man. The Greek stage was initially a space metaphorical to the core. The presence of God shone through. If every single character in a stage performance wears a mask, then the performance space is only open towards the spectators. The wondering faces of the audience open to the stories of masked, superhuman beings. The masks themselves also form a wondering face. It is when reflecting this that the faces of the spectators open to the deepest. And the audience, like in Bergman's *The Rite*, drink the image off the stage. They drink blood, like the King on the stage of Terzopoulos in the opening image of *The Bacchae*.

You stand before the myths of the gods as a magistrate observing the rite. Ancient myth evokes the mystery of existence. It makes it expressible, yet it does not provide an explanation. It does not awaken in us the desire for omniscience. Myth acknowledges that what cannot be articulated must remain unspoken.

The tapestry of myth is always woven with mixed threads. It explains the mystery while keeping it within a tale. It illuminates it, yet retains its mystery. It exposes it to sunlight, but does not dry it out. It usually achieves this by making the lives of the beings, projected from the unknown, humanlike while they themselves are superhuman: gods, demigods, heroes. Their actions are understandable and incomprehensible. Sometimes they act logically, morally, lovingly, at other times they do not. How and when is for them to decide. We

may call this caprice, but that is too human a trait. For what appears to be caprice from below is something whose reasons are inaccessible to us.

The provision of reasons is true knowledge, says Aristotle. Yet this knowledge stops at the boundaries of our world. What lies beyond is what we call: the great questions of existence. A great question is one whose unanswered nature requires wisdom to accept. In my lifetime, I must reach the boundaries of my intellect, but I can never cross that ultimate boundary. All I can do with that secret background radiation is to allow its squinting, opalescent light into my life so that it should dress up its important moments as wonders. Everyone who searches remains faithful to that mystery they do not know, says Pascal Quignard.

This thought sets you on two paths. On one hand, it points to an important element of fidelity: unattainability. Medieval knights swore eternal fidelity to the forever unattainable lady. It was as if they had sensed the limitlessness that resided in the depths of love and had intensified their desire for it to the utmost, to the point of insanity. True loyalty to the unknowable mystery, uncontaminated by the empirical world: this is the vanishing point of our eternal hope. To be faithful to the hopeless: this is what we call hope.

With every thing achieved, the unattainable takes a step back. Our lives are drawn towards infinity. To know is to be faithful to the unknowable. To be in love is to be faithful to the one who, even in the tightest embrace of our lover, we feel is still far away. To be a doctor is to be faithful to death.

Social events are, with few exceptions, not very interesting, but there are some that, upon reflection, can open up intellectual horizons. Such is the revolution of 1956. A country then woke up from its nightmare, only to fall back to the same state a few weeks later. The failure of the freedom fight and the enduring memory of fifty-six made it clear to posterity that a revolution can only truly win if it fails. Because then its ideals will shine as brightly as fresh snow in the hearts of future generations. Victorious revolutions devour their children, and after a brief intoxication of freedom, the victors establish a reign of terror just as – if not more – ruthless than the one they rebelled against.

The other path, onto which Quignard's phrase thrusts: cognition is moved by a secret vow made to the unknowable, much like the tides of the sea are moved by the moon. Everything attracts only as long as it is imbued with mystery. As the known expands, the mystery deepens step by step. People constantly betray knowledge: they abandon it for the sake of new knowledge, reevaluate it, and classify the old as false. The secret can never be betrayed. It is only the journey to knowledge that is interesting. The known is already devoid of secrets and therefore uninteresting, while the secret is intriguing because it is unknowable. Wonder is the lung of the secret that resides within me. In knowledge, curiosity exhales its secret. What remains are rituals, myths, wonder. The theatre.

Translated by Nóra Durkó



ATTILA SIMON

Exhaustion and Recycling

The Figures of the Danaids in Babits and Nietzsche

1. Introduction¹

The literary heritage of classical antiquity from the Renaissance to Classicism, or rather up to German Romanticism, constitutes the basis of a pre-national and, in this sense, a “universal” or “common literature” (not to be confused with “world literature” in the current sense of the term as presupposing the national) which can be considered a sort of “premodern repository.”² In addition to thinking of themes, motifs, plots and figures of Greek and Roman mythology as defining the entire system of literature, we also mean genres, verse forms, meters and even tropes— from directly quoting of ancient texts to reminiscences, and from allusions to patterns which interweave the entirety of literature.

However, since the turn of the 19th century—roughly parallel to the gradual loss of the priority of classics within the academic sphere—the marginalization of the classical tradition has been registered in living culture, as well as in literature.³

¹ The longer version of this paper was published earlier: Simon, Attila. “Exhaustion and Recycling: The Figures of the Danaids in Babits, Nietzsche, Freud, and Proust.” *Central European Cultures* 1. Vol. 2. Issue. 2021. 84–118. The research for this paper was financially supported by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office within the framework of the Thematic Excellence Program: “Community building: family and nation, tradition and innovation,” ELTE 2020/21, and within the framework of the project “Biopoetics in 20th and 21st Century Hungarian Literature” (K 132113).

² Tihanov, “On the Significance of Historical Poetics,” 418–19; Tihanov refers to Alexander Veselovsky’s views.

³ For a brief overview of the complex and historically variable constellation of ancient literature, world literature, classical philology and comparative literature, and the Classical Reception Studies as the intersection of the latter two, see Most, “Classics and Comparative Literature,” 155–57. The academic sphere is defined by the tension

The influence of the ancient cultural “repository” dwindled, and the formal and thematic elements of classical antiquity in European literary culture were gradually effaced—even if the process was not uniform everywhere, nor was it evenly staged.⁴

In Modernism, this tradition was once again challenged. The radical challenging of the creative power of the ancient tradition coincided with a shift which took place between—and for the sake of simplicity, let us associate it with—two well-known names: Winckelmann and Nietzsche. Nietzsche’s relationship to antiquity, once again with some simplification, can mainly be understood as an alteration resulting in Dionysus gaining new prominence in the ancient tableau of gods, placed next to Apollo. That is, a world of irrationality, ecstasy, and tragedy in the Nietzschean-Greek sense. Darkness appeared besides light; the realm of Hades besides the Olympus.

In addition (and more importantly for us), in his early work, Nietzsche had already deviated from the harmonious and, above all, unquestionable relationship with the ancient tradition. In place of Winckelmann’s rules for imitating classical works, he puts greater emphasis on competing or wrestling with the traditions of antiquity, but without losing his admiration for antiquity *reinterpreted*.

As a result, a reflection on this relationship itself also appears. This, in fact, stems from the realization that the classical heritage, with its prevailing roles in European culture, needs continuous interpretation and reinvention. As



Johann Joachim Winckelmann: *The History of the Art of Antiquity*. Dresden, 1764 (source: wikipedia.org)

found in the beginning of this more than two-hundred-year-old story: classical studies had just been established as an independent university discipline when it immediately faced threatening competition in the history of national literatures. Moreover, both were in competition with comparative studies that would only later be institutionalized.

⁴ This is not contradicted by the predominance of Greco-Latin schooling in English or German areas in the nineteenth century, nor by the *individual* attraction of several poets (such as Tennyson or Swinburne) to antiquity (cf. Cushing, “Babits és az angol klasszika-filológiai hagyomány”). On the other hand, and as noted above, this process cannot be considered as uniform, but as having taken place in alternating waves in the different cultural fields of different linguistic regions. According to Most (“Classics and Comparative Literature,” 157) in the field of humanities in the last two centuries “interrelation between these fields has been surprisingly frequent and intense”.

Nietzsche repeatedly proclaimed: the tradition of antiquity and its transmission–philology–became a *problem* rather than a self-evident medium and activity.⁵ For him, philology was therefore needed as a critical discipline, i.e., not as textual criticism but rather as critical work assisting the two-way mediation between the classical past and the present.⁶

Nevertheless, the tradition of antiquity within this framework (which is certainly not defined by Nietzsche only) remains a part of and, at times, a crucial part of European literature and thought (as it does with Nietzsche himself), even if more sporadic and indirect than before. Certain elements of this tradition, however, have undergone radical reinterpretations–perhaps even more radical than was usual in the past. The figures of the Danaids seem to be an element of such a completely novel reinterpretation.

This article shows that two representatives of European modernism, the Hungarian poet Mihály Babits (1883–1941) and the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche have rewritten the story of the Danaids using a completely novel and, upon closer inspection, self-reflective approach. They recycle the myth of Danaus’s daughters–more specifically, the main figures of the myth, the Danaids, and their work in the Underworld: carrying water to perforated barrels or amphorae–to articulate the crisis of *transmission* or *communication* in the broadest terms.

Babits’s poem performs the song of the Danaids while meta-poetically staging the failure of personal and cultural (literary) memory. At the same time, in *The Danaids*, the modern crisis of language and memory–as personal memory and as tradition –, the feeling of exhaustion of the classical poetic heritage is expressed in the reinvented and recycled words and figurations of the same language and poetic tradition. Nietzsche identifies the work of the philologists with the work of the Danaids, though the activities of the philologists do not end with the action of meaningless and futile repetition. Rather, the work of the Danaids and the philologists becomes a symbol of infinite interpretation, which is done on both the exhaustible and inexhaustible material of antiquity.

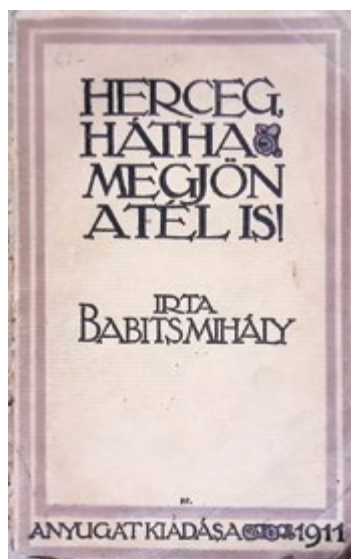
For closer contextualization of these rewritings, we could refer to a complex problem, key elements of which are the crisis of language–the representational and communicative role of language–as articulated by Nietzsche or, with a different emphasis, by Hofmannsthal; another element is the detachment of classical European tradition from the present and the questioning of its power to carry meaning that leads to its increasingly conspicuous reliance on mediation and interpretation. In what follows, I will examine the evocation of the Danaids as the symbolization of unending historical-philological interpretation (Nietzsche), as well as the fallibility of memory and language, the exhaustion and reinvention of the classical literary tradition (Babits).

⁵ Nietzsche, *We Philologists*, fr. 27, fr. 31, fr. 68.

⁶ Nietzsche, *We Philologists*, fr. 7, fr. 152, fr. 153, fr. 160, fr. 174.

2. Babits

With the exception of *Hegeso sírja* [*The Tomb of Hegeso*], all of Babits's 'Greek poems' appear in his second volume, *Herceg, hátha megjön a tél is!* [*Prince, if Winter Should Come*], published in 1911. In addition, his other volumes also contain poems both closely and more loosely related to antiquity in a broader sense. Babits's relationship to classical antiquity was by no means homogeneous or uniformly peaceful, balanced or harmonious; in fact, elements of struggle with the ancient poetic heritage are often present in his work. The title of the opening poem of his first volume is *In Horatium*. The ambiguity of this title (as the preposition *in* does not only mean "against something" but can also be interpreted with the more neutral meaning of "towards something" or "in relation to something") clearly shows that Babits's relationship to Horace—not only in this poem but



Mihály Babits: *Prince, Maybe Winter will Come!* Nyugat, 1911
(source: moly.hu)

throughout his oeuvre—is characterized by the duality of subversion and affirmation, in which differing aspects and emphases might gain importance.⁷ The figure of Horace should be interpreted here as *pars pro toto*: Babits's entire relationship to antiquity is defined by "tectonic" rearrangements and accompanying tensions.⁸

Babits's poem *A Danaidák* (*The Danaids*), written in March 1909,⁹ was also published in his second volume (and prior to that in the 5th issue of *Nyugat* in 1910).¹⁰ The poem is an exceptional model of the spectacular complexity typical of aesthetic modernity, at times exaggerating the decorative sophistication of Art Nouveau.¹¹ The powerful linguistic imagination of the self-contained,

⁷ Imre, "Babits és Horatius."

⁸ Tverdota, "Klasszikus álmok".

⁹ Rába, *Babits Mihály költészete*, 294.

¹⁰ Babits's poems are cited from Babits, *Összegyűjtött versei*.

¹¹ Rába, *Babits Mihály költészete*, 298. Think about formulas here, such as "eyelids permanently closing", then "wind" as "the lash of languid eyelids, for the whip of wavy waters"; the exaggerated alliterations in the construct "*át a réten, hol a Léthe (mert e rét a Léthe réte)*" ("to the bank along the Lethe, [for this bank is on the Lethe])" can be heard by the reader almost as a (self) parody. (In the entire paper, I quote the English translation by Peter Zollman available at https://www.visegradliterature.net/index.php?page=work&interfaceLang=hu&literatureLang=hu&translationLang=all&auth_id=119&work_id=21673&tran_id=21674&tr_id=0&tran_lang=en).

hopeless and depressing Underworld is the result of the combined effect of the poetic factors that determine the poem. This overall effect in the aesthetic experience of the poem should not be interpreted simply as an interplay of *opsis* and *melos* (spectacle and melody) (which is characteristic of all lyrical work), but as a perfect integration or “mirroring” of the two in a way typical of aesthetic modernity.¹² Such is, above all, the irregular pulsation of the verse sections, which loosens and modulates the trochaic meter mainly colored with spondees: “This double rhythm, the short-circuited and regular ones (of the trochees), and the long-arched irregular ones (of the verse sections), run through each other in strange waves, congested, and alternating”¹³ (the image of *waves* is also important in the perception of *liquidity*, which plays a key role in the text). At the same time, the “melody” gives a “single, homogeneous” impression,¹⁴ which, alongside other factors, constitutes the phonetic foundation of the oft-mentioned *monotony* of the poem, that can be perceived in different layers. The poem’s syntax can be characterized by the “long sentence” so typical of Babits (the entire text consists of no more than seven sentences—just as the Lethe runs “round and round seven times” (“in seven coiling girdles endlessly the Lethe circles round / and round and back again”), which is “not an evenly structured period, but a weaving of sentences stragglingly winding the subordinates and coordinates, branching, discontinuing and then turning back or further meandering, often seeming almost inextricable”.¹⁵ As a result, the slow and often “loop-like” development of the complex sentences of the poem contributes to the formation of meaning by slowing down the reading as the meaning unfolds. The slow and languid nature of the movements (“prescribed” by the trochees and the spondees) depicted in the poem plays an important role in this, as well as its figures that can be assigned to the *circulation* (thinking mainly of the circular motions of the Lethe and the Danaids).

Interpreters of *The Danaids* agree that the most particular elements of the language of the poem are recurrence and repetition, especially the different forms of repetition of certain words and phrases.¹⁶ The repetitions or “variants”

¹² To explore the two categories of ancient origin as reinterpreted by Culler in the reading of the lyric, see Kulcsár Szabó, “*Boldogan és megtörötten?*” 44–5.

¹³ Nemes Nagy, “Danaidák, ‘dekadencia’,” 52. Feuermann correctly perceived the poem as bimetric (“Babits, *A Danaidák*,” 161); Rába (*Babits Mihály költészete*, 295–96) cites the “rhythm plan” of Poe’s *The Raven* as the main rhythmic pattern for Babits’s poem.

¹⁴ Rába, *Babits Mihály költészete*, 296.

¹⁵ J. Soltész, “Babits mondattípusai,” 313.

¹⁶ Feuermann, “Babits: A Danaidák,” 156–59; for a detailed linguistic analysis of various repetitions, see Büky, “Az ikonicitás megvalósulása”. As a possible, at least partial model of Babits’s poem, Endre Ady’s poem *Women on the Shore* (*Asszonyok a parton*) must be mentioned (first published in 1907), which could have influenced Babits not only with the “thousand women” (Babits’s “fifty women”) phrase, but also with the four times repeated line “A thousand women stood on the shore,” and by



John Singer Sargent: Studies for *The Danaïdes*, 1921, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
(source: jssgallery.org)

in the text can be understood as morphological repetitions, namely repetitions that take place in the language of the poem both on the level of the signifier and the signified. This alteration of continuity and discontinuity with its known/novel duality¹⁷ gives the poem a dynamic effect. The forms of repetition—from *iteratio* to *repetitio*, from *reduplicatio* to *redditio*, from *anaphora* to *epiphora* and, present within the sentences of the poem at the end of larger units and, because of this distance, separated, the inconspicuous, but still perceptible *polyptota*—urge a murmur or mantra-like reading of the poem. Semantically, the extreme frequency of specific words and—more or less loosely—of larger phrases can be connected to the ever-repeating activities of the Danaïdes in the Underworld.

The most characteristic features of the requisites of the Underworld displayed on the scenic level of the poem—which also determines the affective quality of experiencing the text—are looming darkness, profound silence, and stillness (with the only exception being the River Lethe, though its movement, as noted earlier, is both a beginning and an end, a monotonous circulation flowing back into itself without a source or estuary, where movement and stasis cannot therefore be firmly separated). In this Underworld, movement is primarily related to the Danaïdes, while vocalization is exclusively related to them. Movements occurring in this almost motionless environment, as has been previously discussed, are represented as fluctuating, slow rolling, and dragging (besides the Lethe's circular rolling, we can also think of the quality of the girls' movements), not only in the images but also in the rhythm of the poem. The

predicting context-dependant shifts of meaning of the repeated line. For the most important antecedents of *The Danaïdes* in world literature, from the ancients through Dante and Goethe to (the probably most important one) Swinburne, see especially Rába, *Babits Mihály költészete*, 294–95.

¹⁷ Szegedy-Maszák, “A művészi ismétlődés néhány változata,” 110–14.

repetition in the language evokes the mechanical character of the elements on a referential level (firstly, in the girls' movements).¹⁸ As for the girls, this may even evoke the image of their robot-like quality.

This machine or robot-like nature is further reinforced by the descriptive representation of the Danaids, which emphasizes their group-like and sculptural, non-individual character, their resemblance to one another and even to the amphorae.¹⁹ Consider that all of the women, simply referred to as the “fifty women”, have bodies the color of “alabaster” that, at the same time, makes them similar to “alabaster amphorae”. Their hair is also uniformly “ebony coloured”, and they all sing and act in the mechanically repetitive structures of the language of the poem the same way throughout: “Thus the fifty sisters chanted, doomed widows of deep resemblance, pallid shapes of alabaster, fifty wives with raven tresses” (*Igy dalolt az ötven asszony, ötven kárhozott bús asszony, egymáshoz mind oly hasonló ébenfürtű, alabastrom testű ötven testvérásszony*). The idea of automatons or robots could not have been new to Babits, as it had already been known by Homer: Hephaestus, the god of metalworking, was assisted by maids made of gold, able to think as well as speak (*Iliad* XVIII. 417–420; Babits's poem entitled *Héphaisztosz [Hephaestus]*, which can also be understood as a self-portrait, must have been inspired by the scene portraying Hephaestus's work).

The monotonous repetition of the Danaids' movement, as has been highlighted by several interpreters, does not only determine the girls' motions, but also their songs. Babits, in fact, *makes the Danaids sing* and, in the still and silent realm of Hades, of the two elements of movement and song—which can mainly, or even, exclusively be associated with the girls—it is the latter which attracts the reader's attention more. I have, so far, found no trace of any other literary version of the myth, ancient or later tradition, in which Danaus's daughters sing²⁰ – at least regarding their underworldly “existence”.



Aeschylus: *The Suppliants*, National Theatre of Greece, Epidaurus, 1964, d: Alexis Solomos (source: argolikivivliothiki.gr)

¹⁸ Gintli, “Istennők párbeszéde,” 169.

¹⁹ Bartal, *Áthangzások*, 47–8.

²⁰ For the ancient relic, see Bernhard, “Danaiden”; Keuls, “Danaiides”. In Ermitage there is a volute-krater (B 1717 [St. 424], the 18th image at Keuls), on which there are dancing Danaids. This can refer to singing as well. For the afterlife, Kreuz et al., *Bibliographie*. To highlight only a few major literary authors in whose works the

(In Aeschylus's play *The Suppliants*, they form the singing Chorus, but in the third, lost part of Aeschylus's trilogy called *Danaids*, they probably did not descend to the Underworld.) With this innovative and re-interpretive addition, and with this emphatic inclusion of singing (which makes up a quarter of the poem), Babits does not only place the mythical plot in the psychological and metaphysical contexts of sin and punishment – that is, of the violent prevention of wedlock as an “end purpose” and the acts that follow as a punishment, repeated aimlessly and meaninglessly—but he also creates the opportunity to be able to read the poem as a text about language, or even about poetry. The song of the Danaids, a song within the song, a poem within the poem, could be read as a self-reflecting configuration: this poem is about language and poetry and, what is more, about relationship to poetic forms and traditions.

The largest part of the poem, which encompasses the song of the Danaids, is primarily presented in the genre of description (*descriptio*) and can be understood as part of the narrative (*narratio*), while the dramatizing genre of imaginary speech (*sermocinatio*) is wedged in by staging the song. What characterizes this song? Let us first look at the staging itself. The song of the Danaids is sung in a “stifled voice (*fojtott hangon*” – this element is not translated by Zollman)” by the “fifty doomed, tormented sisters”. The indication of vocal quality, the “stifled voice”, and of the number of choristers add to an important, metarepresentational framework: the dithyrambic chorus also had fifty members.²¹ Babits stages the Danaids as a tragic (or dithyrambic) chorus. The performance of the chorus as a chanter of the Dionysian truth—in that respect also close to lyric poetry—was articulated by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*—a work which made a strong impact on Babits.²² When Babits entrusts a *chorus* (whose members are not individual but robotic parts of a group) with the *exploration* and *expression* of confession and personal memory, of the soul or the inner life, he joins in Nietzsche's critique of the subjective (romantic) perception of lyric poetry. This criticism is performed by the Danaids in Babits's poem. Accordingly, this maneuver brings the song of the Danaids close to one of the origins of the Dionysian lyric of the chorus: that of the non-subjective lyrical speech.²³ The stakes here are greater or at least more poetic than the “personal” confession of

Danaids appear: Cervantes (Kreuz et al., *Bibliographie*, 156), Goethe and Schiller (337), Schiller (374), Karl Philipp Moritz (382), Jean Paul (387, 388, 391, 394), Schopenhauer (475).

²¹ In connection with Aeschylus's Danaids trilogy, it has been suggested that the chorus may have followed this number; however, this is probably not the case. See Lesky, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur*, 289.

²² Rába, *Babits Mihály költészete*, 296.

²³ Nietzsche, KSA 1. 64. For the tradition of choral lyric in 20th century Hungarian poetry, most of all in Milán Füst's and Sándor Weöres's works, see Bartal, *Áthangzások*, 63–130.

the fifty women—which is doomed to failure due to the defect in the creation of “personal” memory and, therefore, of coherent “subjects”.

The end of the song, which claims purposeless determination, belongs to the same framework: “keep echoing without knowing, otherwise the world is silent and the silence so harrowing, and the silent deadly darkness never, never says a word (*és daloljunk, bár nem értjük, mert különben némaság van, és a némaság oly félős! néma, rengeteg sötétség: a sötétség nem beszél –*)”. The sound of the stifled song, which is meaningless for its performers, becomes important in its sheer sound; the atmospheric-auratic effect of the sound soothes the singers’ fear. The merging of silence with darkness or obscurity characterizes not only the exterior (the “Underworld”) but also the singers’ interior world. Moreover, the contrast between darkness and light is also manifested in the relationship between the soul and words: “Long lost words are dimly glowing in our souls’ decaying fire, as if they were streetlights, gilding the walls of an unlit building (*Régi szavak járnak vissza elsötétült lelkeinkbe, mint sötétben nagy szobákba utcáról behullott fények*)”. The effect of words is also restrained here, however, in their restraint words are still similarly important: the accidental appearance of the words in the soul, evoking recurring fears and ghosts, is similar to a streetlight accidentally “gilding” the walls of a dark room, which, in its contingency and transitivity, does not offer the full light of transparency, but still sheds some light onto something.

It can also be seen as a meta-representative emphasis of the staging of the song—already involving the semantic dimension (the confusion within)—that the meanings of the words that make up the song of the Danaids are in themselves obscured to the singers; the linguistic elements are meaningless, unreliable testimonies to their past actions and feelings, performed by mechanical rote repetition—just like carrying water to the perforated amphorae. Paradoxically, the strongest semantic binding of the song of the Danaids created through repetitions is made by the blurring and forgetting of the meaning of the words that make up the song, or the incomprehensibility of the words.²⁴ With their song, the Danaids are unable to account for their past actions and, as a result, they cannot create their coherent story and, consequently, their personality. That is, from another point of view: they are unable to “sing out” their sinful actions, the song does not bring them the redemption of confession.²⁵ As their meaning is obscured, the

²⁴ “[long lost words] how could be trusted as we chant them never knowing what is?”; “what’s the meaning of?”; “just keep chanting, never knowing”; “keep echoing without knowing”

²⁵ Nor does it for a particular mistress Ágnes (in János Arany’s poem *Ágnes asszony*, *Mistress Ágnes*), her compulsive task of washing “her blood-stained sheet” clean, “from year’s end unto year’s end, / Winter, summer, all year through” in another river (trans. by William N. Loew). In Babits’s poem the Lethe’s water is “swilled with ancient, long-forgotten guilt”.

words flicker, moreover, are drained or dissipated, and are not fit for meaningfully recalling their actions. Singing as memory and as expression fails.

The decisively important notion of liquidity in the text is related primarily to femininity, to blood (not only that of the suitors, but also in relation to the “ceaseless” menstrual bleeding which can only be stopped by conception), to the water of the Lethe in the poem, and to the mythical tradition directly invoked in the poem. At the same time, the phrase “ever draining, ever filling” that appears in the song of the rueful girls can also be interpreted as the liquidity of words, their source or river (“just keep chanting, never knowing, *ever draining, ever filling, ever straining, never slowing*” – the italics are mine). Károly Kerényi, in his analysis of the mythological image of the source of the River Lethe, draws a parallel between the Danaids and the Lethe as flowing water and oblivion (the figure of *lēthē* and Lesmosyne), as both an irreversible outpour of memory and as the source and the fluid nature of memory (the figure of *mneme* and Mnemosyne), undergoing a *flow-through* of unfulfilment (the unbedded wedding and the perforated amphorae): “The flowing water symbolizes whatever passes, and water as a source is an archetypal image of the origin of life—and of memory.”²⁶

Though Babits’ Danaids are unconscious, they have feeling: they sing their “half-understood” verses “wakeful, yet without awareness”. The poem uses the same expressions to describe “mourning trees”. This aspect of plant-like life—similarly to the way Greek poetic imagination conjures the dead of the Underworld—indicates a sort of undead existence (and in this way, this plant-like nature is not so far removed from the machine-like discussed earlier, regardless of the contrast between the mechanical and the organic). The act of singing

²⁶ Kerényi, “Mnemosyne–Lesmosyne,” 680. The song of the Danaids, however, has some components that do not fit either the concept of “unfulfilledness” presented above or the known versions of the myth. (Could this be another inventive reinterpretation of Babits?) The phrasing comes to mind wherein the sorrowful girls still characterize their worldly existence with words referring to love, desire, perhaps even fertility, or at least a flourishing life (or even happiness?), and golden sunlight: “for we loved and freely lusted [...] in the glorious golden sunshine, on the earth beneath the sky”, and as if, more precisely, their unrecalable memories were also moving in this circle: “never knowing what is *loved?* and what is *lusted?* what’s the meaning of: *desire?*” Puzzling phrases that do not allow for a true attitude of mind, as filling the worldly jug of desire is accompanied by “emptying” (so, was the desire not fulfilled after all? or did it “empty” after fulfilment?), and the love-desire-lust trio surely does not refer to real past events, perhaps only to imagined events, “daydreamings”, desires that have remained desires (so the daughters could really never be “knowing what is *loved?* and what is *lusted?* what’s the meaning of *desire?*”). In any case, as figures of the myth (think of Aeschylus’s *The Suppliants*) the daughters resent marriage to their cousins (!), and kill their husbands before saying farewell to their maidenhood.

would tilt this hybrid form of plantlike existence, which can be conceived of as being undead in case of man, towards something akin to life, or at least towards a hint of activity. However, the feelings and memories of the fifty “tormented sisters” are incommunicable, unrecoverable, unverifiable by the “long lost words”, and thus the futility and incomprehensibility of the song associates this action with a helpless dead being.

The “amphorae” in the poem can be seen as a critique of language and even poetry, on a referential and rhetorical level, as well as on the material level of signifiers. These “amphorae”, as vessels used for storing and transporting water, are empty, or at least perforated, damaged, have lost their integrity, and are therefore unable to preserve or transport, that is, to “transfer”: the water poured into them drains or flows away. The counterpart of the amphorae in the system of the isotopes of the poem could be words, the song or the “classical forms”—as “vessels” of meaning or content, or as giving “form” to the “formless” substance poured into them: water. What is more, for modern readers, *amphora* both as a word and as an object could be a synecdoche of “classical forms”, thus involving not only a linguistic but also a poetic or traditional criticism in the range of possible interpretations of the poem. In this way, the construct “ever draining ever filling” does not only refer to water first and then to words, but also to the inability to fill poetic forms with content, to their “being drained”. Thus, words and forms, in the same way as amphorae, are incapable of preserving and communicating their content: their meaning or content, as it has been noted, drains or flows away. Moreover, the six occurrences of “amphora” in the text call attention to the material components of the word—their phonemes and letters—which highlight their projection of the signifier and the metaphorical object onto one another: in Hungarian, the words *forma* and *amorf* are a perfect anagram, and, with the addition of one vowel, so is *amphora*.²⁷

In addition to proving a defect in personal memory, in its somewhat paradoxical way (since the erasure of memory of the underworldly women is not complete, they can still recall some actions²⁸), the song of the Danaids can also be read as a partial erasure of cultural or literary memory, the memory of forms and myth. Consider this: in Babits’s poem the figures in the mythical story forget and cannot tell their own mythical story. In this context, when the Danaids are

²⁷ A well-known Hungarian advertising slogan of the eighties took advantage of this phonetic similarity: “*Tartalomhoz a forma: Amfóra!*” “Form adjusted to content: Amphora!” (I was reminded of this by Gábor Tamás Molnár, I thank him for that; the advert can be viewed here from 3:50: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TqRABRRAsSA>)

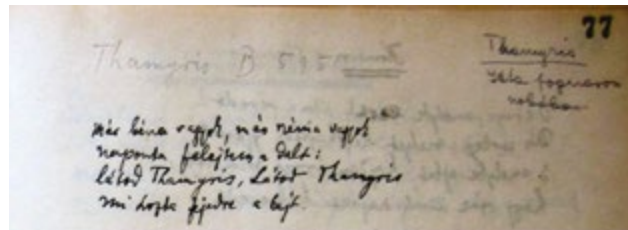
²⁸ “We have murdered fifty valiant wedded husbands, for we loved and freely lusted”, but it is then followed by: “heaven knows for whom we lusted”; “So let us chant: *We have murdered*—and remember well: *our husbands*”, and later here as well: “never knowing, keep echoing”.

singing “[d]eep, the darkness keeps its secret and the shadows don’t reply” (about the meaning of the words “to love”, “to desire”, “to embrace”, which are the most important codes in love-poetry, one of the elementary forms of lyric), they may as well be poets among these shadows. Horace sings about (*Carm.* II. 13. 21–40) how the song of Sappho and Alcaeus impresses the inhabitants of the Underworld and how Orpheus’s song softens Danaus’s daughters: for a moment the pitcher stops in their hands (III. 11. 22–24). Furthermore, in Virgil’s description of the Underworld, that Babits was surely familiar with, Orpheus and Musaeus are also present (*Aeneis* VI. 645–678). Traces of the erasure of the song, of the forgetting, of the silencing and the inability to transmit are also present in Babits’s other poems as well. There are two noteworthy examples of this.



Song of Sappho and Alcaeus on a copy of a Greek vase painting (source: harvard.edu)

The first one is from the poem *Thamyris*. The title refers to the mythical Thracian singer, who, challenged and defeated by the Muses, is blinded and deprived of his poetic talent, thus becoming a symbol of the tragic fate of poets and of poetic talent as a gift from the gods, which man cannot control. At the beginning of the poem, Thamyris complains he is paralysed, and lives in a silence and forgetfulness due to which he is unable to pluck the lyre, to produce sound or remember the song: “I am now lame, I am now mute, / daily forgetting the song”. However, it is not only singing in general, but the irrevocability of the classical past in particular which appears in Babits’s poetry. In this context, the poem *Classical Dreams* (*Klasszikus álmok*) should also be mentioned. Its significance is apparent in the fact that Babits originally planned to entitle the entire volume after this poem.²⁹ In the poem these “classical dreams” appear as “tired” and “fading thoughts”. These dream-thoughts, however, are embodied in the appearance of girls offering a sacrifice in front of the temple



Manuscript of Babits’ poem *Thamyris* (source: pimblog.blog.hu)

²⁹ Rába, *Babits Mihály költészete*, 287.

of the goddess. This is what we read about them: “Your wreath / a sapless, orphaned laurel; the costly trimming of the peplum / shows its colour reversed, as feverish dream: / no wonder, old wreath and a thousand-year-old suit.” (The poetic implications of the laurel wreath and the “thousand-year-old suit” are obvious, and these attributes are associated with privation: the laurel is “sapless” and “orphaned”, the suit is “a thousand year[s] old” and therefore its edges are faded.) No wonder that “the goddess thinks of you not”. For this goddess looks down in her distant and reserved majesty on the mortal men coming and turning to her, in the whirlwind of great times passing by. These girls offering a sacrifice are therefore the thoughts of the lyrical I receding into the shadows of the antiquity, evoking the classical age, wanting to be in communion, and, if I understand correctly, the goddess can be interpreted as the allegorical figure of classical heritage, who, in her majestic tranquility, cares nothing for these embodied dreams and thoughts. The past of antiquity is inaccessible in its meaningful and lively nature, in the rich content of its form. With Babits, in line with the aforementioned ambiguity of his relation to antiquity, there are other attitudes towards (classical) forms and creators, which are indicative of a timelessness (or even an enrichment over time) and the resonant nature of the lyrical I even in the present—for example in his *Sonnets* and *Homer*.

The duality observed in the relation between antiquity (the poetic heritage of the classical tradition) and the conveyability of antiquity—which, more generally, can be understood as the duality of memory and forgetting, of expressibility and inexpressibility, of conveyability and non-conveyability, and of the giving and losing of meaning—does not only appear in the aforementioned poems of the volume *Herceg, hátha megjön a tél is!* [*Prince, if Winter Should Come*], but is also emergent in a similar structure in *The Danaids*. To show this, we must first recall another point Kerényi makes. He contends that Mnemosyne,

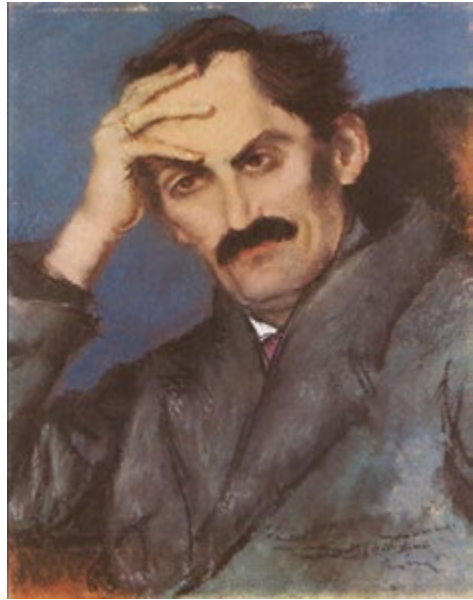
mother of the Muses and therefore of poetry, also has something to do with the Lethe or *lethe*, oblivion, just as primordially. Kerényi refers to Hesiod, who says in *Theogony* (53–55) that Mnemosyne did not only give birth to the Muses after “blending in love” with Zeus, but also (and all at once) birthed “the forgetting of troubles and the calming of worries (*lesmosyenen te kakön ampauma te mermeraön*)”. Poetry is linked to oblivion through the forgetting of troubles. “This unity of opposites under the rule



Mnemosyne, Antioch mosaics, 2nd and 4th centuries AD, Art Museum, Worcester (source: wikimedia.org)

of their positive side” is manifested in the fact that “this is also a gift from the Muses deriving from Mnemosyne, the Lethe, which dispels all things belonging to the nocturnal side of life. Together, these two form the essence of the goddess: illumination and illusion; Mnemosyne and her opposite, Lesmosyne.”³⁰

Naturally, oblivion in Babits’s poem, unlike Hesiod’s, at least at first glance, is only associated with the negative values of loss. Moreover, for him, the primary object of forgetting is also different: it is not “troubles” which are forgotten but the words which express worldly actions, as well as



József Rippl Rónai: *Portrait of Mihály Babits*, pastel on paper, 1923 (source: wikipedia.org)

past actions themselves, the memories of which have been erased (and which were naturally quite “troubled”, and therefore had to be forgotten). It is not clear, however, if the song itself, the “singing”, completely loses its significance and thus only retells the loss, the final disappearance of the irreversible, as in that case it would only be a painful song, the tormented, “inexplicable” return of the repressed.³¹ However, the song of the Danaids shows that despite the partial erasure or loss of meanings of words, the song and the forms demonstrated above, these words, this song and these forms must be sung. And it is not only confirmed by the Danaids as protagonists of Babits’s poem but also by the “song” *The Danaids* because Babits’s reinvention of the mythological story is a poem *per se*. This singing functions as a sort of chanting, moving away from the loss of the personal and literary, as well as the cultural memory, and perhaps, even from the need for sense itself. This song at least has the beneficial effect of driving away the dreadful silence of the Underworld:

“So let us chant: *We have murdered*—and remember well: *our husbands*, just keep chanting, never knowing, ever draining, ever filling; ever straining, never slowing; keep echoing without knowing, otherwise the world is silent and the silence so harrowing! and the silent deadly darkness never, never says a word”.

³⁰ Kerényi, “Mnemosyne – Lesmosyne,” 686.

³¹ According to Ritook, “Marai es Homeros”, Babits’s poem “is about man in general, as a being tormented by guilt, who may stifle guilt, the depressing memory—but who cannot escape it”.

3. Nietzsche

Babits expresses the crisis of language and the crisis of relation to tradition, the ceasing, or at least, the questioning of the content and conveyability of words and singing, or even the “exhausting” of classical poetic traditions in the recycling of words and forms of this very tradition and language. In relation to tradition, and, in particular, to the ancient tradition, a similar tendency can be observed with Nietzsche, who at this time was a decisive influence on Babits’s work and personality.

The duality already mentioned above—the duality of conveyability and non-conveyability, of giving meaning and losing meaning—is present not only in the poems of Babits. In 1911, he wrote a review in *Nyugat* on the first published volume of Nietzsche’s philological writings.³² This text eagerly affirms Nietzsche’s relationship to classics and to classical philology (more on this later), going as far as to distinguish between two types of philologists: the philologist “without a philosophical and emotional background”, and the philologist who is not “a thorough researcher, but has an enthusiastic understanding”, that is, the philologist turned into a philosopher. Here, the philosopher-philologist—and not just in reference to Nietzsche, who truly had become a philosopher—can be understood in a broader sense, as a discerning and interpretive scholar beyond positivism, for whom the “subject of philology in the broadest sense” is “the intellectual works and intellectual history of mankind”.³³ In the eyes of Babits, as in those of Nietzsche the transmission of data, which dominated the approach of traditional positivist philology, is surpassed by philology’s potential of conveying meaning.

In addition to shaping Babits’s ideas of the Greeks and philology, Nietzsche also impacted—besides the already mentioned influence on forming the “chorus” of the Danaids—his approach to art, again mainly through *The Birth of Tragedy*. The 1912 text *A Philosophy of Play*, written shortly after *The Danaids* and *Nietzsche, the Philologist*, is one of the most important and highly interesting texts in this regard, one in which Nietzsche’s influence, alongside that of Plato and Bergson, can be most strongly felt, and one which raises questions on the nature of art from an ontological perspective.³⁴

The figure of the Danaids appears in Nietzsche’s oeuvre in several places serving different functions. The following is a fragment of *We Philologist*, an early, unfinished work presenting a context of primary importance for our subject:

³² Nietzsche, *Philologica I*.

³³ The terms quoted: Babits, “Nietzsche mint filológus,” 257, 256, 262.

³⁴ Babits, “Játékfilozófia”. For the influence of Nietzsche, especially *The Birth of Tragedy* (and with this Michelet as well) in Babits’s early works, see Kelevéz, “Lelkemben bakhánslárma tombol”.

“Careful meditation upon the past leads to the impression that we are a multiplication of many pasts—so how can we be a final aim? But why not? In most instances, however, we do not wish to be this. We take up our positions again in the ranks, work in our own little corner, and hope that what we do may be of some small profit to our successors. But that is exactly the barrel of the Danaids (*Aber das ist wirklich das Fass der Danaiden*)—and this is useless, we must again set about doing everything for ourselves, and only for ourselves, measuring science by ourselves, for example with the question: What is science *to us*? And not: What are we to science? People really make life too easy for themselves when they look upon themselves from such a simple historical point of view, and make humble servants of themselves. ‘Your own salvation above everything’—that is what you should say; and there are no institutions which you should prize more highly than your own soul.—Now, however, man learns to know himself: he finds himself miserable, despises himself, and is pleased to find something worthy of respect outside himself. Therefore, he gets rid of himself, so to speak, makes himself subservient to a cause, does his duty strictly, and atones for his existence. He knows that he does not work for himself alone; he wishes to help those who are daring enough to exist on account of themselves, like Socrates. The majority of men are, as it were, suspended in the air like toy balloons; every breath of wind moves them—*Consequence: the scholar must be such out of self-knowledge, that is to say, out of contempt for himself—in other words he must recognize himself to be merely the servant of some higher being who comes after him. Otherwise, he is simply a sheep.*”³⁵



Photographic portrait of Nietzsche from 1873 (source: nochrisis.blog)

This highly complex passage, unfolding with junctions and reversals, addresses several topics. The main line of thought important to us can now be reconstructed as follows: it is an illusion for the philologist to believe that in its linear unfolding, history moves his science forward in a cumulative way. At the same time, it is also an illusion if he assumes that he is the end goal of this process and places his own importance above all else. The meaning of the philologist’s work only becomes clear when he knows that he serves a higher purpose: a life characterized above all— as opposed to the heteronomy of his

³⁵ Nietzsche, *We Philologists*, fr. 21. The translation has been modified (cf. Nietzsche, KSA 8. [wherein the numbering of the fragments is different]).

life—by his autonomy-based superiority. It is obviously no mere coincidence that Nietzsche, a philologist turned philosopher, mentions the name of a (or *the*) philosopher: Socrates. The term “the barrel of the Danaids” (*das Fass der Danaiden*) functions as a criticism of the philologist who places himself into a long line of colleagues and perceives philological activity as superimposed layers of scientific production, as the continuous accumulation of different interpretations, that is, as the accumulation of philological knowledge.

According to another fragment, the reason the philologist starts (or resumes)—in a Danaiden fashion—his own work of *drawing water*, is because even though philology is a science of the ancient world, “its elements are not inexhaustible (*ihr Stoff ist zu erschöpfen*). What cannot be exhausted (*Nicht zu erschöpfen ist*), however, is the ever-new adaptation of one’s age to antiquity; the comparison of the two. If we make it our task to understand *our own* age better by means of the antiquity (*vermittelst des Alterthums*), then our task will be an everlasting one.”³⁶

Against this background of insight into the historicity of understanding, the work of the philologist, like that of the Danaids (a truly exhausting undertaking due to its inexhaustible exhaustion), is neither meaningless nor purposeless. Evidently, Nietzsche does not criticize philological work itself, but the incorrect, positivist self-interpretation of the philologist, exhausted by the purposefulness of data collection (cf. what is said about the philologist who lacks a true calling and who misrepresents the field: Nietzsche, *We Philologists*, fr. 10). The idea behind the image of the Danaids is the equivalent of a non-teleological and non-linear conception of history; it is a necessary corollary of it which shows

non-hierarchical differences between the different issues of different eras, and between the historically different life-concerning motivations of understanding which ultimately exhort the philologist to continue working towards a new understanding.

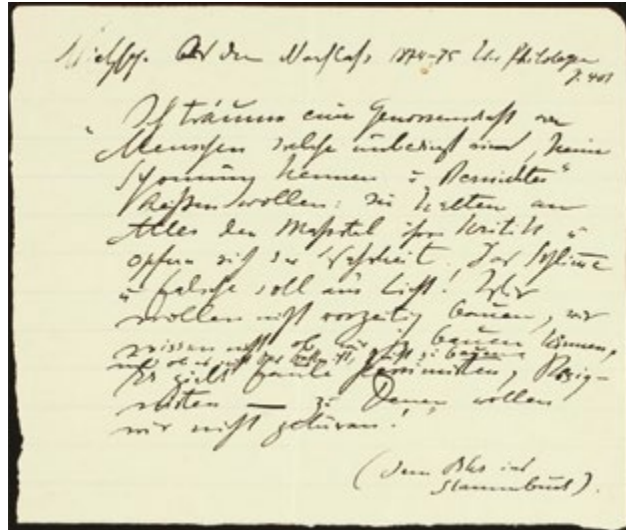
Perhaps a critique of Eduard von Hartmann’s teleological interpretation of history (*Philosophie des Unbewußten*, 1868) is behind this idea. Nietzsche explained this in another early work, in his second “Untimely Meditation” a year prior to his notes in *We Philologists*: in the ninth unit of *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*.³⁷ Here Nietzsche criticizes (not once satirically), above all, the components and connections of Hartmann’s Hegelian ideas



³⁶ Nietzsche, *We Philologists*, fr. 7; Nietzsche, KSA 8. 31.

³⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, 49–58.

that view the course of history as deterministic and purposeful viewed from the modern age (defined by the “laws” of history,³⁸ and the people of the modern era as “[p]eaks and targets of the world process”,³⁹ and it is in this sense that they talk about “the total surrender of his personality to the world process” (*die volle Hingabe der Persönlichkeit an den Weltprozess*).⁴⁰ Here, besides the act of subordination and merging, the idea that still attributes a prominent role to “personality” also becomes the subject of sarcastic criticism: “The personality and the



Manuscript page from Nietzsche’s *We Philologists*, 1874 (source: staatsgalerie.de)

world process! The world process and the personality of the flea-beetle!”⁴¹ In this composition, we can see the sample of an exemplary story introducing a text also created around this time, *On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense*. This story is about certain “clever animals”, who are “invented knowledge”, and therefore imagine themselves as the center of the universe, even though “[t]hat was the most arrogant and the most untruthful moment in ‘world history’”⁴²

But the parallel between Hartmann’s critique and Nietzsche’s interpretation of philology is apparent not only in notional and conceptual similarities but also in the reversal of the image of the Danaid used by Hartmann. In his

³⁸ Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, 55.

³⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, 50.

⁴⁰ Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, 49, 52; Nietzsche, KSA 1. 312, 316.

⁴¹ Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, 49; Nietzsche, KSA 1. 312.

⁴² Nietzsche 1989: 246; Nietzsche, KSA 1. 875. Another parallel: “What the ‘world’ is there for, what ‘humanity’ is there for is not to concern us for the time being, unless we want to be funny: for there just isn’t anything funnier and more cheerful on the world’s stage than the presumptuousness of those little worms called man” (Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, 54–5); cf. once again with the findings of the 1873 study of the invention of cognition as the ‘most arrogant’ moment in world history, as well as with what Nietzsche says here about the ‘star’, ‘[i]n some remote corner of the universe... on which clever animals invented knowledge’; or his phrasing of the ‘intellect’: “It is utterly human, and only its owner and producer takes it with such pathos as if the whole world hinged upon it.” (Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying,” 246).

second Untimely Meditation, Nietzsche refers to the concept of *Philosophie des Unbewußten*, which challenges the infinite nature of the world-process regarding both the past and the present, with sardonic commentary in the form of quips interjected into the quote. Since, as Hartmann says, and as quoted by Nietzsche, “each would invalidate the concept of a development toward a goal (oh more of a rogue!) and would equate the world process with the Danaides’ drawing water (*und stellte den Weltprozess dem Wasserschöpfen der Danaiden gleich*). The complete victory of the logical over the illogical (oh rogue of rogues!), however, must coincide with the temporal end of the world process, with judgment day”.⁴³ In Hartmann’s teleological concept, the image of the Danaids is portrayed in a negative light, since it symbolizes the aimlessness of world history and its consequences in counterfactual reasoning. According to Hartmann, however, world history cannot be without ends if eventually it must reach its end due to the ever-growing dominance of the unfolding of The Logical in a Hegelian sense. This is what Nietzsche challenges.

Nietzsche, even at the end of the fragment of *We Philologists* that contains the image of the Danaids, does not backtrack on this character of philological activity: the work forever restarting, as antiquity is finite yet still inexhaustible, always working from its own questions. The mention of Socrates and a higher being may refer to the “individual” who is contrasted in several places with the “philologist”, who always works and lives for others. At the same time, it may also refer to the “poet-philologists”, who practice their work as creation and *art*.⁴⁴ Philology as a Danaidean task is not a fruitless or hopeless continuation of meaningless, aimless and futile repetition, but a symbol of the work of interpretation that is always restarting and always has something new to say, and is, in this sense, infinite and never reaches its (non-existing) target. Philology, understood here as interpretation, is part of the “ubiquity” that characterizes the Nietzschean interpretation (not only in the scope of understanding culture but of nature as well), and which makes the nineteenth century author a forerunner of twentieth-century hermeneutics.⁴⁵ The Danaidean work in this sense is both a curse and a blessing to philologists. Only after realizing this, can we understand Nietzsche’s adage: “People in general think that philology is at an end—while I believe that it has not yet begun”.⁴⁶

⁴³ Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, 54; Nietzsche, KSA 1. 318.

⁴⁴ See for example Nietzsche, *We Philologists*, fr. 9, fr. 12, fr.22, fr. 49, fr. 171.

⁴⁵ For this, see Babich, “Nietzsche and the Ubiquity of Hermeneutics,” mainly 86, 87, 88. Gadamer himself also reports on Nietzsche’s influence on hermeneutics, see: Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 283 (Nietzsche as a forerunner of Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology), 301 and 306 (in relation to the concept of the horizon, the Nietzschean antecedents of the principle of history of effect).

⁴⁶ Nietzsche, *We Philologists*, fr. 24.

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Appendix

Mihály Babits: The Danaids

In the silent halls of Hades, down the windless halls of Hades, in the dells of asphodels where asphodel leaves never tremble, mourning boughs will never bow and poppy petals hold forever, for the wind is fast asleep there, sleeps in beds of asphodels, sleeps and will not say a word,

where the lakes are marble mirrors, motionless, inertly dozing, eyelids permanently closing, for the lash of languid eyelids, for the whip of wavy waters, there the wind has never stirred;

into urns of alabaster, giant urns of alabaster fifty guilty sisters filling, draining, straining, never spilling, fifty doomed and wretched widows lifting fifty slender vases pouring water down below,

fifty doomed, tormented sisters into urns of alabaster vainly drain their priceless liquid, water from the precious Lethe, never-ample costly flow.

Mourning trees in dreamy drowse will never shake their mighty boughs: for every bough is but a ghost, a suicidal, ghastly ghost growing grey upon the tree:

wakeful, yet without awareness reaching out into the airless,
mercilessly reeky, rank riverbank,

to the bank along the Lethe, (for this bank is on the Lethe), reeky river rotten,
swilled with ancient, long-forgotten guilt, soiled with ancient guilty secrets,
never draining in the sea,

as in seven coiling girdles endlessly the Lethe circles round and round and back again]: there the fifty wretched sisters strain and drain their priceless liquid into urns of alabaster but in vain, but all in vain

filling, straining all the day the fifty sisters vainly wrestle as each alabaster vessel mercilessly drains away, like the ocean ebbs away, with the tears and Lethe-water that the urns of alabaster, vicious vases, can't retain.

Fifty alabaster sisters, raven-haired, tormented sisters, wakeful, yet without awareness chant a song half-understood,

those tormented widow-sisters, fifty plaintive, pale choristers, chant their half-understood verses, haunting from their half-remembered bygone sunlit sisterhood:

“We have murdered, we have murdered fifty valiant wedded husbands, for we loved and freely lusted, heaven knows for whom we lusted, drained the juices of desire, draining, spilling, ever-willing, in the glorious golden sunshine, on the earth beneath the sky –

Long lost words are dimly glowing in our souls’ decaying fire, as if they were streetlights, gilding the walls of an unlit building; long lost words, how could be trusted as we chant them never knowing what is: loved? and what is: lusted? what’s the meaning of: desire? Deep, the darkness keeps its secret and the shadows don’t reply.

So let us chant: We have murdered – and remember well: our husbands – just keep chanting, never knowing, ever draining, ever filling, ever straining, never slowing, keep echoing without knowing, otherwise the world is silent and the silence so harrowing, and the silent deadly darkness never, never says a word –”

Thus the fifty sisters chanted, doomed widows of deep resemblance, pallid shapes of alabaster, fifty wives with raven tresses, by the bank along the Lethe, in the midst of poppy flowers, never-trembling asphodels, where mourning trees will never bow and windrustle is never heard;

in the silent halls of Hades, there the wind, in haunted Hades, sleeps in beds of asphodels, it sleeps and never says the word.

Translated by Peter Zollman



Erzsébet Korb: *Danaids*, oil on canvas, 1925, Ottó Hermann Museum, Miskolc (source: hung-art.hu)



mitem 2024



JOHAN DE BOOSE

A Sensual Nightmare

Johan de Boose (1962) writes novels, non-fiction, poetry and stage plays. He is the author of *The Puppeteer* and the *She-Devil*, a non-fiction book about the war in Yugoslavia, *Blood Witnesses*, a novel about the Second World War, and *Belgian Rules/Belgium Rules*, the script for a theatrical creation by Jan Fabre. Five years ago, before COVID, he was asked by the director to write the script for his upcoming production of *Peak Mytikas* (On the top of Mount Olympus). In his poetic essay, Boose recounts his experiences which, while fulfilling the assignment, made him rethink the culture of ancient Greece handed down to us. He visited the places where Europe's oldest stories originate and, he says, rewritten them in the wounded language of the 21st century "from the perspective of 25 centuries of experience that separate me from the Tragedians that I loved in such an unbridled way". He then witnessed the process during which the eleven excellent performers, members of the Troublein company, and Jan Fabre, the extraordinary director, created their cathartic show, which premiered in Antwerp in May 2023.

Four years ago, I was travelling from the armpit of the Adriatic Sea between the Dalmatic islands, towards the Greek coast. Near Mljet, the island where, according to the legend, Odysseus spent seven years with the nymph Calypso, I received a phone call from a theatre maker, who is a friend of mine. Whether I would like to write a piece about the lechery and the madness of the Greek pandemonium. I am not certain anymore about how his words sounded precisely, but I was immediately persuaded. The title of the piece was *Peak Mytikas*, like the top of the mountain of the gods, Mount Olympus. Mytikas literary means *nose*. The ancient myth would be revised: Prometheus did not actually steal the fire from the gods but he obtained it thanks to a cunning deal. The gods, who lived up there in dilapidated camps, hoped that humans would use the fire to prepare delightful meals that they, the gods, would be able to smell on

their mountain top called Nose. Humans would bring to gods pleasure and consolation. And so it happened. But soon, rose to them not only the smell of what was cooked, but also the one of burnt corpses. *Peak Mytikas* would become the story of the destruction and perversion of humanity.

The rest of my boat trip continued in rapture: I reread the ancient Greeks that I once had tasted in the original language, and in mature age I took the opportunity to rewrite them in the wounded language of the 21st century, from the perspective of 25 centuries of experience that separate me from the Tragedians that I loved in such an unbridled way. As a sensible poet I looked at the coastal land, where originated the oldest stories of our Continent, and at the remotest branches of the Alpes and the Carpathian mountains, from where passed the artery of our civilization. Over there, behind the tree-covered mountains named Bal-can, literally “blood and honey”, stands Peak Mytikas, the head of the mountain that was nothing but a nose. I freed the bridles of my imagination. I wrote the text during my Odyssey across St Petersburg, Rome, the islands of the Mediterranean Sea and – tied as Odysseus to the sail of his ship – confined in the isolation of the pandemic in my ark in the Low Lands. It would take four years until the text, ripe as a fruit, would land on the stage of a theatre, ready to become peeled and served by a group of actors.

Every text grows from necessity, but this text has become sharpened and weighed through the developments of the time when it was written. On our planet, that was already ravaged from water shortage and heat, also spread, to make things worse, an illness that transformed residential areas into Places of the Scull, as if the years of the plague of Thebes had broken out again. I picked old masters from my bookcase: Samuel Becket, for whom the world was a deadly place where humanity waited for salvation that did not come; Heiner Müller, who had described the earth as a colourful mess; and Hugo Claus, who looked at the place where he was thrown to earth, as a frivolous joke. After the pandemic, the war in Ukraine broke out, which destroyed decades-long stability with a blow and would trigger centuries-long resentment. The Greek world of envy and bile still existed – I thought desperately, while already writing. In Iran, girls who removed their hijab were forced into school classes like modern Antigones and were executed. The madness of our own time sneaked into the story of the gods on their Nose. Thousands of years of civilization and we still do not know where things stand with freedom and love. Humans, seeing blind, walk towards destruction. Humans rule upon the world and drag their own species into the abyss. Humans cry out their opposition against all kinds of injustice, but become chained and punished. Humanism has become a crime. From one day to the next, freedom becomes a fatal aim. The smell of burnt skin fills the room in my house, and we, 21st century mortals, we hope for salvation in vain. We console ourselves with treats that offer oblivion, because we can no more handle the madness or because we’d rather look away. While I was writing *Peak Mytikas*,

I realized painfully well that the world of ancient Greeks that lies *merely* 2,5 thousand years behind us, still exists, that it is still as horrible as then – or is it even more horrible? I sneaked in my text quotes from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which even now no one can utter without blushing from shame. I had to control myself and not slip into soft-headed idealism out of sheer despair, because there exist also valuable elements in it, because it is not about fighting for improvement, because the old dreams, as articulated by lucid poets, still narrate the difficult values. Soft-headed? How about that!

Then comes the moment of reality: eleven actors, who are among the best of our Continent, in the Troubleyn Company, get their teeth into the work with a genius theatre director. They offer everything they have – their body, their language, their humanity, the power of their vulnerability – to the service of the public. I witness this creative process, that, as always, proceeds with a lot of openness, generosity and imagination. The result is a catharsis, a world as a sensual nightmare, a universe in which the difference between life and death is eliminated. As it lasts long enough, it has the effect of a meditation or a trance. And – despite everything – this offers consolation. This is the reason why I immediately said “yes” when I was called by Jan Fabre four years ago, when I was at the Adriatic Sea, and he asked me to rob the Olympic gods with him.



Landscape: Mljet Island (source: smiletemplate.com)



ALESSANDRO SERRA

Tragedy/ The Song of Oedipus

“Language is that which we intend to say”
Italo Calvino

“How to accomplish the tragic, nowadays? (...) What language is it, that which through Sophocles, we wish to tell the spectator?” – asks Alessandro Serra in the introduction to his new production. Just as in *Macbettu* he interpreted Shakespeare in archaic Sardinian, he has now chosen the *Grecanic* of southern Italy, which preserves vestiges of the ancient Greek language, to bring closer to the people of today the tragedy of Oedipus, who, Serra believes, blinded himself not as a punishment but in order to gain prophetic insight. MITEM 11 this year will see the world premiere of this highly anticipated performance.

Rubble.

In an age of rubble there is no other choice but to work on what is left, to blow on the cinders to revive the fire.

What is left of tragedy:

words without sound.

What is left of the polis:

a society of strangers. What is left of the rite:

an extinguished dramaturgy. What is left of a myth:

a dull little tale.

What is left of a hero:

an out-of-focus character.

The song of Oedipus is built on rubble.

As Antiphanes writes in his comedy, *Poiesis*:

Tragedy is a fortunate art, because the spectators already know the plot before it is told by the poet, it is enough to simply remind them. As soon as the name “Oedipus”

is spoken, the rest is already known – the father Laius, the mother Jocasta, the daughters, the sons, what he has suffered, what he is guilty of.

Nowadays, how is one to rebuild that collective knowledge which exempted the tragic poet from having to turn myth into prose and legitimized his immediate evoking of visions within the public? How to accomplish the tragic, nowadays?

What language is it, that which through Sophocles, we wish to tell the spectator? And what tongue is it in?

Sophocles' Greek was deliberately elevated and musical, a language which tears us from the plane of reality and places us on a level of transcendence.

How to deliver the perfect dramatization of the perfect myth to the public in a language that is not hostile and conceptual, but rather musical, instinctual and sensual?

Italian seems to lower the tragic to a dramatic occurrence.

We have therefore chosen Grecanic, the language that still currently resounds in a remote corner of what was once Magna Grecia, a strip of land which climbs up from the sea to the Aspromonte, peering at Mount Etna over the horizon.

Auditory vestiges of an ancient Greek nowadays spoken by a few individuals born of a generation that was ashamed of Homer's language and stopped teaching it to their children, in order to hope in a better future in a society where the language of poets has been usurped by that of television.

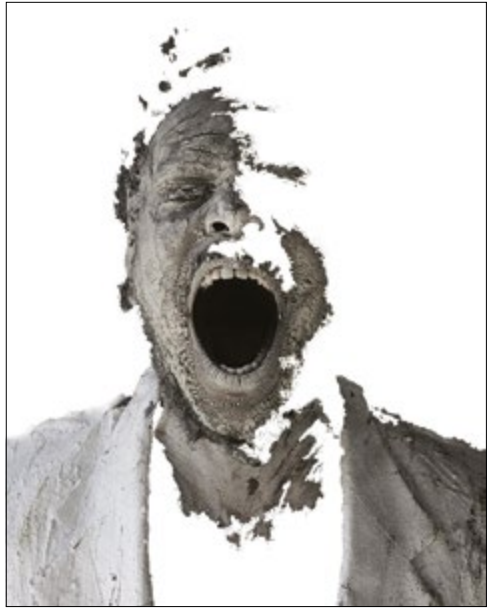
An extremely ancient idiom sullied by languages fallen from above and by subaltern dialects spontaneously sprouted in the sublime field sown by the Greek such as Calabrian and Apulian.

The tragedy of Oedipus is set in the flickering candle-lit remains of a city that is arid, sterile, decomposing.

And yet Sophocles leads the spectator towards an inner light which will manifest in Colonus, in the sacred grove where Oedipus will be literally absorbed by the gods.

The perfect tragedy of which Aristotle makes constant use as an ideal model over the course of his rhetorical treatise.

The Freudian tragedy by definition. The very archetype of all tragedy.



“What Has Just Happened Is Already History”



Roundtable of Professional Guests at 10th Theatre Olympics

Stagings of the Nation – when the first issue of *Szcenárium* was published in September 2013, Zoltán Imre’s book with this telling title was the hot discussion topic for Hungary’s theatre community. But already a decade earlier, when the new National Theatre opened in 2002, the liberal intellectual elite was convinced it was not only superfluous but a downright retrograde institution trying to impose a 19th century political and cultural model on 21st century Hungary as it was about to accede to the European Union.

Underlying that was Francis Fukuyama’s theory, which had attracted worldwide attention, suggesting that history was over, because the only salutary option for all of humanity was the American economic and cultural model, and the export of “democracy”, the only alternative left after the end of the bipolar world order. Today, however, not only economists but also intellectual opinion-makers believe this theory has failed, and that Fukuyama’s master, Samuel P. Huntington was right in that the 21st century world will be reordered as a result of armed conflicts along religious, cultural and national fault lines. The ten MITEMs held so far at the National Theatre in Budapest and the 2023 Theatre Olympics are proof that this changing mindset is not only reflected in world theatre, but that the most outstanding artists also seek actively to shape this process.

The events in Budapest from 30 September to 23 October this year were an integral part of the months-long programme. These included, first and foremost, Synergy Festival showcasing the theatres of a wide array of national minorities; the first-ever Showcase, which brought the best productions of the hosting National Theatre to the attention of the international theatre community; and the introduction of Berehove Theatre, founded by Attila Vidnyánszky 30 years ago and currently operating in parallel/alternately in war-torn Ukraine and Hungary.

The theatre professionals who made the statements below were our guests this autumn, but could not stay throughout the event. Their answers to our three questions show that they found the themes raised by these events relevant, thought-provoking and suitable starting points for the international discourse:

1. Do plays that present the key events of your national history have an important role in the repertoires of the theatres in your country?
2. Do these plays shape your national identity and consciousness through public education? Is it justified to keep them in the curriculum?
3. Are these plays suitable for contemporary productions using modern theatrical language problematising the existential challenges facing people today?



OANA BORS (1972), Romanian theatre critic, adjunct professor at the I. L. Caragiale National University of Theatre and Film Arts in Bucharest. He has published numerous theatre studies and essays in Romanian and international publications. Since March 2022, he has been editor-in-chief of the magazine Theatre Today. He is also Artistic Director of FEST-FDR Timișoara/ European Festival of Performing Arts in Timișoara – Romanian Drama Festival, and Production Director of the Romanian National Theatre Festival.

1. We can say that Romanian theatres stage Romanian classical and contemporary drama as a programme. However, in general, they have a much stronger inclination towards texts about recent history and texts that question contemporary reality, while texts dealing with key moments of national history tend to be staged on a random basis or for certain celebrations. On the other hand, there is contemporary reality since the political changes in 1989, with all that it has brought forth in a society shaken by decades of communism. Until now, social changes have been accelerating and often uncertain, and have also had multiple interpretations on Romanian stages.

2. Yes, the school curriculum contains the most important plays that deal with key moments in national history, which is extremely important for teaching the younger generation respect for national values. Even if these plays are rarely found in current Romanian theatre repertoires, their role is obvious. A theatre text often offers a much subtler approach to addressing certain subjects, so it plays an important role in awareness raising.

3. Of course, any text can be staged using modern technology. Also, even if the context is explicitly temporal and local, the issues it raises are generally part of the human universal, with current reverberations. Therefore, any subject can be interpreted using the modern world as a key, without being artificially contemporized.



ALEKSANDER SEKULOV (1964) is a contemporary Bulgarian writer, playwright, whose poetry and prose have been translated into English, German, French and Hungarian. He graduated from the Theatre Technical College as an assistant director and has a Master's degree in Bulgarian philology from Paisiy Hilendarski University in Plovdiv. He is head of the International Department of Plovdiv Drama Theatre, founded in 1881.

1. An honest answer to that requires us first to talk about the experiences of Plovdiv Drama Theatre over the last 15 years. As the oldest professional theatre in Bulgaria, its repertoire policy is mainly about staging famous and modern Bulgarian novels using a new and unconventional approach to various periods in our national history.

The performances *Exaltation* by Milen Ruskov, *The Pallaveevi Sisters* by Alek Popov, and *Wolves* by Petar Delchev were combined in a trilogy that

had a huge public response and convinced the theatre guild that efforts in this direction pay off. The playwright Alexander Sekulov continued with *Debelyanov* and the *Angels* at Plovdiv Drama Theatre and *The People of Vazov* at the National Theatre in Sofia, which won national awards in all categories.

You can definitely say that the Bulgarian public is not only looking for but also has a huge need for modern performances that “read” various historical periods in new

ways, that “illuminate” the national character, and seek new answers about the nation’s destiny. Many theatres have had tremendous success with that. We can say that in the last 15 years, there has been a sharp increase in Bulgarian theatre texts that are truly enjoyed by the audience.

2. Only by looking with love at the faults of national destiny, by dressing the wounds inflicted by centuries of division, and by evoking the builders of our modern fatherlands will we be able to reach the highest goal – reconciling our divided nations. National identity is not a monument, but a process of reconciliation and ideals.

National ideals cannot be implemented by the sacrificing a distinct part of the people. We can only move on if we bury the dead in a cemetery and stop



A. Sekulov: *Vazov's People*, National Theatre, Sofia, 2021, d: Diana Dobрева (photo by Guergana Damianova, source: nationaltheatre.bg)

watering them with the desire for revenge. Certainly, the connection between theatre and education should and can develop. Theatre is increasingly becoming the only temple where different people can gather, have a shared dream and believe in it.

3. Theatre worldwide is obliged to reformulate its existence more and more frequently. The transformation cycle has shrunk to 10 years. The audience is changing, and so is the theatre. But theatre also changes the audience! When theatrical language connects, rather than divides us; themes and ideas bring us closer rather than take us further apart through rough ideologisation and propaganda, when the means of the performance are a balanced mix of traditional and highly visual – then we can claim that theatre fulfills its primary function: to serve as a laboratory of public interpretation.



VIDA OGNJENOVIĆ (1941) is a contemporary Serbian playwright, prose writer, theatre director, drama teacher and free thinker. She graduated in literature in 1963 and in theatre, film and television directing in 1965. She is a fellow of the University of Contemporary Art in Belgrade.

1. Yes, plays based on national historical events often grace the repertoires of theatres in Serbia, particularly the National Theatre in Belgrade. Established during the nineteenth-century Romanticism period (1868), it was a time when theatres, hungry for unique narratives, found history to be a rich source of dramatic tales – featuring brave heroes, affectionate ladies, betrayed kings, revenges, guilt conflicts, impostors, assassins, valiant princes and loyal peers. Consequently, historical plays became the mainstream in theatres, captivating audiences and earning acclaim from reviewers. From photographs and other materials, we observe that these performances were often playful illustrations, colourful reenactments and literal evocations of various events, complete with period costumes and elaborate sets. Nowadays, historical plays continue to find a place in theatre repertoires, not merely to depict events in their original national hues or to pass judgment from a distant perspective, but rather to delve into our heritage, exploring ideas and presenting them in a new context of theatrical experience and knowledge. The National Theatre inherently serves as the ideal venue for reflecting upon, scrutinizing, and reinterpreting these challenging historical narratives, personalities, and, most importantly, the prejudices and false propaganda surrounding them. Indeed, they offer a rich mine of ideas for a fresh approach.

2. As we all know, theatre and its audiences engage in a continuous dialogue, mutually shaping each other's consciousness through their perpetual interaction.

This shaping that we call catharsis defies quantification but remains the essence of every theatrical exchange. Hence, it is justifiable to retain historical plays in the modern theatre repertoire.

3. Undoubtedly, historical plays, as you suggest, are well-suited for inspiring contemporary theatre productions, as exemplified by the National Theatre of Budapest production *AGON*, which opened the 10th MITEM. Directed by



Péter Pál Józsa: *Agon*, National Theatre, Budapest, 2022, d: Attila Vidnyánszky (photo by Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nationaltheatre.hu)

Attila Vidnyánszky, the play by Józsa Péter Pál, featuring superb actors and virtuoso musicians positioned amidst the audience, created an immersive experience for all in the auditorium. *AGON* represents an innovative theatrical vortex, brimming with daring ideas and intense debates, delivered with electrifying performance energy and engagement. Two other plays showcased at the SYNERGY Festival also exemplify the theatrical exploration of historical themes. Mario Diament's play *THE*

BOOK of RUTH, performed by the State Jewish Theatre of Bucharest, skillfully directed by Eugen Gyemant and boldly presented in Yiddish – a language preserved only in the memories of Holocaust survivors – an apt choice for achieving historical and human authenticity. Similarly, *LEANING CHURCH* by Karin Lednicka, directed by Radovan Linus, cleverly addresses the absurdity of geopolitical divisions with sensitivity, encouraging acting prowess and freedom of expression. These productions excel in examining the historical challenges of our era.

In my view, theatre and history are intertwined disciplines, with history serving as an endless, diverse screenplay.



EMILIA DEMENTSOVA (1989) is a creative writer, theatre critic, editor and lecturer, author of more than five hundred theatre and film publications. She is a member of the International Association of Theatre Critics. As a poet and playwright, she is involved in anti-war projects. Participating in *The Conflict Zones* (a European Theatre Union project). She is a columnist of several cultural

publications (*Critical Stages*, *European Stages*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Arti dello Spettacolo/Performing Arts*, *Teatro*, *Novaya Gazeta*, *Discours.io*, *Theatre World*).

1. The circumstances of my personal life and the current context have led me to reside in two countries, Russia and Israel. Therefore, I will address the proposed questions while considering the realities of both nations. In many aspects, the situation regarding attitudes toward plays depicting national history shows parallels in these countries. Dramatic works inspired by historical events or delving into historical themes filled with intense emotions hold a significant place in theatre repertoires. In Israel, these include plays about the Holocaust, while in Russia, dramaturgy revolves around themes of the Second World War. Naturally, national dramaturgy encompasses more than just these themes, but they are perhaps the most prominent. Recently, there has been a noticeable trend in Russian theatres to glorify and emphasize themes of national identity, likely due to tragic circumstances. By contrast, in Israel, contemporary texts, social dramas, or experimental productions often touch upon echoes or glimpses of historical trauma and the dark chapters of the country's history, spanning from the Holocaust to present-day military conflicts. Biblical texts, (which are also layers of Israel's national history) undergo reinterpretation on stage, acquiring new resonance with the contemporary era.

2. Undoubtedly, national dramaturgy holds a significant place in the socio-cultural life of both countries. Theatre, as a living art form, is an integral and essential component of national identity. It mirrors the nuances of national existence and draws upon the collective experiences of the people, contributing to their understanding of cultural traditions and heritage. Without this understanding, moving forward into the future is impossible. In Russia, theatre serves as the keeper and activator of collective memory, while in Israel, it also plays a crucial role in shaping national identity and statehood. Theatre shapes individuals' cultural identity, values, and perception of heritage, transmitting the memory of generations. In Russia, a culture of attending the theatre is cultivated from a young age, with literature lessons often accompanied by group trips to traditional performances of Russian classics, usually presented in a conventional as opposed to experimental way, though they are not canonised. These productions not only promote language, culture, and historical memory but also instill a sense of patriotism and are often imbued with excessive pathos, sometimes bordering on propaganda, particularly in state theaters, which has adversely affected the artistic integrity of performances in recent years.

3. The plays of the national repertoire undergo adaptation and rethinking through the language of theatre, seeking new forms of interaction with the audience and creative comprehension of historical events. However, not all directors can overcome certain templates and stamps of perception of canonical or textbook texts. Historical narratives often dominate the director's imagination, although there are striking exceptions. In both countries, theatre director's laboratories strive to find new embodiments for texts from – for example – Soviet dramaturgy. Similarly, dramaturgy laboratories are organized



Stalin's Funeral, based on contemporary documents and memoirs, Gogol Centre, 2018, d: Kirill Serebrennikov (source: oteatre.info)

to make sense of past events in new plays, discussing them in a modern language accessible to young audiences. This was evident in Kirill Serebrennikov's production of *Stalin's Funeral*, based on memoirs and documentary evidence of the turbulent 20th century, or in his own theatre project *Requiem*, dedicated to the end of the Second World War. This symphonic performance – as its authors so neatly labeled it – pays tribute to all those lost in the wars that shook the world from the 17th century to

September 1945. There is also a curious tendency in Russian theatre to relocate the place and time of actions from certain plays to the historical realities of Russia. This was seen, for instance, in Andrei Konchalovsky's recent production of *Married Life: Perestroika*, where the director transposed Ingmar Bergman's famous play into the life and atmosphere of Moscow in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The long-standing truth is that to offer the audience something new, it must be presented containing twenty percent of the old – a principle successfully implemented in theatre. The traditional national layer of dramaturgy provides fertile ground for applying new means of artistic expression and expanding the boundaries of audience perception.



TARLAN RASULOV (1968) is a theatre director, he founded the Azerbaijani independent theatre company dOM in 2016; he is a translator, manager, producer, writer and performer. He is the head of the Laboratory of Experimental Theatre, lecturer at the Azerbaijan State University of Culture and Arts, advisor to the Theatre Union. He is a member of several European theatre forums, including EURODRAM, the European Network for Reverse Drama.

1. Dramatic works dedicated to the glorious and tragic events of Azerbaijan's history are an integral part of our country's repertoire. Just as history shapes the present day, our theatre repertoire includes productions that comprehend and reflect on the pages of our history in order to help the audience and all of us, considered people of the theatre, understand the historical moment in which we live. History is something that happened a moment ago. I think it's

important to realise that every single thing we do, no matter how pathetic it sounds, is a contribution to the overall history of the country, the people and the world. This realisation helps us recalibrate and be fully aware of the impact of our actions. In this respect, contemporary plays by young authors, dedicated, for example, to the tragic events related to Karabakh, are both contemporary and historical. The Azerbaijani theatre stage does not seek only to entertain the spectator, it makes him think, analyse, study history and draw lessons from it. Theatre as a means of enlightenment is an effective tool of education and a platform for public dialogue, thanks to the inclusion of plays about historical events in the repertoire.

2. As in any country, I believe that the so-called layer of national theatre reflecting the identity, history, culture, traditions of the country and people is an important part of the national cultural code. The case of Azerbaijan is unique in its own way, because our country has historically strong traditions of multiculturalism. This means that plays discussing the culture and traditions of different peoples living on the territory of our country since ancient times are equally interesting and sought after by the widest audience striving to be both good friends and neighbours. And there is nothing surprising in the fact that, for example, a play about the pages of life of the Jewish community arouses interest among the audience of other nationalities and religions. And vice versa. National identity in our case does not bear the imprint of being closed and hermetic, on the contrary, on the theatre stage and beyond, “all flowers bloom”. And, of course, theatre culture is instilled in children from school. Literature and history lessons are combined with school collective trips to the theatre. In fact, the repertoire devoted to the history of the country helps to recruit new theatre audiences, foster theatre culture and stimulate interest in theatre.

3. Theatre, of course, can touch on the problems of the epoch, but it is much more important that it touches the thoughts and souls of both the theatre people themselves and the audience. And what form the theatre will have – a school, a temple, a podium or a mirror – is not important, the main thing is that it should be alive. This is exactly what my Theatre Manifesto is dedicated to. It is live theatre, not “plastic” theatre, that arouses genuine interest in the audience, regardless of where they live, their level of education and other background data. When I returned from the MITEM festival in Budapest, where I had the opportunity to communicate with colleagues from different countries (which is a great way to check the validity of my own thoughts), I became convinced that all theatre people, regardless of our aesthetic preferences and views, are worried about the same things, undergo the same problems and crises. Maintaining life in the theatre is a perpetual problem. But maybe within this incessant battle with mortification we unearth the source of the theatre’s eternal life. If we talk about repertoire devoted to national history, it all depends on whether the play is written in advance or is written during the production. Usually, the more

talented the playwright, the more difficult it is for the director to work with his text, which, as a rule, already has a set form. The author may not even realize it himself, but when he wrote the text he had already set its form, which is difficult to overcome for a director who wants to tackle the play in a different way. I, for example, prefer to avoid self-contained texts, because I'm not interested in creating theatrical illustrations for a work. It is better to work with playwrights at the stage of pre-production, when the text is just being born. It is also important to follow the algorithm of the production. All my students know that the starting point of a director's work is a concept. It's a fancy and beautiful word that nobody can really explain, it's too ephemeral. It is a kind of a single defining idea that encompasses the performance in its entirety. The concept includes the idea, the form, the content, the format of the performance, its design, the peculiarities of the actors' existence on stage, etc. It is in this sequence. If you start with the content of the work, as many do, it will crush your imagination with its weight. The text has many indicators of its own, significant for literary scholars and readers, but making it difficult for directors to find the form. And in this respect, plays dealing with history or national reflection are no different from other dramatizations. They may gravitate towards traditional or, as I call it, "orthodox" theatre, but the key of modern, experimental, living, searching theatre also helps to open them up and reveal new facets of even textbook texts, as we have successfully observed at the MITEM festival and the Theatre Olympics.



MATTIA SEBASTIAN GIORGETTI (1962) is an Italian theatre and opera director, a member of the SCOT-Suzuki Company in Togo and a contributor to the theatre magazine Sipario. Executive Director of the 2019 Theatre Olympics. He led a workshop on Tadashi Suzuki's actor training method at the 2023 Hungarian Theatre Olympics. Member of CTA (Centre Theatre Active).

1. Yes, they do have an important role. But they reflect historical research and narrate our Ventennio, the post-war period, the partisan struggle. Fortunately they are present in the repertoire of national theatres and in non-subsidized or smaller ones which keep cultural resistance alive by countering a prevailing political tendency toward denial or distortion of narratives, which is on the rise.

Unfortunately, considering everything through the globalization process, many differences and visions are reaffirmed and there is a tendency to place an emphasis on concepts such as love for one's homeland or the national spirit of solidarity. Politicians have begun to take advantage of these inclinations, using historically important art and culture to garner public support for their agendas.

However, authors such as Machiavelli, Manzoni, Pirandello, De Filippo and Dario Fo who carry within themselves reflections, questions and criticisms of

historical, social, political and economic changes are rarely present. For example *La Mandragola* by Machiavelli, albeit under the guise of a hilarious comedy, denounces the total loss of morality in the society of the time.

Goldoni is present in our broad theatrical tradition with typically mannered stagings or with resolute directors aimed at validating his modernity, see the recent staging by Antonio Latella of Goldoni's *La Locandiera*.

2. If I were to think of a text that reflects the problem in question I would think of *The Mountain Giants*. *The Mountain Giants*, Pirandello's last and unfinished work, metaphorically summarises the conditions of the theatre in a time dominated by negative forces. He senses that something profound has happened, a fracture caused by new dynamics that have forced the theatre to change its role in society. Between the two world wars, the theatre experienced a profound transformation of its function, put into crisis by the progressive affirmation of a mass industrial society. The European theatre between the two wars seems dominated by this effort to chase after society, in a dramatic attempt to adapt to the new times. To answer this question, I would start from the Pirandellian vision by stating that I believe more in cultural identity than in national identity. But focusing on the essence of the problem, it follows that national identity and conscience should be investigated in their artistic, literary, musical, sociopolitical manifestations, in an effort to understand and overcome the dramatic moments of division, which occurs more and more frequently. It is necessary to investigate and understand the values, symbols, collective memories, traditions that make up an identity – whatever it may be – to establish whether and how it can be expressed in the “construction” – and not in an education – of a future collective, since, without a screening of this type, only museum reconnaissances of dubious usefulness or an attempt to distort the narrative will be carried out. Unfortunately, repertory theater in Italy has disappeared, it goes without saying that it were produced by some National Theater, would remain on the bill for perhaps two years. We are no longer able to produce phenomena such as Strehler's *Harlequin Servant of Two Masters*.

3. Regardless of what modern tool is used for staging – which I don't object to as a director but would not use it as excessively as it is used these days – I think it must only be necessary to enhance communication – both visually and intellectually – with the public and foster a connection with the new generations.

The more unified the world becomes, the more people will try to express the singularity of their heritage and affirm their links to a particular country, religion, ethnicity and history. This is not necessarily a negative impulse, but it portends that art and culture will increasingly be presented in an environment where people are searching for a national identity, with politicians attempting to take advantage of that need.

Revised by László Vértes

A közönség kívánatára.



Bérlét

Pest, szerdán, mártius 15-én, 1848.

276-dik szám.

Huszonegyedszer.

A nézőhely teljes kivilágításával:

Bánk bán.

Eredeti történeti drama 5 felvonásban. Irta Katona József.

Hendese: Lendvay.

SZEMÉLYEK:

H. Endre, magyarok királya	— — — — —	Bertha,	Mihály bán, /	— — — — —	Újvárhelyi
Görgey, királyad	— — — — —	Lakófalvi B.	Simon bán, /	— — — — —	Szilágyi
Béla,	— — — — —	— — — — —	Zsuzsika	— — — — —	Göncz
Endre, /	— — — — —	— — — — —	Péter bán, bírói újság	— — — — —	Egry G.
— /	— — — — —	— — — — —	Miksa bán, a királyfiak nevelője	— — — — —	Szilágyi
Mária,	— — — — —	— — — — —	Szilveszter fia	— — — — —	Károly
Otto, Bertha báné nevelője	— — — — —	— — — — —	Benedek bán, burligol leány	— — — — —	Komlóczy Ida
— /	— — — — —	— — — — —	Egy udvaronc	— — — — —	Egry G.
Bánk bán, Magyarország magyar	— — — — —	Szigeti,	Sándor bán, lakodlak leány	— — — — —	Fényes
Melinda, felesége	— — — — —	Lendvay,	Tiborcs, parasit	— — — — —	Bencsik
Soma, kovácsok az udvarnál	— — — — —	— — — — —	— — — — —	— — — — —	— — — — —

Újvárhelyi Szilágyi, Göncz, Egry G., Szilágyi, Károly, Komlóczy Ida, Egry G., Fényes, Bencsik

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József Katona: *The Viceroy Bánk*. The poster of the performance was printed on 15 March 1848, the day of the revolution in Pest. The presentation of the play was demanded by the March Youth (source: mek.oszk.hu)

Plot Outline for József Katona's *Bánk bán (The Viceroy Bánk)*

The historical drama takes place in 1213. The King, Endre II, is far away, setting out to bring Galicia under Hungarian sway. During his absence, Bánk bán, the viceroy of the country is acting as his deputy. The king's Meranian wife, Gertrudis, organises a grand ball in the palace. Ottó, Gertrudis's younger brother, is driven by a carnal desire to seduce Bánk's wife of Spanish origin, Melinda. The queen's lady, Izidóra, chases after Ottó in turn, thus she becomes witness to the most important events. Bánk is sent by the queen to conduct a tour of inspection across the country, however, he is secretly called back home by Petur bán, the leader of Hungarian noblemen rebelling against the power preponderance of the Meranians. Bánk learns of the imminent conspiracy, which has "Melinda's beautiful, unsullied name" as its password.

The luxury at the royal court is in sharp contrast to the plight of the people all over the country. Tiborc, the old peasant, steals into the palace only to get food for his starving family, but he has to leave empty-handed. Ottó confesses his love to Melinda, to which Bánk is a witness, hiding. And since he can only see but not hear them, he becomes overwhelmed by jealousy. He eavesdrops on Ottó's conversation with Gertrudis, who at one and the same time slows down and spurs on his brother, fearing a loss of prestige as queen in the event of his masculine failure. Bíberach, the confidant, hands over a love potion to Ottó to seduce Melinda and a sleeping pill to Gertrudis.

When in the wake of these scenes Bánk emerges from his hiding place with a drawn sword, he expresses his doubts in a monologue, declaring that he wants to see clearly and do justice both to his country and his love. The rebellious noblemen and Melinda's Spanish brothers, Simon and Mihál, gather in Petur's house. Petur incites them to murder the queen, but Bánk enters and reminds him of the sacrality of the royal power, by which Petur is successfully disarmed. It is at this crucial moment that Bíberach arrives with the news that Ottó is just seducing Melinda in the palace. Bánk reaches his wife's room too late. Melinda begs for forgiveness, but her husband does not believe her guiltlessness and curses their child. Melinda takes her leave in dismay. Tiborc appears again to call Bánk's attention to the foreigners plundering the country. Being equally afraid of the revenge of Bánk and the anger of his sister, Ottó asks Bíberach for help, however, they become embroiled in a lengthy dispute instead. When Bíberach reminds him of a murder he once committed, he stabs his former advisor to death. The queen is informed of the events that have taken place by Izidóra, who announces that she wants to leave the country. Gertrudis summons Melinda and calls her to account for the ignominy she had to suffer.

Mikhál comes to the palace to mediate between the zealots and the queen, but Gertrudis has him as well as Simon captured.

Bánk arrives in the company of Tiborc, to whom he entrusts Melinda. Bánk is left alone with the queen and, as the deputy for the king, he calls the queen to account for his personal offence and the national afflictions. At the climax of their verbal fight, the eavesdropping Ottó bursts into the room. Bánk curses him, at which the queen is also offended and draws a dagger. The viceroy wrests the dagger from her hand, and stabs the queen to death.

Anarchy breaks loose: Ottó flees, the advance guard of the returning royal army clashes with the zealots, and Petur and his family suffer a torturous death. Upon arrival, the king finds Gertrudis lying in state. Those surviving are trying to reconstruct the events, and court people accuse Petur of the murder. However, Bánk bán, entering, confesses his deed. Tiborc arrives with the corpse of Melinda who was killed by Ottó's hired men. The king grants a royal pardon: recognizes the rightfulness of the queen's violent death and is aware that the most severe punishment for the completely broken Bánk bán is to survive in life.

Translated by Nóra Durkó



National Themes and Renewing the Language of Theatre

Roundtable Discussion on Attila Vidnyánszky's New Staging of *The Viceroy Bánk* (*Bánk bán*)

The National Theatre launched the 2023/24 season with the slogan “Season of Kings”. Attila Vidnyánszky's new production *The Viceroy Bánk* premiered on 3 September, Sándor Sík's *King Stephen* was presented on 2 February 2024, and a contemporary adaptation of *King Lear*, *King Lear Shaw*, is scheduled for May. Last autumn, the editors of *Szcenárium* came up with the idea of holding a public round table discussion at Benczúr House, where members of the Writers' Union and the National Theatre – writers, literary historians, directors, actors and dramaturges – could discuss professional issues in connection with these premieres. The first topic, on 5 March 2024, was *The Viceroy Bánk*, where the state of our reading culture, our relationship with national classics taught as compulsory reading, and the issue of stage adaptations were discussed in the context of the new production. The round table was moderated by Róbert Smid, representing the Writers' Union.



Round table participants, right to left: Róbert Smid, László L. Simon, Attila Vidnyánszky, Zsolt Szász

RÓBERT SMID: I'd like to start with a "hot potato" question right away. There's been a debate in Hungary over the past few years on compulsory reading for secondary schools. Some authors have been excluded, other authors have been included, and certain interpretative communities argue against the current list of compulsory books, suggesting that the concept itself is outdated, a product of the romantic national ideal, and that we no longer understand the classic texts. They are too long, too complicated, they don't reflect the issues of our day and age. What do you think: should we still read our national drama *The Viceroy Bánk* or is it enough to see it at the theatre? Does it really fail to reflect current issues, unless we rewrite it or simplify its language?

ZSOLT SZÁSZ: We should remind ourselves at the start that today's discussion was preceded by a round table in last year's Writers' Camp in Tokaj¹, where this was the subject of a heated debate. This time, the participants are László L. Simon, writer, cultural policy-maker, president of the Writers' Camp Association and a participant of the round table in Tokaj; along with the director of *The Viceroy Bánk* presented at the National Theatre in the autumn of 2023 and General Manager of the National Theatre Attila Vidnyánszky; and Róbert Smid, a scholar of literature and culture, head of the first-year dramaturgy class at the University of Theatre and Film Arts (SZFE), and myself, dramaturge of three *Bánk* performances staged by Attila.

ATTILA VIDNYÁNSZKY: I also welcome everyone. Let me tell you up front that I'm very conservative on this issue. I can refer not only to my past as a teacher of Hungarian literature in 1985-'86-'87, but also to my being a father of six children and that, together with his wife, I wrestle compulsory literature on a daily basis in the family.

I had a fantastic teacher of Hungarian literature, my mother, who made me fall in love with all of Hungarian poetry, but I didn't get much of either *The Viceroy Bánk* or *The Tragedy of Man* from her. My fascination with *The Viceroy Bánk* began at university. Before the University of Dramatic Arts, I majored in Hungarian literature and linguistics in Uzhhorod. *The Tragedy* became an experience in the course of teaching, when instead of the allotted three lessons, we studied it for more than a month. I had an incredible journey with the kids, and I think that left its trace in the hearts of many at the time.

I don't rewrite the stage text, I don't treat classical drama as contemporary literature. We may include contemporary passages in the performance, but we always work with the original text. It is my experience, based on the productions I have presented at the National Theatre, but also based on my previous productions, that after the first few minutes the audience's ears are tuned to the language of József Katona. Grammar school students can absolutely follow everything they see and hear on stage. And I am outraged that we are asking our

¹ 13–17.08.2023



Playbill of the *Stars of Eger* from 2022 (source: nationaltheatre.hu)

children to memorise less and less. Today, two verses of Petőfi’s greatest poems suffice. Back then, everyone learned to recite the great poems, at least together. I can safely say this was good practice then, and it could be good practice now as well. We’ve probably just turned cowards with today’s “non-requirements”. The mantra is that there isn’t enough time for works of literature.

Yes, this is another generation. But there’s my production of *The Stars of Eger*² at the National Theatre, based on the novel by Géza Gárdonyi, another compulsory reading. It’s a 3 hour 20 minute performance. There are about 620 students aged 12–13–14 sitting in the audience. And when the lights go down in the auditorium, 450 mobile screens light up. That’s how we go into battle. Then slowly they turn them off and we hardly see any mobile phone lights during the performance. The kids sit through the 3 hours and 20 minutes, and by the end, everyone becomes a bit of a hero from Eger. So it’s us adults who I think tend to give up all too easily. Teachers of Hungarian literature are key persons, that’s for sure. The way they address the students, the way they approach the work. In answer to the many questions, I can say no work is more topical than *The Viceroy Bánk* and *The Tragedy of Man*. They can switch you over into the present in no time. This is the sense in which I’m a conservative.

LÁSZLÓ L. SIMON: I, too, welcome everyone! One of Robi’s two questions was about whether we should keep compulsory reading compulsory, and the other was about whether compulsory reading can be replaced by watching the stage versions. Valéria Csépe’s 2018 National Curriculum for literature rightly makes the point that we need to have students read what is appropriate for their stage of personal development. The question is how reading can contribute to

² Premiere: 16 March 2018

character development and what should be read at which stage of life. The aim is to provide developing children with stories and situations, through an increasing variety of literary works and examples of complex characters, which they will encounter in adult life. As readers, they will not be at a loss when faced with certain crisis situations. They can draw strength, faith and example from their reading experiences. Read *The Stars of Eger* to understand what a traitor deserves in life.

My position is clear from this: compulsory reading, which includes some of the greatest works of Hungarian literature, is absolutely necessary. Despite the fact that the children's classroom workload cannot be increased indefinitely. Disciplines have become even more complex in recent decades, so in principle more and more should be taught. We teach subjects in school that were not known at all in our childhood or in our parents' childhood. My parents did not have four IT lessons a week, because there was no such thing as computing, and Neumann had just thought of it and started to build his own computer. You have to realise that these subjects must be taught – but at the expense of something else. Yet I would say that if we take our identity seriously, and if we think about the important function of the arts and literature in character development, we cannot reduce the teaching of literature.

I have given this example many times: in Velence, on a hillside, there is a thatched-roofed press-house monument building that used to be Mihály Vörösmarty's³ own press-house; he sat there, writing, thinking, making his shoddy wine. Once, on a commercial radio programme, there was a discussion about racism, about whether it was or wasn't OK to use the word Gypsy, and the presenters cracked the joke that Vörösmarty was a racist because he'd



Mihály Vörösmarty's press-house in the village of Velence (source: facebook.com)

written the poem *The Old Gypsy*⁴, so he should be punished, someone should set his press-house in Velence on fire. I got a desperate call, somebody was eager to warn me of the danger, because they didn't get the irony and took this part of the conversation seriously. This is why I say the teaching of literature is extremely important, because in the fifth grade of primary school you can learn what irony is. Otherwise, you'll be a silly adult

³ Mihály Vörösmarty (1800–1855) was the greatest poet of Hungarian Romanticism

⁴ *The Old Gypsy* is a poem that mourns the fall of the revolution and war of independence.

and take things you're supposed to laugh at absolutely literally, because you won't get the hint or metaphor. So teaching literature is not just about being literate.

I always use the example of Shakespeare: how many people have translated *Romeo and Juliet*, from János Arany⁵ to Ádám Nádasdy⁶. Which is an opportunity to bring the work closer to new generations, making it lovable and accessible. Obviously, it would be outrageous to rewrite Zrínyi's *The Peril of Sziget*⁷, for example. But sooner or later we will have to face the fact that if language keeps changing at this rate, if so many words are transferred from the active vocabulary to the passive, our children will be unable to read some of the compulsory classics. And that's a big problem.

A decade or more ago, my position was that original texts should not be rewritten. Now, at least, I have second thoughts about that. And here we can move on to theatre and the second part of the question. Attila says he stages the original text. But there are two pitfalls in this: on the one hand, the text is abridged. Which keeps the dramaturge busy, that's a big job. On the other hand, the director keeps reinterpreting the text, changing it from the previous stage versions. I'd like to remark here that in the current *Bánk* production, for example, I couldn't understand about half the text. Basically, for two reasons. One is that some young actors have major articulation issues – Imre Montágh⁸ must be turning in his grave. The other is that the director's amazing skills at building an all-arts reality occasionally render the text unimportant, so it's drowned out by the music and the multitude of sound effects used in an attempt to make the performance more complete. Such interpretations therefore only work really well if you know the text and the plot to begin with. So that doesn't bother me, because I happen to know the story, even if the director sometimes distracts me with things like noisy looms. In other words, what Attila says about his using the original text is not entirely true, because it's the original text all right, except it's not presented in the usual way. In theatre, you can do what, say, a literary person or a publisher can't: you can cut down, rewrite or "refresh" the original. I must confess that after the performance, I evesdropped on the conversations of some secondary school students. They were saying things like that's one compulsory read ticked off, meaning they no longer had to read the original work. And I realised a lot of these kids simply didn't know what they'd just seen on stage. They hadn't read the text, they didn't have that fresh reading experience, in the absence of which Attila's interpretation, in my opinion, was hard to make sense of and could not be fully appreciated. Because Attila is not

⁵ János Arany (1817–1882) is one of the greatest Hungarian poets of all time

⁶ Ádám Nádasdy (1947) is poet, linguist and literary translator

⁷ *The Menace of Sziget* (1645–46) by Miklós Zrínyi (1620–1664) is a Baroque epic of heroic resistance against the Turks

⁸ Imre Montágh (1937–1986) was a legendary speech therapist of Hungarian actors

staging a classical costume performance, but a completely contemporary, one might say avant-garde interpretation, I'm afraid that's by no means suitable as a substitute for the compulsory read. I'd tell the kids to come to the theatre and see the play only when they've read *The Viceroy Bánk*, and not to come with the idea of ticking off the compulsory read.

SZÁSZ: Listening to you, I thought of the playwright György Spiró⁹, who wrote a doctoral thesis back in the 1970s, where in the context of Hungarian classics, he talks about the similarities between Central European destinies, histories and literatures, and how these literatures are related. Ten years ago, our host today, the Hungarian Writers' Association, organised a conference to compare the ways in which literature is taught throughout the region, in connection with the 2013 curriculum debate. Csaba Gy. Kiss¹⁰ and his colleagues invited everyone from the "neighbourhood": representatives of Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Ukraine and others to speak on the topic of how understanding literature impacts on the state of national identity. Genre issues were also raised there. It turns out that while we Hungarians focus on poetry and novels, Poles and Serbs, for example, tend to focus on drama. They teach over thirty plays in public education. I can't forget the Yugoslav War and the superb performances I saw at the National and at MITEMs, including *The Patriots*¹¹ by Sterija.

And I'm also considering what Attila said about learning text by heart. How are we slowly losing our hearing as well as our literary and spoken language? Before Attila's curricular Bánk production in 2020, linguist Géza Balázs, who teaches at the SZFE, told the students and their teachers that József Katona's pre-reform Hungarian of 1820 is not only literature, but also cultural history, a cheat sheet of all you need to know about being Hungarian, and an introduction to the history of our language. Something that has disappeared from the curricula. This is also my hobby horse: in the reform era, the ideological basis of a civic nation-state was closely linked to the issue of language. The three-in-one unity of literature-language-linguistic nation is the basis of the new national consciousness, which we're still using or abusing today. Why did we need institutions like the National Museum, the Academy of Sciences and the National Theatre when it wasn't until 1844 that Hungarian became an official language of the Austrian Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary? We who represent the company of today's National Theatre have to ask ourselves these questions again and again. We are at the beginning of a process, as was theatre from the last decade of the 18th century right until 1848, an era of

⁹ György Spiró (1946) is a writer, poet, playwright, author of the book of essays *Central and Eastern European Drama* (1986)

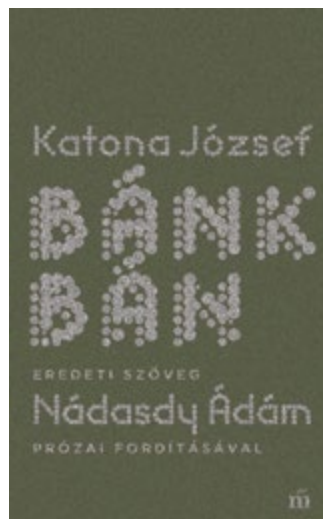
¹⁰ Csaba Gy. Kiss (1945) is a historian of literature and culture

¹¹ Sterija Popović's (1806–1856) drama, directed by András Urbán, was performed at MITEM in April 2016

which Katona's belated drama, presented in 1833 – as it turned out much later – was the turning point. For years, I've been wondering whether a new reform era, the intellectual basis for the regime change, began in the mid to late 1980s. And I agree with Attila about staging the original text, because we can only reconstruct the style of the period, the novelty of Romanticism in terms of the emancipation of women, for example, from the text.

L. SIMON: I'm just saying that's a treacherous thing. Attila's concept was not to touch the text. But let us add quickly that in the history of Hungarian literature there is a long tradition of our great writers rewriting the texts of their predecessors. Some writers were asked to do so, such as János Arany, who at Madách's¹² request, gently "scribbled corrections all over" the manuscript of *The Tragedy of Man*, while Gyula Illyés¹³ also touched up the text of Bánk with great skill. And actually, Bánk could use some more touching up today. What I've just said about translations is also present in Hungarian literature when it comes to works without a specific author, i.e. folk stories and fairy tales. Just think how many people have borrowed and rewritten the stories of Anonymus, from Mikszáth¹⁴ through Ferenc Móra¹⁵ to Dénes Lengyel¹⁶. It was obviously at the back of Gyula Illyés' mind that he wanted to speak to today's children in modern Hungarian, passing on the old stories, Hungarian folk tales in a way that would preserve their relevance. Or think of Marcell Jankovics'¹⁷ Hungarian folk tale cartoon series, which was the crowning of this process. Because that was also a new interpretation, using a new visual language.

SZÁSZ: In the context of *The Viceroy Bánk*, we should also mention the latest prose adaptation by Ádám Nadasdy in 2019. I met the author in person and read it honestly. We are talking about a very well-intentioned undertaking. But the way in which the Móra publishing house advertises the book, in terms of "understanding", is plain ridiculous. In any case, it made a big splash in the media: Viktor Horváth¹⁸ – otherwise a renowned novelist – wrote an article suggesting that Bánk



¹² Imre Madách (1823–1864) is the author of *The Tragedy of Man*

¹³ Gyula Illyés (1902–1983) was a writer, poet and playwright

¹⁴ Kálmán Mikszáth (1847–1910) was the greatest Hungarian novelist of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries

¹⁵ Ferenc Móra (1879–1934) was a writer and museologist

¹⁶ Dénes Lengyel (1910–1987) was a writer and literary historian

¹⁷ Marcell Jankovics (1945–2021) was a cartoon director and cultural historian

¹⁸ Tibor Horváth (1962) is a writer and literary translator

conveys behaviour patterns harmful to our modern Europeanness, and the work should therefore be removed from public education.

In addition to the prose reading, of course, there is also a recent adaptation in verse. By one of our most important contemporary poets, Tibor Zalán¹⁹. He, so to speak, only straightened out the limping rhythm. In dramatic terms, however, the play lost much of its original excitement and power. The power of the fundamental conflict that arises from Bánk's political role and his relationship with his beloved wife, the mother of his children. I would just like to add that this is a fundamental insight into the Hungarian world view and dramatic character, which no playwright has ever expressed better or more clearly than Katona. Even if he does so using dated expressions, as opposed to the vernacular of his age, mobilising a fundamental layer of the Hungarian vocabulary.

SMID: The two acts are radically different in the performance we saw on the main stage. I liked the first one better: I know Zsolt is not happy when theoretical people label Vidnyánszky's staging as post-dramatic, but I'd still use this term about the first act. At the same time, I think the way he stages the first act of



József Katona's *The Viceroy Bánk*, National Theatre, 2023, d: Attila Vidnyánszky, in photo: Act I, the mutineers' scene (photo by Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetisinhaz.hu)

Katona's play is a good theatrical alternative to literary adaptation or rewriting. I think it's a good alternative to stage adaptation. When – in the first ten minutes or so – the director has the mutineers led by Petúr say Bánk's name, and then the names of the Meranians and Bánk's wife Melinda's name, the conflict is already outlined, it's in the air. All in all, the first act with its million impulses, its dynamics and theatrical impact really captivated me. It occurred

to me that today's young people watching the performance may feel they're in the same mediatised environment, with the same stimuli and excitement surrounding them on a daily basis.

But when I talked to my students about this, I found myself in the minority. The vast majority could cope better with the more romantic second act that relies on more traditional dramaturgy.

VIDNYÁNSZKY: That was a conscious directorial gesture on my part. In the first act, I have the conflicts and themes running in parallel, so that everyone can nibble and cherry-pick what they want, as they please, with everything

¹⁹ Tibor Zalán (1954) is a poet

flowing and inundating us spectators. In the second act, I start down the path of purification, towards cleaner storytelling. I do this intentionally, because I believe that telling a story straight is as much of a feat as putting a multitude of directorial acrobatics on stage. Besides, as I see it, it's getting harder and harder to tell a story on today's stages, even while I think there is a growing need for stories, stories that touch the very bottom of your soul. In the second act, there is a great apocalyptic scene before Bánk kills Gertrude, in which he keeps repeating: this is not how I wanted it, this is not what I wanted. But beyond that, the conflict becomes clearer and clearer. As for the first act, I don't think it's strictly necessary



Melinda (Ágnes Barta) and Bánk (Sándor Berettyán) in the opening scene of Act II (photo by Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)

for a student to be able to follow everything. The important thing is to grasp the whole. You don't have to understand everything straight away, nor should you. I think this need is the impact of German theatre, bombarding the brain with tremendous force, using irony, sometimes cynicism, which are aimed at the conscious mind. Note the spaces they use: most of the time, they don't need depth, and in their smaller theatres and smaller stage spaces, the music, whose presence I consider very important, does not have the same effect. By the way, this German theatre can be very true, very effective, but I don't think our theatre culture is like that. Or at least I would very much like to see a different kind of theatre here, one that speaks more to the heart. So that, after the last thirty, forty or fifty years of deheroisation, when the dirty little man dominated the stage, we can finally see real heroes again and go along with them. There is a lot to be said about the ways and means by which we can ensure that the actor is no longer just an actor, but a stalker, and that we, as spectators, can be guided by him, so that the performance can take place somewhere deep down in our soul. As I get older, I am moving more and more in this direction, while it is very difficult to free myself from my former theatrical language, which chopped, tore and shredded the story and sometimes even eliminated it. Perhaps the pure tale brings me closer to this theatrical ideal that now lives inside me.

SZÁSZ: I'd like to return for a moment to Róbert's account of his experience, and also to the issue of generational perception he raised there. This also manifested itself in the difference between the first and the second

acts. It is anthropologically determined, depending on our age, when and to what we are sensitive or attuned. Sensory perception, emotional identification, the capacity for abstraction, conscious thought and the experience of identity are built on each other in a succession of distinct life stages in a person's life up to adulthood, up to the age of about thirty. The fact that young adult students in their early twenties – Róbert's dramaturgy students – are more attuned to the romantic second act can be explained by their psycho-physiological maturity. From this point of view, Romanticism is not just one of many stylistic periods. The emotional outbursts of Katona's great monologues are the elemental expressions of a twenty-four-year-old in the case of the early draft of *Bánk*, and of a twenty-eight-year-old at the time of the final manuscript²⁰. These can also be understood as Katona's inner speech. If I also take this into account when contrasting Attila's approaches to the first and second acts, I can say that the first act is about external dramatic events and external speech, while the second act is about what is internal, i.e. the drama unfolding in the soul. And this duality is balanced out in the overall production. In the fifth section of the original work, in the king's judgement, Katona also puts these two planes of existence together, simultaneously bringing these two ways of perceiving the world into play.

L. SIMON: I would like to add another point of view. When I watched the performance, I was basically interested in how a classic play can be made up-to-date, what gives the work its timelessness, what the director thought important to highlight and what he thought important to neglect or relegate



Scene with Bánk (Sándor Berettyán) and Tiborc (Attila Kristán)
(photo by Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)

to the background compared to previous stage adaptations. Of course, it might also be interesting to know, since you have a recurring directorial interest in *The Viceroy Bánk*, Attila, what you thought of it two years ago, or even twenty years ago, when you first directed it in 2002. I wonder, for example, does Tiborc have any relevance today? I would add that

²⁰ József Katona (1791–1830) was an outstanding figure of Hungarian drama literature. He completed the first version of *The Viceroy Bánk* in 1815 and the final version in 1819. It was published in book form in 1820.

this Tiborc fighting for justice is not a character from the time of the play, but from the time of the author József Katona, i.e. not a 13th century serf but a late 18th, early 19th century one.

VIDNYÁNSZKY: One whose boots with the horseshoes on them scratch the floor.

L. SIMON: I'll give you another current example. Yesterday I saw the Derkovits²¹ exhibition in Szombathely. In his paintings from the 1920s and 30s you see factory and dock workers, a multitude of people with a hard life and a miserable fate. And I was also reminded of Kassák's poem "My Poetry", wherein he sang of the unfortunate with elemental power. Today, no one talks about that at all. There is not a single literary work that deals with the fate of the many poor, unfortunate, vulnerable, persecuted, destitute or homeless people living in the world today. When I went to see Katona's play, I wondered if Tiborc's character was relevant. Maybe, it was, maybe, it wasn't. After the performance, I felt that even Petúr was not relevant. I noticed that in your play, Petúr doesn't even have a big role. He is not topical, because the perception that Katona had in his day of the Andrew II era has been refuted



Gyula Derkovits: *Carriers on the Danube*, oil on canvas, 1927, Hungarian National Gallery (photo by László L. Simon, source: facebook.com)

and superseded by the study of history in the light of more recent sources and archaeological finds – it's enough to read Attila Zsigmond's studies on the subject²². The political-historical approach we were taught is completely outdated, including the reasons for writing the Golden Bull – For me, the personal fate and tragedy of the dishonoured wife, the tricked and humiliated husband, the schemer, and the queen who turns a blind eye to the intrigue are much more important in Bánk today than the political relevance of the oppressive foreign power foisting the Meranians on Hungarians. Today, we live in a sovereign nation-state, a full member of the European Union, of course, were're faced with many external influences and challenges which, in different

²¹ Gyula Derkovits (1894–1934) was a painter and graphic artist

²² Attila Zsigmond (1941) was a designer, politician, member of parliament, founder of the Hungarian Democratic Forum

forms, are also eroding our culture. But in the sense that was relevant in Katona's time – when a sovereign Hungarian state was practically wishful thinking, when Hungarian was not an official language, and many other elementary things that we now take for granted were missing – I think that by now, a number of things in *Bánk* have lost their relevance.

VIDNYÁNSZKY: I still consider *The Viceroy Bánk* to be the best Hungarian play. It works just like a play by Shakespeare. And you have to touch it up just as much as any other play by Shakespeare, we don't stage that as it is, either: you whittle it down, you rearrange it here and there, you try to get a grip on it. I very much agree that the personal thread is terribly important, but for me the role of the king, the act of pardoning, the act of forgiveness, are also a key issue: the "free grace", which has an immediate social dimension: the example set, the example shown. The extent to which this play reflects historical facts is not the main question. You say we are a sovereign state. But is the lack of sovereignty that was a screaming reality in Katona's day still haunting us today? I'm afraid there'll come a time when we'll have to wishfully think about our sovereignty again. 20 years ago²³, I had this shocking experience that everything



Scene from the 2002 *The Viceroy Bánk* performance, with the fallen cauldron (photo by Béla Ilovsky)

was changing at a terrifying pace. I had paint brought in in huge cauldrons, and when the murder takes place, when Bánk kills Gertrude, a 50-litre cauldron of red paint fell from a height of 9 metres onto the white floor, splattering everything. And when the king (Peter Sinkó) arrived, his path was cleared with mops wrapped around brooms. Then I felt that something was disappearing for good, and now I feel that everything has changed. That now in this changed world we have to find ourselves, our own topics. What a paradox it is, for example, that the daughter of Gertrude and Andrew II is Saint Elizabeth, Europe's patron saint! That's why I have one of the child characters go with a bouquet of roses to Gertrude, who is covered in blood, and some in the audience react vividly to that, realising this story is not so unambiguous after all.

SMID: I'd like to come back to the question raised by Laci, because I also think that in this production, Petúr is in the background, not as prominent as

²³ Attila Vidnyánszky's first production of *The Viceroy Bánk* premiered at the National Theatre in December 2002.

we are used to. But I would also add that one can identify much less with him on the basis of national self-esteem: here Petúr is not a romantic Koppány figure; he's a bigot who keeps using the homeland as a pretext, who allows himself male chauvinistic (misogynistic) remarks, allegedly in the interests of the homeland. Gertrude, on the other hand, is elevated into a real tragic character, her aspirations and downfall have much more impact in the performance than when you read the play on your own at home.

L. SIMON: One thing is certain: the Petúr in Attila's current production is not the Petúr that Katona wrote in the original drama.

VIDNYÁNSZKY: When I did the 2017 chamber *Bánk*, or the 2002 one, Petúr was much stronger (Blaskó played the role in 2002). I find the Biberachs a lot more intriguing these days. I see them all the time, I catch them repainting their faces or peeking, I want to see how they adapt. It's amazing, you're wowed by how beautifully they do it.

SZÁSZ: I feel we have reached the point where we get to ask the question that could actually be the real topic of this series of discussions. What is the place and role of contemporary theatre in today's Hungarian reality? What is it that only theatre can represent and display? And having reflected on Laci's earlier question, I can say that the world of working people, the unemployed, the homeless are very much present in today's Hungarian art theatres, such as Katona. Oodles of texts are written using a verbatim technique, in the style of the post-dramatic German school already mentioned. And they already have a cult following in liberal circles that claim to be socially sensitive. Seeing all this, my question is: where is the Hungarian dramatic character, does tragedy as a genre still stand a chance? I think Attila will agree that the National is a dramatic art theatre, which, beyond Russian theatre culture as a model – all the way back to ancient tragedy – is a two-thousand-five-hundred-year-old European heritage we must represent. We can't find any good contemporary texts for this mission, let alone tragedies, not to mention king plays, which have been demanded of us for a hundred and eighty years.

VIDNYÁNSZKY: It's a recurring issue about the National Theatre that we need new plays. I have 15 or 20 contemporary plays on my desk right now, but the fact is they have to compete with Katona's *Bánk* or István Örkény's *The Totes*²⁴, and that's not so easy. I don't know of anything more wonderfully written than the relationship between Bánk and Melinda in Katona's play. It's all about whether I can elevate the woman to the point where I can turn to her as my better half for the rest of my life. Bánk is crushed by his loss of faith precisely in that. He contemplates no vengeance against Otto. Presenting this is vital in the performance.

²⁴ István Örkény (1912–1979), writer and playwright, whose play *The Totes* has been performed in many countries around the world.

SMID: I suggest that at this point we open the discussion to the audience.

Imre János Hegedűs (from the audience): I taught for twenty years in Transylvania, in Dănești and Sfântu Gheorghe, and of course I held *The Viceroy Bánk* in my hands many times. I saw this performance with my 17-year-old grandson. I brought a message from him to the director Attila Vidnyánszky. The kid says it was a super-modern production that would do credit to Hollywood. But I have a question: what happens between Bánk and Gertrude before she is killed? I see them as though they are a couple in love: when Gertrude complains that she is cold, Bánk covers her in his fur coat. Did I see that right? That's the question I'd like to principal director to answer.

VIDNYÁNSZKY: I think there is a very, very complex dialogue going on between Bánk and Gertrude. Bánk doesn't want to kill till the last moment. He respects the queen and begs her to undo the dishonour done to him and



Bánk (Sándor Berettyán) and Gertrude (Eszter Ács) in the scene preceding the assassination (photo by Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)

Melinda. But Gertrude would not attack him either, if Bánk did not curse her and Merania, where she was born. Gertrude, driven by her own grievance, can't begin to understand what motivates Bánk, why he takes what happened to Melinda as such a tragedy. Why he makes such a big fuss about her cheating or the suspicion of that. That's why, from his own point of view, Bánk feels that she's a stranger after all. That's the complex relationship I was trying to expound. Also,

I wanted to suggest that Gertrude is amazed by this man-woman connection unknown to her till now, till the last moment. She is used to much looser morals, more frivolous behaviour.

L. SIMON: It's not the first time I've realised how few layers I can extract from Attila's productions, even though I see almost everything he stages. I should see his recent *Bánk* twice or three times, because in his staging, there are three things going on at the same time, and all of them are important. It would also be very worthwhile if Attila once took the trouble to stage a performance that he'd interrupt every now and then and comment throughout. Now the performance is two and a half hours long, his comments might take another two hours – I think we would benefit from that.

Translated by László Vértes

sándor petófi 200



SÁNDOR PETŐFI

The Actor's Song



Miklós Barabás: *Sándor Petőfi*, ink on paper
(source: mek.oszk.hu)

Of all the arts on earth
Ours has a shining crown.
Can you oppose my words?
This art is mighty prime.
How grand, how grand, how grand
Our purpose is, we say:
Let's be worthy and proud:
We're actors and we play.

Just shades of letters that
Written poetry gives,
we add breath and spirit,
life and soul to all these.
How grand, how grand, how grand
Our purpose is, we say:
Let's be worthy and proud:
We're actors and we play.

We have all the charm
over the hearts of men
to make them dearly smile,
then bring forth tears from them.
How grand, how grand, how grand
Our purpose is, we say:
Let's be worthy and proud:
We're actors and we play.

We are like apostles
On the ground of ethos.
And our preaching voice calls
for virtue and honours.
How grand, how grand, how grand
Our purpose is, we say:
Let's be worthy and proud:
We're actors and we play.

But what we preach and cry
To people from the stage,
Don't let that be belied
By deeds on common days.
If our play is without
this grand majestic aim,
It is a guilt for us,
We're actors just in name.

Pest, September 1844

Translated by Nóra Durkó

“Petőfi is still the best-known Hungarian poet abroad. He is the Hungarian favourite of the gods. He had everything to become a great poet: talent, history, destiny. He lived for twenty-six years and left behind a life’s work of world literary rank and size, which marked an epochal turning point in the literature of his nation”, writes a renowned literary historian. He was born in Kiskőrös on 1 January 1823. As one of the leaders of the ‘March Youths’, he participated in the revolution of 15 March 1848 and later in the struggle for freedom. He sacrificed his life for Hungarian freedom: historians today believe that he died on 31 July 1849 in the Battle of Segesvár. During his short life, he wrote nearly a thousand poems, of which eight hundred and fifty have been preserved for posterity, and the better known ones have been translated into many other languages. It is less well known that the young Petőfi was also drawn to the theatre: after leaving school at the age of eighteen, he became an actor and befriended Gábor Egressy, the greatest Hungarian actor of his time. On the day after the outbreak of the Revolution, he encouraged his fellow poets to begin translating Shakespeare’s plays systematically; he himself translated *Coriolanus* into Hungarian, but he also made his own attempts at drama. In this compilation, we evoke the figure of the actor Petőfi, as well as the 150th anniversary of his birth: the years 1972 and ‘73, when the *Petőfi Rock* of the university youth shook the entire country and unleashed the spirit of protest and discontent against the communist Kádár regime. Additionally, we include a study outlining the century-and-a-half history of the Petőfi cult. Finally, we have assembled a representative selection of images from the theatre-related events of the Petőfi Bicentenary – including Petőfi’s comic epic *A helység kalapácsa* [*The Sledhehammer of the Village*], his narrative poem *János Vitéz* [*John the Valiant*], the 200th performance of his play at the National Theatre in Budapest, and lastly the “historical adventure film” (*Most, vagy soha* [*Now, or Never*]), produced with the participation of young actors from the National Theatre.





Sándor Petőfi: *John the Valiant*, National Theatre Budapest,
premiere: 2014, d: Attila Vidnyánszky





The title character of the 200th performance: Sándor Berettyán
(photos: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetisinhaz.hu)





Sándor Petőfi: *The Hammer of the Village*, A joint National Theatre and Transcarpathian Regional Hungarian Drama Theatre production, 2022, d: Attila Vidnyánszky





In the role of Sándor Petőfi: Attila Vidnyánszky Jr.
(photos: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetisinhaz.hu)





Now or Never! Hungarian Film, 2024,
producer: Pilvax Film Kft, director: Balázs Lóth





In the role of Sándor Petőfi: Sándor Berettyán; in the role of Farkasch: Ottó Horváth Lajos
(photo: Philip Rákay, source: imdb.com)





MÁRTA TÖMÖRY

“Well, You Need Erudition to Shakspeare¹, but Not the Salon Kind”

The Theatre of Sándor Petőfi²

Petőfi, the actor and critic

Petőfi's passion for the theatre blossomed early. As early as in 1835, as a student in Pest, he was “*prowling around theatres*”³. Between 1835 and 1838, he attended the skola latina (Latin school) in Aszód (“1) *I started to write poetry here. 2) I first fell in love here. 3) I wanted to become an actor here for the first time*”⁴). From 30 May to 11 June 1837 director István Balog's⁵ travelling company performed in Aszód. Our hero fell in love with the young Borbala László and wanted to run away with the troupe. His father discovered the plan and “*his fatherly advice continued to be felt weeks later (...) on my back and other corners of my soul's porch*”⁶ – he recounts.

Meanwhile, in Selmec, he failed history, and his bankrupt father washed his hands of him. Consequently, the young school dropout arrived in Pest in the spring of 1839. “*I was an extra at the National Theatre in Pest, carrying chairs and love seats onto the stage, and on the orders of the actors I ran to the pub for beer, wine and horseradish sausages*”⁷ Intermittently between 1841 and 1843 he

¹ We followed Petőfi's contemporary transcription of Shakespeare's name.

² In Hungarian: Márta Tömöry: “Hiába, Shakspearehez műveltség kell, de nem szaloni”. Petőfi Sándor színháza”, *Szcenárium*, March 2013, 20–26

³ Kerényi, Ferenc: *Petőfi Sándor*. Elektra publishing house, Élet-kép series, 2002, 20

⁴ Sándor Petőfi: *Úti jegyzetek [Travel Notes]*. In: <http://mek.oszk.hu/06100/06125/html/petofiu0001.html>

⁵ We, the MÉG Theatre, also adapted the play *Jupiter théátruma avagy a vándorló színészek [Jupiter's Theatre or the Wandering Actors]* in 1992, and we made it as far as Italy.

⁶ Kerényi, op. cit. 22

⁷ *Ibid.*, 26

was an itinerant actor, travelling with several troupes. He played in Fehérvár, Kecskemét and in Tolna county under the stage names Rónai, then Borostyán. He gained considerable life and professional experience of contemporary theatre and acting style.

How good of an actor Petőfi could have been – important arguments about this are brought by for example Kerényi's thorough book. He played character roles. His performance in Kecskemét, portraying the clown in *Lear*, stood out. His acting divided the audience. While the older generation missed comedy, the students, Jókai and his friends, loudly applauded his portrayal of the philosophical fool.⁸



Maltitz: *The Old Student Zolky*, copy of the play in Sándor Petőfi's handwriting, from 1841 (source: pimblog.blog.hu)

His poem *The Actor's Song* is the ars poetica of the profession: “Just shades of letters that / Written poetry gives, / we add breath and spirit, / life and soul to all these. (...) We have all the charm / over the hearts of men (...) We are like apostles / On the ground of ethos. / And our preaching voice calls / for virtue and honours.” (However, if our actions do not align with the proclaimed ideas: “It is a guilt for us, / We're actors just in name.”)

He had a close friendship with the defining actor of his time, Gábor Egressy⁹. Egressy was a self-cultured and conscious actor. He made study trips abroad to Vienna and Paris; dealt with the theoretical and practical issues of acting (actor training, role learning methodology, drama criticism, art analysis, role interpretation). He wrote a great analysis about Hamlet, too¹⁰.

In his poem *To Gábor Egressy*, Petőfi focuses on the conflict between the poet or actor, and his age.

“Often the age does not understand its child / Who creates great things from the power of his great soul, / And his downfall! He raises his people / So high, whence they fall down (...)”

But while the poet outlives his work by centuries: “The actor's fate is so different / He's bound to a short chain – / The present's grip is his sole domain,

⁸ Op. cit. 43–46, date of performance: 25 March 1843

⁹ Gábor Egressy (Galambos) (Sajólászlófalva, 3 November 1808 – Pest, 30 July 1866): actor, member of the first ensemble at the National Theatre, member of Kisfaludy Társaság, friend of Petőfi.

¹⁰ Egressy Gábor válogatott cikkei (1838–1848) [Selected Articles of Gábor Egressy (1838–1848)]. Library of Theatre History, 11, MSZI, 1980 (Edited and study written by Ferenc Kerényi)



Gábor Egressy's daguerreotype of himself, 1845 (source: wikipedia.com)

/ For the future, no ties remain. / If not securely, in the present's grasp, / He anchors his name, his legacy's clasp: / The ship of time, with his name on it, / Will sail away, through eternity."

And to show what a sensitive spectator and critic Petőfi was of the theatre of his time, below is a quote (edited and abbreviated) from his review¹¹ of Egressy's acting¹².

Selfishness is a heinous sin – the poet begins philosophically – and there is no people more selfish than the English (...) *"whose pocket is the axis around which the earth turns, this people is the embodiment of two times two (...) and this people (...) has Shakspeare. Most annoying (...) if he was not Hungarian (...) wish he was rather French (...)"*

This ironic digression is followed by a deification of Shakespeare: *"Shakspeare alone is half of creation. Before him the world was imperfect, and when God created him, He said, 'Behold, people, if you have doubted until now, doubt not henceforth my existence and my greatness! Neither before him nor after him has any bird or human mind flown so high as Shakspeare (...) There is no passion, there is no emotion, no character that he did not depict, and with a paint that does not lose its colour even with the passage of time, nor does it fade away (...)"*

He turns to the play: *"Richard III, on the whole, does not belong among Shakspeare's most distinguished works; compared to the others, it is dry and one-sided (...) The story is not as interesting as in Romeo and Juliet, and it lacks the passions of Othello or King Lear; but considering character portrayal, this work is one of the most amazing, standing immediately alongside Coriolanus and Falstaff. Richard is the epitome of villainy (...) His aim is to rule – the cheerfulness with which he pursues it is the most terrifying aspect"* – Petőfi grasps the essence of the character.

"But there is a scene in this play that Shakspeare did not write anything greater or bolder than (...) – the scene next to the coffin in the first act (...) – here Petőfi discusses winning Anne's heart. – There is no match for the greatness of this scene."

¹¹ III. Richárd király. Színbírálat, Nemzeti Színház, febr. 13, 1847. Egressy Gábor jutalmára "III. Richard király" Shakspeare-től [King Richard III, Review, National Theatre, 13 Feb 1847. For Gábor Egressy's Benefit Performance, King Richard III by Shakspeare.] In: Petőfi összes prózai művei és levelezése [Petőfi's Complete Works and Correspondence], Szépirodalmi Publishers, Budapest, 1974, 261–264

¹² The different perceptions of the role of Richard III by Lendvay in 1843 and Egressy in 1847 provoked a sharp debate among the critics of *Honderű*, *Pesti Divatlap* and *Életképek*. Petőfi understands and defends Egressy.

Shakspeare must have written this in some delirium, because even in his sober mind, he could not have dared to do such a thing.”

On Gábor Egressy’s portrayal of Richard III: *“He created a character that we expected from him, and that we could expect from him only (...) I will tell you what sets Egressy apart from our other first-rate actors. It is the measure of greatness in art, like in poetry: versatility; hence Shakspeare is greater in drama than Molière (...) While [the pieces of] the latter are just individual instruments, each of the former is like an entire orchestra.”*

What he writes about the portrayal is almost like a cinematic close-up on the actor’s tools:

Richard III stands out as one of Gábor Egressy’s most successful and unforgettable portrayals. (...) It is a terrifying face, with its small, smiling eyes and the gaping bottomless maw, which then swallows you whole. It is like the gaze of an anaconda, coaxing its prey into the snake’s throat. If this face appears in your dreams, by the time you wake up, you will find that your blood has run cold. And that is just the face and the silent smile; but when he laughs, what an inhuman sound it is! It is as if a rusty door is creaking, or as if a tiger is grinding its dry, blood-thirsty throat. His speech is fragmented, disjointed, each word thrown out like needles, as if he is spitting pins into someone else’s eyes.”

When the actor, the viewer/receiver, and the author are all in tune:

“I was curious about the scene in the last act where Richard suddenly awakens from his dream after the appearance of the ghosts; I was afraid that Egressy would shout out the monologue, which could indeed garner great applause but would be incorrect. My concern was unnecessary, especially since Egressy does not usually sacrifice art for applause.

As he jumped out of bed, he stumbled and slid a few steps, grabbing onto a chair as if it were a living creature protecting him. Here, half-lying, he delivered or rather whispered the soliloquy with fading breath. How satisfying it was to see this colossal villain, who had trampled over others until now, writhing on the ground, utterly devastated, desperate, miserable, trembling, like a crushed serpent. And then, even more surprising was his final determination to rise up, to rush into battle, so that if his life had been so abhorrent, at least his death would be valiant and thus reconciling. Shakspeare thought of it this way, and so played Egressy Gábor...”

The conflict between the artist and his era:

“There was a small but select audience present... because the boxes were empty. Well, you need erudition to Shakspeare, but not the salon kind. Are we going to thank Egressy for choosing, in full knowledge of the circumstances, a Shakspearean play again as his benefit performance? Will Egressy be content with any amount of warm, but mere thanks on behalf of poetry and art? (...) For all the world’s thanks, they will not even give a belt, on which, in your ultimate desperation, you could hang yourself”¹³
– Petőfi concludes his theatre critique bitterly.

¹³ Original source: *Életképek*, 20 February 1847

Tiger and Hyena

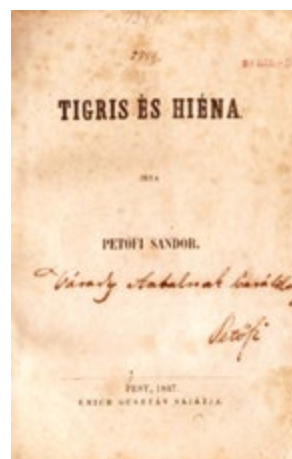
Undeservedly neglected for a long time, Petőfi's only surviving¹⁴, completed dramatic work is a historical drama. With its extremely romantic situations and heroes, it seems to be gaining popularity lately – as a cult piece in postmodern theatre? Built upon the twin battles of the Árpád dynasty, it is a royal drama and revenge tragedy. It truly transcends romantic horror dramas with its grandiosity. The male and female principles clash irreconcilably here. Raging passions, unfulfilled dreams, the raw, bloody reality and illusions cannot be harmonized; the world shows its dual, sacred-foolish, intoxicated face.

Petőfi's drama was never performed during his lifetime. In the first half of January 1846, he came to Pest with the manuscript of *Tiger and Hyena*. The play was accepted for performance, and he happily wrote to his friends that it would be staged during the Joseph's Day fair, in a subscription break¹⁵. However, the decision was changed. Szigligeti's promising popular piece was played instead, and Petőfi was offered the date of 4 April 1847 for the subscription performance of his drama. Due to the unfavourable conditions which he found insulting, he withdrew his play himself. "I will not tolerate indignity from anyone's son, not even for a few hundred, or even a few thousand forints..."¹⁶

It is a great pity that the National Theatre at that time did not take the risk¹⁷, and our poet did not live to see his work being tested in front of an audience. Perhaps our entire dramatic literature and Petőfi's career would have taken a different direction. This should serve as a reminder to decision-makers at all times!

(We may be glad that on 2 January 1847, Gusztáv Emich published *Tiger and Hyena*.)

Few have experimented so far with these puppet-like, polarized characters and brief scenes on the live stage. Puppeteers have not attempted it yet. The external form is offered by the heavy Sicilian marionettes designed for jousting, with metal poles and the ability to fence. However, the passion-driven motivation of the characters actually calls for a Bunraku puppet theatre adaptation.



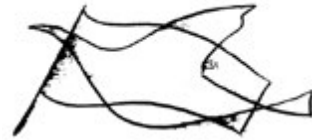
Translated by Nóra Durkó

¹⁴ He also wrote *Zöld Marci* – his popular play about the famous outlaw was unanimously rejected, and in his anger, he probably set it on fire.

¹⁵ According to the rule at the time, the author was entitled to 5% of the income of the first 4 performances. Ferenc Kerényi *Sándor Petőfi*. Elektra publishing house, Életkép series, 2002, 88

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 89

¹⁷ It is our playwrights' destiny that the triumph of their work begins long after their death.



FERENC TEMESI

Petőfi with a Christ Beard

Isti Paál and *Petőfi Rock*¹

If he were alive, he would be 150 years old today, said a double-chinned doctor-worker-comrade about Petőfi in his oration in Szeged in 1973, when cautious economic reforms were aborted in the Hungarian Artful Society and ever larger loans were taken from the enemy, i.e. international capital, which was uniting more successfully than the proletariat. The Petőfi Year was canonised, setting a dangerous precedent in the hard-to-swallow history of Revolutionary Youth Days, wherein the comrades tried to concoct nothing less than the Holy Trinity of 1848=1919=1945². 15 March was a day off for schoolkids only, with pre-cinema western adventure movies on TV to make sure, to the extent possible, that young people stayed at home. But they didn't. They wore tricolour ribbons of their own making (hand-sewn by their mothers), as opposed to the official tricolour ribbons worn at the parades. One thing was certain: the secret police wore tricolours hanging down to their bellies. When the students dared to demonstrate in the centre of Budapest, some suspicious teachers, i.e. those wearing beards and jeans, were beaten up along with them, including Young Communist League (KISZ) secretaries and Party members. A teenage girl had the national-coloured ribbon in her hair torn out along with her pigtail, because it was simpler that way. For quite a few young people, the adventure ended in police custody or in Baracska Prison. The comrades hit first and asked questions later.

¹ In Hungarian, see Ferenc Temesi: *Krisztus-szakállas Petőfi* (Petőfi with a Christ Beard). Paál Isti és a Pefőfi-rock (Isti Paál and Pefőfi Rock), Szenárium, March 2014, pp 26–32. The essay is published in an abridged and edited form.

² From 1967 to 1987, the combined celebrations of the 'Three Springs' were organised by the Young Communist League (KISZ). The Civil Revolution and War of Independence began on 15 March 1848; the Hungarian Soviet Republic based on Bolshevik principles was proclaimed on 21 March 1919; the 2nd World War ended in Hungary on 4 April 1945, by which time the Russian troops had occupied the whole country.

Though in 1973 the sky was denim blue, ignored only by those who wouldn't notice it. The Vietnam War was over, Allende had been bombed at the Chilean presidential palace, the first mobile phone (with a battery the size of a smaller suitcase) had become operational, the Arab-Israeli war had broken out for the umpteenth time, Picasso had died, the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* had debuted, the Bosphorus Bridge connecting Europe with Asia had been built and Chicago's Sears Tower had been completed. Brezhnev, Party Führer of the Bolshevik Empire, Lenin Prize-winning writer, gave a televised speech to scare Americans, if they were watching. But they weren't.



Petőfi Rock, Szeged University Stage, 1972,
d: István Paál (photo by Marianne Blazsó,
source: hiaszt.hu)

We didn't watch TV then either, we went to amateur theatres and the movies instead. In '73, Madách's *Moses*³ was shown in Pest and *Fiddler on the Roof*⁴ was banned. We didn't kill ourselves over that. We had presented Madách's *Moses* in Szeged three years earlier, with members of the Szeged University Theatre, in the not-yet-renovated synagogue. Tamás Raj, the young rabbi who had studied philosophy in Szeged (I have known few people more book-loving than him), had the Ark of the Covenant brought out, and the characters wore yarmulkes or hats.

But for the believers and the coppers, that much was more than enough. Tamás Raj was banished from Szeged.

The best way for young people to resist at that time, beside beat music and folk dance parties, was the amateur theatre movement. They had a mutual impact on each other.

That year, theaeres officially busied themselves with Petőfi: the Thália Theatre dug up the poet's only play *The Tiger and the Hyena* from the mists of memory, while the Literary Theatre produced an adaptation of *The Apostle*⁵. But it was all too late. (...)

In '73, the Universitas Ensemble, an amateur theatre company, presented an adaptation of a Hungarian folk ballad *The Woman in the Wall*, directed by József

³ Imre Madách 1823–1864), author of *The Tragedy of Man*.

⁴ The musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, set in 1905, was composed by Jerry Bock, lyrics by Sheldon Harnick, screenplay by Joseph Stein.

⁵ *The Apostle* is Petőfi's autobiographically inspired epic poem, written between June and September 1848, in which he expresses his frustration with the revolution and public life.

Ruszt⁶, in an attempt to create Hungary's answer to Grotowski's Poor and Ritual Theatre. Isti Paál⁷ was doing the same thing in Szeged. Let's not forget Tamás Fodor's⁸ Orfeó, Tibor Hegedűs⁹ Street Theatre, the Pincészínház¹⁰ (staging *The Hammer of the Village*), or the Manézs Theatre¹¹ in Miskolc (presenting *The Apostle*). Péter Halász¹² and co. were already stuck in their Dohány Street flat, but in August they staged a week-long happening in Balatonboglár. László Szabó, crime correspondent to *Népszabadság*, wrote a denunciatory review about them, as was common at the time. A superior snitch of mine, whose civilian name was Gusztáv Hábermann, took me to one of their performances.

That year, amateur actors from Szombathely to Miskolc were burning with Petőfi fever all year long. A year before, a very cheap, very amateurish arts programme called *Speak, Beautiful Words* had been launched on radio and television, showing how many talented children and young adults there were in the country and at the same time, keeping as quiet as possible about amateur theatres. And then trouble hit: Petőfi Rock¹³ from Szeged took first place.

The Szeged University Theatre was a troupe with an opposition profile from the early sixties, reaching its first apex with Ionesco's absurd *Exit the King* (*Le roi se meurt*). I'd seen the premiere back in 1967 as a secondary school student. The performance began and ended with the Gregorian-inspired song Still I'm Sad by the band Yardbirds. Isti was no stranger to beat, either. The penny dropped for the comrades a bit late: they banned the show only after the third performance.

As of 1970, Tibor Déry¹⁴ found his voice starting with the premiere of his *The Giant Baby*, which made theatre history, wrote István Nánay¹⁵ in a review of the

⁶ József Ruszt (1937–2005) was a major theatre director with a school-making method, and a leading figure of the Universitas Ensemble, the University Theatre of ELTE, in the 1960s.

⁷ István Paál (1942–1998) was a legendary avant-garde theatre director of the 1970s–1980s.

⁸ Tamás Fodor (1942) was a founding actor and director of the Universitas Ensemble in 1960. From 1971 onwards, he was Manager of the Orfeó and from 1974 of Stúdió K Theatre.

⁹ Tibor Hegedűs is a prominent creator of the alternative theatre movement, street theatre.

¹⁰ The Pincészínház has been operating in the 9th district of the capital city since 1966.

¹¹ The Manézs Theatre of Miskolc operated from 1967 to 1975.

¹² Péter Halász (1943–2006) was an avant-garde writer, director, actor. From 1962 to 1969 he was a member of the Universitas Ensemble, and in 1969 he founded his own theatre Kassák House Studio. Emigrating in 1976, they initially worked as the Squat Theatre in Western Europe, then moved to New York and achieved success.

¹³ Based on the diary entries of Sándor Petőfi on 15 March 1848, the minutes of the Governor's council meetings in this period and Petőfi's poems (*Dicsőséges nagyurak...*, *Akasszátok fel a királyokat*, *Nemzeti dal* – Glorious Lords..., Hang Kings!, National Song).

¹⁴ Tibor Déry (1894–1977) was a writer and poet. His play *The Giant Baby*, written in 1926, is an outstanding work of Hungary's avant-garde.

¹⁵ István Nánay (1938) is a journalist, critic, university lecturer, researcher of Hungarian amateur and alternative theatre.

Szeged performance. From then on, the charismatic leader of the ensemble was the rebellious István Paál with a Christ beard, influenced not only by the ideas of contemporary world literature and theatre, but above all, by the lessons of '56 and '68. His work method was determined by the Polish director Grotowski's Poor Theatre and everything else accessible about Living Theatre. For Nánay, "The presentation of *The Giant Baby* was a political and artistic feat, because Déry's position has always been highly controversial, to put it mildly, and his early plays were considered scandalous before '45 and afterwards, too." The production ran for 29 performances, and was even available to season ticket holders at the Technical University's Szkéné in Budapest. The author himself saw it six times. In the front row of one of the performances at the University Theatre of Budapest (although we were the best that year, they, the Universitas from Budapest, got to go to Nancy for the World Festival, as opposed to us provincials), there was György Lukács¹⁶, who had not been to a theatre for twenty-five years, and for whom Böbe herself, Déry's wife, translated the performance into German.

This was the performance that turned the director into a professional. Isti kept on seeking open theatre. With Handke's one-act play *Offending the Audience*, for example, in '71, if I remember correctly. For *Forever Electra*¹⁷, spectators were herded into the auditorium amongst armed guards lined up, with Creon-Kádár agitating in the midst of the audience. (...)

The literary staging of *Speak, beautiful words*, on Petőfi started out as a compulsory exercise for the ensemble and Isti. However, Sándor Fekete¹⁸ – whose play *Thermidor* the troupe had performed earlier – recommended to Paál and the team that they should base the production on the official protocols, secret documents and police reports of the time. The idea worked. Petőfi's poems – *Dicsőséges nagyurak...*, *Akasszátok a királyokat!*, *Nemzeti dal* – set to music and sung, as well as excerpts from the poet's diary and the minutes of the Governor's council meetings constituted the structure of *Petőfi Rock*. Prose, poetry, movement, music. The latter written by László Vági, the theatre's standard composer from the Szeged-based beat band Angyalok (Angels).

János Ács¹⁹ (later director) and Erzsébet Dózsa²⁰, with only minor roles in *The Giant Baby*, were by now the leading actors of the company founded by Professor

¹⁶ György Lukács (1885–1971) was a Marxist philosopher, literary scholar and aesthete.

¹⁷ A Szeged University Theatre and Szeged National Theatre co-production, directed by István Paál, Auditorium Maximum, 2 October 1971.

¹⁸ Sándor Fekete (1927–2001) was a writer, journalist and literary historian.

¹⁹ János Ács (1949–2005) was an actor and theatre director, at the Szeged University Theatre with István Paál in the 1970s. In 1981, he made theatre history by staging Peter Weiss' play *Marat/Sade* in Kaposvár.

²⁰ Erzsébet Dózsa joined the company after her performance in *The Giant Baby*. She later worked as a drama teacher.

Albert Szentgyörgyi²¹ and led initially by István Horváth Jr²², whose life would also end tragically. The only surviving footage of this production is a blurred video recording from Kiskőrös.

Nánay says, “The most beautiful moments of the performance were when the revolutionary youth gathered the students, i.e. turned to the audience, and invited them to join their ranks. And the crowd kept growing, to a point where there were more people on stage than in the seat rows, they sang the *National Song* together, and by the end of the performance the auditorium and the stage had merged, the spectators were back on stage, singing the songs of the play, the *Marseillaise*, the *Warszawianka* with the actors...”

Then he adds, “The production won the *Speak Up* Grand Prix, has toured many countries, and has been performed in Poland several times at various venues. Domestic performances were not always accompanied by such triumphs. For example, no sooner had they won the Grand Prix of the national competition than 15 March arrived. To mark the occasion, they had planned a performance at the university, but it was a little out of the ordinary. In the morning, Erzsébet Dózsa, a member of the ensemble, had recited Endre Ady’s²³ poem *March of Fire* outside the Museum and invited the audience to the afternoon performance of *Petőfi Rock*, just as the university administration, fearing the impact of the production and its unforeseen consequences, sought to make it a private performance. A huge crowd gathered for the show, which turned into a regular demonstration with the final joint singing session.”

University leaders, and the henchmen who had kept a watchful eye on the morning’s events, panicked, and István Paál and company members had a hard time calming the crowd. Mind you, this was the Auditorium Maximum where the spark had already been ignited on 16 October 1956, when the Federation of Hungarian University and College Associations, MEFESZ, was founded!

Erzsi Dózsa, who the authorities believed was involved in the Hungarian tricolour ribbon demonstration on Kárász Street (the equivalent of Budapest’s Váci Street in Szeged), was summoned to the Csongrád County Police Headquarters every 14 March. After graduating from teacher training college, she would only find employment in remote farm schools. At long last, the fondly remembered Mihály Bácskay, Headmaster of Mihály Horváth Grammar School in Szentés, had arranged for her to teach at her former alma mater. She became

²¹ Albert Szentgyörgyi (1893–1986) was a Nobel Prize-winning Hungarian physician and biochemist. In the autumn of 1940, as Rector, he supported the foundation of the Szeged University Youth Drama Society.

²² István Horváth Jr. (1922–1941) was a student theatre genius of Szeged, who voluntarily chose death with his lover to escape Jewish laws. The National and International Amateur Theatre Festival, held since 1972, bears his name.

²³ Endre Ady (1877–1919) was one of the most important Hungarian poets of the 20th century.

the leading teacher of the school's nationally renowned literary drama faculty, teaching, among others, Róbert Alföldi²⁴.

And an "F" (short for Surveillance) file was opened on Isti. Only time and the Firm could tell if the nerves of the company or its director would snap first as a result of the harassments.

True, they still did *Kőműves Kelemen* (Clement Mason)²⁵, compiled from fragments by Imre Sarkadi, in which they sought to answer the questions of whether it's all right to sacrifice one's life for an ideal, and whether material goods can pay for betraying your faith and giving up lives. The sad truth is they can. Regardless of the success of the performance, the troupe was disintegrating ever faster, István Paál was swallowed up by professional theatre, and the actors were first divided, then crushed. Using secret police methods, among other techniques.



István Paál (1942–1998)

The legend of Isti Paál lived on, however: he was the lone warrior who, though successful in pro theatre too, was shadowed by his daredevil image all along. Then came a point where his otherness was no longer tolerated. He had to leave Szolnok, where he was a principal director with great productions to his name. We would travel from Budapest to Szolnok to see his

premieres. What followed were Isti's years in hell. Veszprém, Pécs, Győr. When he learned of his blind mother's death, he followed her.

Then came 1990, when history turned away from university theatres. Defiance against the system and the shared desire for freedom either vanished or sought and found other forms of expression.

Let us conclude with a quote from Isti in 1994: "I haven't reached the end of the road. But in this Hungarian theatre life, I don't see any possible new beginning for myself. I know how to do theatre, and I try to do it honestly... But to be able to make a fruitful new start in this situation – I think that's out of the question. I have always rebelled. It was from this confrontation that my productions were born. I now surrender my weapons – true, there is no one to surrender to. I don't know what to do with the energy pent up inside me. I don't want to use it in show business, and the possibilities of confrontation that make real theatre come alive have been so smoothed out that even dousing petrol on yourself and immolating yourself is not an event. I won't deny it, I am also tired."

Translated by László Vértes

²⁴ Róbert Alföldi (1967) is an actor, director; Manager of the National Theatre in Budapest between 2008 and 2013.

²⁵ Imre Sarkadi's (1921–1961) fragments, based on the folk ballad *Clement Mason*, known in several versions, were premiered in October 1973 by István Paál at the Szeged University Theatre.



KATALIN KESERÜ

Cult and Community of Tradition¹

Petőfi, Mari Jászai and Béla Kondor

The tradition-community paradigm

The 19th century, which set out to create a nation, democracy and a homeland simultaneously, naturally exalted among its sons (and daughters) those who could turn these three ideals into reality and did so – with the help of language – physically and spiritually at the same time. Initially, the icons were writers and poets, then they were statesmen (known as politicians today) who were no less poets at heart and writers of speeches and diaries, than the former. Because allegiance to their community was part of their personal destiny and reflections – they took it upon themselves to represent and advance it. In modern terms, the subject and object were identical for them, personal creation coinciding with collective creation. The *creative* character of social/public thinking and reality-building inspired by language and literature, which went hand in hand with the creation of symbols, and the way in which symbols were seen as organising principles of a conceived and desirable reality, can therefore be regarded as key in this period. Hence the cult of the symbolic figure (and the new culture and reality that was taking shape) was both individual and communal. Petőfi may have been the most distinguished subject of this “tradition-community paradigm”².

In the course of historical and political changes, Petőfi has been associated with a variety of – positive and negative – meanings. However, the fact that a

¹ This English-language article is an abridged version of the author’s essay published in Hungarian in the March 2014 issue of *Szcenárium*.

² Pál S. Varga: *A nemzeti költészet csarnokai*. (Halls of National Poetry) *A nemzeti irodalom fogalmi rendszerei a 19. századi magyar irodalomtörténeti gondolkodásban*. (Conceptual Systems of National Literature in 19th Century Hungarian Literary History) Budapest, Balassi Kiadó, 2005.

nation felt itself worthy of life in and through him explains his outstanding role in Hungarian cultural history. The pictures and statues of, or related to, the poet who embodied the idea of independence and gave his life for it kept the ideal alive in the decades of tyranny following the war of independence and then throughout the Compromise era. Until the early 20th century, when his cult declined as the cornerstone of the 1848 generation's vision – the historical context of the revolution, the war of independence, and the unity of individual and community – disappeared from the public mind. The fact that the cult began to be based on physical objects rather than “conceptual objects” is a clear indication of the breakdown of the unity of thought and reality, the faltering of implementation to follow the construction of intellectual reality, and an excessive attachment to materiality. (The history of religious relic cults, which can be used as a model, does not contradict this, in fact, it rather supports it.)

The institutionalisation of the cult was accompanied by criticism: the Petőfi Society, founded in 1876, and its cult curators were not only praised but also criticised. The two poets Ady³ and József Kiss⁴ also criticised them, calling them conservative, precisely in defence of the ideals Petőfi – who lived on through his poems – stood for during his life, i.e. in defence of the realities that could be created again and again in poetry.



Mari Jászai's (1850–1926)
photo, around 1890
(source: oszk.hu)

An outsider, a woman: Mari Jászai⁵ gave an example of how to keep the poet alive and at the same time honour the achievements of those working to preserve his legacy and memory. In 1908, she wrote a paper entitled *Petőfi and Acting*⁶, which was read out at a meeting of the Society. Jászai kept scourging those who could be bought with “a silly order or title”⁷, and there must have been some people like that among the members of the Petőfi Society. In her diary, she contrasted Petőfi with them, “Today, I only believe Petőfi. He was true.” Jászai would always evoke him. All she did was recite his poems. Always and everywhere: at Rajec Spa, at museums, salons, workers' hostels, then for soldiers wounded in the World War. When she was elected a member of the Society, she considered it a national honour.

³ Endre Ady (1877–1919) was one of the most important Hungarian poets of the 20th century.

⁴ József Kiss (1843–1921) was a poet, editor, member of the Petőfi Society.

⁵ Mari Jászai (1850–1926) was an actress, one of the greatest Hungarian tragic actresses, and the grand dame of the National Theatre

⁶ *Jászai Mari írásai*. (Writings of Mari Jászai). Budapest, 1955. Művelt Nép, 348–360.

⁷ Work cited, 150. (note from May 1907)

She deserved her membership. In return, she made a gift to the collection: she donated the silver laurel wreath she received for reciting Petőfi's poems.

She was not the only female member of the Society, though few women could boast of this honour. However, instead of the growing number of women writers and poets at the turn of the century whose role model could have been Petőfi's wife Julia Szendrey, members of the Society would – conservatively – recruit aristocratic ladies to sponsor and raise funds for the establishment of the Petőfi House, the predecessor of today's Petőfi Literary Museum (PIM), which opened on 7 November 1909. For this reason, the Society was attacked in Petőfi's name in connection with the opening of the Petőfi House. "They portray the public work of women as if it were being exploited merely for the purposes of their vanity and self-indulgence. These cruel accusations are not only untrue and in bad faith, but also reveal evil intentions", wrote Jászai in her diary, perhaps again in defence of the Society, in 1910.⁸



The Jókai-Feszty villa – turned Petőfi Memorial House as of 1909 (source: pestbuda.hu)

Why did she stand up for the Society so passionately? It seems clear that was because it kept alive Petőfi and his memory, with whom and with which she could identify as an actress embodying the unity of word, thought and deed night after night, utterly and completely, without hesitation. This identification was as absent from biased public life based on party politics as it was from the scientific study of poetry. And then the cult is left to none other than the collectors of authentic relics and to art that attracts people around them: the creators who can authentically relive and present the fate of the iconic personality using their own means and their own fate.

The poet, the actor and the painter

Mari Jászai, born in 1850, often said her mother carried her in her womb during the War of Independence, during the surrender at Világos and the execution of the martyrs of Arad/Oradea. She describes her dedication to Petőfi as fateful: "I breathed the same air as him for three months on this earth, because people breathe in there too. I am certain that my enthusiastic mother nourished my

⁸ Work cited, 174.



Petőfi's birthplace in Kiskőrös in the 1920s
(source: vira.hu)

soul with his thoughts... I suffer for my homeland as passionately as He did.”⁹ In 1869, as a young married woman, she met the poet's son Zoltán at Szolnok railway station. “I am touching Petőfi's living blood with my hand!” – she exclaims, writing her memoirs¹⁰. This construed sense of origin and living “blood-tied” relationship lasted until her death, and was rendered authentic by her death. Every New Year's Eve, the night of the poet's birth, she would go to Kiskőrös to

recite, and during her last visit there, waiting at the station till dawn resulted in her long illness and death (1926).

That is a peculiar attachment, but it's almost natural for an actor who has brought to life the greatest tragedies of antiquity and Shakespeare and performed in plays that depict human life as a destiny to be lived in the divine dimension of myth and the earthly dimension of history. She highlights a well-nigh forgotten aspect of a cult: personal (and lifelong) identification with the “object” of cult, assuming his fate. This actor who lived and created in public was able to connect the cult, which had thus become personal and individual at the turn of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century, with the community. We do not know whether she regarded the poet as a role model for her recitations, since we don't know how Petőfi recited poems. One of Jászai's writings was dedicated to her recitals of Petőfi's poems: “We must not add anything of ourselves to Petőfi. He includes everything. You can't recite Petőfi simply enough. This is his secret. Since I have known this, I have loved to recite him... Since then I have recited nothing else.”¹¹

With Jászai's death, there seems to be a void in the Petőfi cult. But if we look back at the intervening decades from the perspective of PIM's 1972 exhibition of Béla Kondor¹², the void is filled immediately. The painter's illustration for Attila József's¹³ poem *Mother* (1972) had the following inscription: “And somebody said I resembled Petőfi!...” In addition to that, Kondor also made other illustrations

⁹ Work cit., 211.

¹⁰ Work cit., 32–33.

¹¹ *Hogyan tanultam én Petőfit szavalni* (How I Learned to Recite Petőfi, 1909). In: *Jászai Mari írásai*, 360–362.

¹² Béla Kondor (1931–1972) was one of the greatest painters of the second half of the 20th century

¹³ Attila József (1905–1937) was a poet, one of the most outstanding figures of Hungarian literature

for Attila József's poems¹⁴ and drew a portrait of the poet¹⁵, which he presented at this exhibition, along with many of his other illustrations.¹⁶ Attila József was also seen by his contemporaries as a reincarnation of Petőfi and in 1949, on the 100th anniversary of his death, when the Society was banned (!) (or was it forced to liquidate itself?), the Petőfi House material was supplemented with the Ady and Attila József collections, ideologically articulating the continuity and relevance of the cult of socially committed Hungarian poetry. (The Petőfi Literary Museum was also built on that, in the same place, at the Petőfi House, in 1954.)

The legend of the Petőfi – Attila József – Kondor “bloodline” included poverty, non-conformity, a prophetic role and a revolutionary spirit. In Kondor's case, this ethical attitude (stemming from the 1956 Dózsa series, created as a graduation thesis commemorating the revolt and preceding the revolution) is expressed in the intensity of the desire for action in the individual and communal sense. Youth, premature death (in the case of the latter two, its hastening by suicide or alcoholism) can be interpreted as sacrifice from the point of view of the cult in all three cases.

One of Kondor's early works is a Petőfi illustration (etching)¹⁷ entitled *Pillowd in a Soft Bed*, while the pages of the 1972 Petőfi series are among his last works¹⁸. (In between, we also encounter works in his oeuvre that may refer to Petőfi, such as the pastel entitled *Two Portraits*, in which the head on the left could be Petőfi's.¹⁹) The winged, huge



Béla Kondor: *The Thought Torments Me*, Petőfi illustration, etching, 1957 (source: pim.hu)

¹⁴ 1971, *Béla Kondor*. – Budapest, 1991. PIM. 31–32.

¹⁵ *Attila József*. 1962.

¹⁶ B. Supka Magdolna: *Kondor Béla kiállítása a Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeumban* (Béla Kondor Exhibition in Petőfi Literary Museum). *Művészet*, 1972. 7. 43–45.

¹⁷ See p. 40 at the *Béla Kondor memorial exhibition*. Tihany, 1973. Tihany Museum; *Petőfi illustration* (The Thought Torments Me...) at the exhibition entitled *Prints by Béla Kondor*, Békéscsaba, Mihály Munkácsy Museum, 1977. no. 41; the catalogue of the exhibition entitled *Béla Kondor* (Budapest, 1991. PIM 22.) dates it to 1957, Petőfi illustration: *Pillowd in a Soft Bed*.... Also known from 1957 is his pencil drawing entitled *Sketch – Petőfi Illustration*, *ibid.* 23.

¹⁸ *Béla Kondor*. Budapest, 1991. PIM. 32.

¹⁹ At the 1964 exhibition in Székesfehérvár, entitled *Two Faces*, dated 1963, at the *memorial exhibition of Béla Kondor* (Tihany, 1973. Tihany Museum), *Two Faces*, no. 79.

horse of the 1957 etching, rearing skywards, and the small figure falling from it, refer to Petőfi's poem and his personal prophecy coming to pass, as well as to poetry itself (Pegasus), the severing of the relationship between the poet and his work, or the revolution and its failure. The pictorial contrast between the horse's wings spreading skywards and the emptiness "beneath" expresses the celestial (or cosmic) origin and purpose of the aspirations of the artist consumed by fire, relating to Petőfi and Kondor himself at the same time. "Is the fire extinguished by the one who once lit it?" – asks Ferenc Juhász²⁰, who, in commemorating Kondor, calls Kondor's work a "created sacrifice", combining the three meanings. This concept of art, brought back to the age of false or surviving concepts of art as a purgatory by none other than the young Béla Kondor, will become the basis of the cult surrounding him in his lifetime and, through it, the resurrector of the cult of the person/artist with a mission, such as Petőfi.

At the same time, this is perhaps Kondor's first work depicting failure. Kondor's images of the fall, which he had already experienced (in 1956) with the revolution as a vision of "humanity as a single being"²¹, then – from Lucifer to Saint Anthony and the experimenter – formulate the tragedy of the man who builds himself and his oeuvre and also tests the limits of existence, but at the same time is locked in his own fate, around whom a common reality is no longer built from thought and language, as it could still be in the 19th century. Kondor also expressed this process of becoming solitary from a societal perspective in another way: with the grotesque image of the clown, from the *Dózsa* series to the *Wasp King*²² and the *Petőfi* series, sensing and suggesting the folly of human (artistic) activity, its not belonging anywhere. The actor as a clown is the most obvious embodiment of this.

Jászai, in her paper *Petőfi and Acting*, following the poet in his wanderings, assesses his performance in the fool's role in *King Lear*. "I try to imagine him in this role and I see him. He had the soul for it, and his external defects were not to his detriment; on the contrary, what was angular and clumsy in his lean, bony figure was more suited to the fool; and seemed to belong to and be "part of the role". If his performance was exaggerated, his voice rises from deep down and is true. His bitter laugh, while his tears roll down, his deep affection, hidden under his mocking sarcasm, the leaping unevenness of the role, entirely fitted Sándor Petőfi. This role was in essence his, he succeeded in it."²³ This rarely mentioned event is the subject of Kondor's *Petőfi* series in 1972: *Petőfi's Bonus Performance in Kecskemét (as Lear's Fool) I-III (...)*

The gloomy and determined features of the *Petőfi* with the clown's hat, known from the daguerreotype, are black, the tilted head is facing, his hand is holding

²⁰ Ferenc Juhász (2028–2015) was one of the greatest Hungarian poets of the second half of the 20th century.

²¹ Kondor is quoted by Lajos Németh, art historian: *Kondor Béla*, Budapest, 1976. 6.

²² Gyula Rózsa: *Béla Kondor*, Új Írás March 1974, 87–94.

²³ *Writings of Mari Jászai*, 358.



Béla Kondor: Petőfi as Lear's Fool, mixed media, 1972 (photo by Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

another, similar but pale white Petőfi face in the right picture space, as his hand, in turn, is holding the black one. The hands hold the faces like Kondor's various "fools" hold their own constructions (structures, artificial crickets, wasp-shaped contraptions). Like Shakespeare's Hamlet, the archetype of the artist=clown, holds the skull, the socket of the creative artist's brain, for whose tragedy Kondor made his first illustrations (from 1954). If we look at Kondor's Petőfi series as role portraits, we can say that, according to his concept, Petőfi's role in the Kecskemét performance was of his own devising, but not only that. For "Just shades of letters that / Written poetry gives, / we add breath and spirit, / life and soul to all these.", says Petőfi's enthusiastic Actor's Song. If this is so, then the poet owes his "face", the unification of his life and poetry, i.e. his essence, to the actor. That is why both faces wear a clown's hat. But perhaps not only because of that. This image of Petőfi may have been suggested by Kondor's era.

In Jászai's notebook, in which she recorded the poems recited at her evenings, the first is Petőfi's *Republic*: "I pay tribute now, now I welcome you, / For you will have enough tributes, / When from above you look upon your foes / In triumph at the blood-stained dust". What kind of republic could Kondor's Petőfi, conjured up over a hollow blood-stained landscape, possibly see here in 1972? A landscape without people. In which (in the '60s) the "foolish artists" who would meet tragic ends in the following decades mushroomed. And nothing happened around them. It was to this time that Kondor summoned Petőfi, the



Béla Kondor: *Petőfi's Bonus Performance (Lear's Fool)*, mixed media, 1972 (photo by Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

actor, to look around this landscape. Instead of the poet of “truth”, who did not have to become a court jester to say and do what he thought.

But the tragic nature of the clown as a social role is ambiguous. Kondor jests with the poet: with his relative, with himself, as Petőfi once did to his friends, including Megyeri, the actor. The play (the actor's, the clown's) is the lifeblood of artistic creation, perhaps one could say a gift from the heavens.

What Petőfi created is disappearing from the public sphere (to use the modern word for *community*). In the 15 March celebrations of the decades following Kondor's death, until the mid-1990s, the recitation of the poet-hero's *National Song* was an exquisite acting task in front of a crowd that not only wanted to remember but also to relive and demonstrate the liberating experience in a place that had been transformed by science into a place of doubtful authenticity, outside the National Museum. Pilvax Café, another authentic site preserving the moments of the revolution, became the home of a new Petőfi Circle, the regime-changers and their ritual commemoration, around 1990. However, the unsuccessful turn of history and its humiliating consequences led to the disappearance of Petőfi's hero cult, and the devaluation of his mission. However, the negative of his face, a daguerreotype that can also be regarded a photograph, is still disturbingly present in Kondor's picture in the Petőfi Literary Museum. In whose work, Petőfi really lived, as he did in Ady's and Attila József's.

Translated by László Vértes



VERONIKA SCHANDL

Presence in Absence

Gender Dynamics in Recent Hungarian Appropriations of Shakespeare's *King Lear*

How do we see King Lear? How do we want to see King Lear? Answers, of course, to these questions can be so varying that it would need a bulky volume to cover them. Yet, from much advertised, star-lined, touring productions one trend emerges: on contemporary stages King Lear has become an old man. Not necessarily a king anymore, simply an old man. Johann Wolfgang Goethe's remark that "(e)in alter Mann ist stets ein König Lear"¹, is echoed by Bridget Escolme's chapter on recent *King Lear* productions in the *Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Tragedy* where she claims that the main contemporary interpretational trends in Britain favor humanizing Lear, presenting him in a more down-to-earth, psychologized light, as an old man with everything old age might bring.² Ian McKellen's recent portrayal is characterized by *The Guardian's* reviewer³ as naturalistic, displaying signs of old age and



Ian McKellen at eighty as King Lear in 2018 (photo by Johan Persson, source: ntathome.com)

¹ Goethe, *Zahme Xenien*, [http://www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/Goethe,+Johann+Wolfgang/Gedichte/Gedichte+\(Ausgabe+letzter+Hand.+1827\)/Zahme+Xenien/Zahme+Xenien+3](http://www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/Goethe,+Johann+Wolfgang/Gedichte/Gedichte+(Ausgabe+letzter+Hand.+1827)/Zahme+Xenien/Zahme+Xenien+3)

² Escolme, "Tragedy in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Theatre Production", 540–556.

³ Akbar, "Ian McKellen's Dazzling Swan-Song weighted with Poignancy", <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/jul/26/king-lear-review-ian-mckellen-duke-of-yorks>



Glenda Jackson as Lear on Broadway in 2019
(source: npr.org)



Mariana Mihut in A. Serban's staging of *Lear* (photo by Cosmin Ardeleanu, source: criticaillapok.hu)

dementia, while a recent woman Lear, Glenda Jackson also suggests that her portrayal of Lear is that of an old person. She claims that it is exactly the reason why the question if Lear was played by a man or a woman is irrelevant. “As we get older, we begin to explore, I think, rather more the gender alternatives of our defined gender...those kind of gender barriers begin to crack,”⁴ she argued in a podcast on NPR. In other words, when we think of Lear as a cultural symbol for aging, his gender as performed on the stage becomes redundant.⁵

The question this essay sets out to answer is how an aging Lear is portrayed in two Hungarian independent productions, far away from the limelight of Anglo-American brick theatres. How much of his Learness is left in these adaptations to show, and how much his gender is relevant to the interpretations of these plays.

Whilst exploring the aging Lear-figures that appear in these productions the paper also wishes to find Lear’s so famously silent daughters,⁶ or indeed to explore what happens to the play’s gender dynamics when Lear is bereft of his crown.

The two productions the essay is concerned with are not straightforward rewritings of Shakespeare’s play, they use *King Lear* as a cultural metaphor, therefore, in Richard Proudfoot’s term, are “some Learns”⁷. Yet, it seems that they still tap into the above-mentioned contemporary theatrical trends, by

⁴ Gross, “Glenda Jackson on Playing King Lear: Gender Barriers ‘Crack’ with Age”, <https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=716305342>

⁵ And, indeed, Andrei Serban’s 2010-all-female *Lear* did not emphasize the gender switch either. Furthermore, it seems casting a woman actor to play Lear has become a trend, since the latest Canterbury Shakespeare Festival season also advertised a *King Lear* about a single mother of three. See: <https://www.canterburyshakespeare.co.uk/current-season>

⁶ Callaghan, “The Construction of Women through Absence, Silence and Utterance”, 74–89.

⁷ Proudfoot, “Some Learns”, 139–152.

appropriating the character of King Lear as a symbol to discuss aging in a contemporary setting or by imagining Lear as a woman.

The first production, an interactive theatre project by the Káva Kulturális Műhely (Káva Cultural Workshop) from 2016 entitled *Lady Lear*⁸, rewrote the Shakespearean plot as a parable of a typical Hungarian family where the aging mother's illness challenged the independence of her three sons. Using *Lear* as a cultural symbol of parents/authority figures who, despite their physical weakness, wish to control the lives of their children/subordinates, the play confronted audiences in dialogues initiated by the actors to discuss how they would react in a similar situation.

The second production the paper intends to introduce is a two-person play entitled *Lear's Death*⁹ that premiered in the studio space of the Miskolc National Theatre in 2018. While *Lady Lear* repositions the Shakespearean plot into a wider contemporary social setting, this production digs into the personal psyche of an aging Lear. Accompanied by his Fool the play follows "Uncle Lear" through several stages of self-investigation ending in his death.

Strangely enough, although the Káva *Lear* features a Lady in its title, and the Miskolc *Lear* introduces the Shakespearean female characters as well, yet both expressed the Lear problematic as primarily a male issue, with female voices absent or mediated by male actors. The paper will delineate how the male vocalization of the aging and death of King Lear affected the gender dynamics of these productions.

1. Gabi néni¹⁰ had a stroke

Lady Lear by Káva Cultural Workshop addresses the contemporary problem Western countries all face: that of an aging society. That – "by virtue of age and retirement – there is a much larger nonworking population than a working population."¹¹ It asks how far we are expected to take care of our parents, how much of a personal sacrifice we should be willing to make to help them. The fictional Lady Lear of the play, a former leader, not of a country, but of a school

⁸ *Lady Lear*, 2016, Káva Cultural Workshop, Written by: Júlia Róbert, Director: Dániel Ambrus Kovács, Actors: Viktor Bori, Gábor Gyombolai, János Kardos, Melinda Milák, Gábor Takács.

⁹ *Lear's Death*, Miskolci National Theatre, 2018, Written by: Éva Enyedi, Director: László Keszég, Actors: Attila Harsányi, Krisztián Rózsa, Music by: Ákos Zságer Varga.

¹⁰ In Hungarian every elderly woman is called 'néni', which roughly translates as auntie, while every elderly man is called 'bácsi' that roughly means uncle. Both terms can be used with family and Christian names as well.

¹¹ Gross, "Glenda Jackson on Playing King Lear: Gender Barriers 'Crack' with Age", <https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=716305342>

choir, a widowed mother of three boys, got a stroke that left her paralyzed on one side. In the course of the play her boys and her only grandson try to resolve the crux this situation has brought their lives into. As the ensemble website indicates: it is “a crap of a situation with a capital C, served with lots of bittersweet humor.”¹²

As it is clear from this short description, this adaptation of the Lear theme is a domestic version of the play where “the main emphasis is on family dynamics”¹³. It primarily addresses a social concern many of us refuse to face, the aging of our parents. Indeed, in Goethe’s understanding of King Lear’s figure it challenges the audience to grasp the “the sad commonness of the (Lear) experience rather than providing the rarified emotional distinction craved”¹⁴ by many. This, as Peter Conrad convincingly argues, is what the play itself teaches by doubling the fate of Lear with that of Gloster’s. In this sense “every old man is a deposed king”¹⁵, even if in this case she happens to be a woman (but more of that later). This commonality is what ultimately enables the play to engage the audience in conversations during the two “openings” the production accommodates.

The play light-handedly molds some themes from *King Lear* to fit the scope of the project – Gabi néni, the mother, starts out from her own flat with her youngest son taking care of her, then slowly loses all aspects of comfort she enjoyed in that first situation. She temporarily has to reside in her second son’s apartment, where her pregnant daughter-in-law is disgusted by her “old person smell”, and where she is stranded in the living room, as Lear on the heath, naked, since she is unable to put her dress on again alone. Gradually all three sons of hers desert her care, and as a final blow her doctor, one of her former students who admires her for her energy and vitality, refuses to administer her a self-imposed death of sleeping pills. In the penultimate scene of the play it is her grandson who tries to keep her spirit alive, only to witness her second stroke¹⁶ which leaves the family with “the worst that is yet to come.”¹⁷

Nevertheless, very differently from *King Lear*, the boys in *Lady Lear* are not simply male versions of Lear’s pelican daughters – even if communication is not their forte, they still try to help. When they fail on their own, they are willing to hire a full-time nurse to assist their mother or look for a well-established

¹² <https://kavaszinhaz.hu/lady-lear-en/>

¹³ For similarly angled adaptations see: Desmet, Christy. “Some *Lears* of Private Life from Tate to Shaw”, in: *King Lear: New Critical Essays*, Kahan, Jeffrey. (ed), New York and London: Routledge, 2008, 326–350.

¹⁴ Conrad, “Expatriating Lear”, 97.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁶ As the doctor explains it was an atrial fibrillation, but the consequences are the same for the family.

¹⁷ This is the final sentence of the play, spoken by the middle son as a conclusion to previous events.

nursing home. Their mother, who claims that caring for her is *their* job, immediately turns these ideas down with pain and disgust. What she does not realize is how much, similarly to her, her sons are also determined by their particular life situation they cannot escape: the oldest lives abroad with his second family, and apart from regular money transfers and Skype calls with his son from his first marriage, he cannot leave his new life and family for longer periods of time. Her second son has just started his own family, and his wife – who fails to see herself as a



The three boys as Gabi néni
(source: kavaszinhaz.hu)

prefiguration of her mother-in-law – is not willing to share the last months of her pregnancy with Gabi néni daily. Her youngest boy still lives at home, but has finally, after many years of failure, found a job he likes – he becomes a tour sound technician, a work that leaves him much less time at home.

Although far less of a dragon than Lear, the play shows Gabi néni as temperamental and outspoken, with rather harsh opinions of her sons. According to the list of characters she is supposed to be a 78-year-old retired music teacher, yet the play itself presents her as someone much older, something of an anachronism. She is given a gray wig and a home dress (“otthonka”) – a usually 100-percent nylon piece of clothing that was popular among women as loungewear in the 1970s, but is rarely worn today.¹⁸ Her taste of food is also rather conservative, she only eats traditional Hungarian food, mostly from warmed up tins, is baffled by take-away pizza, and is proud of her family’s secret “pogácsa” recipe. These characteristics are the source of most of the bittersweet humor the play’s website promises, but they age Gabi néni unfavorably, making her closer to 98 than 78, and a thing of the past, almost a caricature.

What complicates her portrayal even more is that although the play’s title promises us *Lady Lear*, she is played by her three sons, who take her role one after another. A choice applauded by all Hungarian reviews as an ingenious doubling that foreshadows the future fate of the sons, it is, at the same time, a decision that did significantly change the gender relations of the play. While *King Lear* does give spectators the image of an old man, frail and weak at times, *Lady Lear* deprives the audience of seeing an elderly woman on stage. When the middle son clumsily tries to undress then redress his mom, it is a middle-aged male body on display that we

¹⁸ See slideshow here: <http://kollokvium.figura.ro/play/en/18>

see. When the grandson readies to give a pedicure to his grandma, it is giant male feet we see soaking in a bowl of hot water. The annihilation of a fragile elderly female body on stage and the extinction of an actual female voice deprived the play of the connotations the gender switch the title promises would have brought alongside itself, the associations one has with the body of one's mother.

Due to the naturalistic acting style present all through the production, the image mediated by the boys, while recalling early-modern practices, is primarily masculine, distancing the idea of a mother from the audience. Whereas Lear's journey is definitely a passage during which he has to grapple with his own femininity, Lady Lear here is prevented even from showing her femaleness. Although still there in the playscript¹⁹, on the stage she is absent. Similarly to how her boys decide her fate, the production also deals with her without giving her an actual presence.

2. Lear bácsi is dying

Lear's Death is a play with no linear plotline, it is series of scenes, linked by loose association and the two characters that perform them: Lear and the Fool. Lear plays himself, while the Fool takes on several roles: he becomes Goneril, Regan and Cordelia, Death, James the butler, and, of course, Lear's Fool. In a short paper it is nigh impossible to do justice to the manifold connotations the play unlocks, so the essay merely attempts to introduce a few aspects to be able to discuss the gender dynamics of the play.

Lear's Death is first and foremost a journey into Lear's psyche. It starts with the sentence: "I don't want to die!"²⁰, and ends with Lear's death and him concluding: "There's! Nothing! Wrong! *Va bene!*" It is a journey of self-confrontation, of self-annihilation and personal growth, a journey towards the acceptance of death. In a whirlwind ride of scenes, full of grotesque and farcical situations – at times hilariously macabre or tear-jerkingly honest, the two actors who play Lear and the Fool discuss aspects of Lear's death.

Secondly, the play is a metatheatrical tragi-comedy, a commentary on Shakespeare in performance. As if it wanted to show arm-chair critics complaining about the inability of theatrical productions to display a plethora of interpretations one can ponder about in the quiet of one's mind with a glass of sherry in hand, the production gives spectators just that. We first see Lear on the heath, being investigated by the Fool, sometimes more his executioner than

¹⁹ The whole playscript can be read here: http://szinhaz.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Kava_Lady_lear_2017_marcus.pdf

²⁰ Enyedi, *Lear's Death*, 2. All quotes from the play are from this translation. Courtesy of the translator and the author. Furthermore: *Lear's Death*.

his companion, then he becomes a whining old man in a chaotic Hungarian hospital with the Fool forcing him to swallow all the medicine he ground up in a mortar while singing a botched up version of the song *Brazil* about the lure of death. Later he morphs into Szabolcs, the Leader, the hero of the first Hungarian translation of *Lear*, who in turn becomes the actor playing Lear, Attila Harsányi himself, disclosing his own innermost feelings for his mother, only to transform into Lear again seemingly dead, but alive enough to listen to his eulogy. The list could go on. It is a dance macabre across a modern version of Hell that contains circles of burlesque halls, cabarets, or for that matter a Jerry Springer-like tabloid talk show that hosts the play's mock-trial scene.

Besides the virtuoso performance of the two actors (Attila Harsányi as Lear and Krisztián Rózsa as the Fool) there is a video screen showing flashing images or extra scenes²¹, as well as the monologues the two actors improvised into the text that all add to the overt metatheatricality of the play. So does the live accompaniment of music and effects by Ákos Varga Zságer, who remains on stage throughout the production. While *Lady Lear* wished the audience to internalize the events they were watching, *Lear's Death* continuously distances viewers from Lear's vicissitudes on stage. Frailty and death are depicted here as "concepts that are incomprehensible, that are only to be reflected on with the help of an adequate toolkit."²²

While displaying a vast array of interpretational possibilities, the play also reflects on its own idiosyncrasy. In several asides to the audience the two actors debate how this production fails to present the "famous royal costume drama from the pen of the greatest of all playwrights, the Bard of Avon."²³ They discuss what tricks it would take to gain "serious professional recognition, critical acclaim, if not the occasional invitation abroad"²⁴ and in an interlude entitled: "Long Live Youth – Festival Interlude" they satirize the backward theatrical hierarchies of the country's theatres.

Yet, at the bottom of this metatheatrical extravaganza, at the core of Lear's quest for the acceptance of death, is Lear's struggle with his daughters. Although the three daughters never appear in person on stage they are recalled and are played by the Fool from the first scene to almost the last. They are evoked in their father's curses²⁵, are presented as relatives who never visit their father in

²¹ Like that of the two hilariously confused murderers, also played by Harsányi and Rózsa, who discuss whether to blind, castrate or simply kill Lear and Cordelia.

²² Almási, "A halál geometriája", <https://www.prae.hu/article/10829-a-halal-geometriaja/>

²³ *Lear's Death*, 12.

²⁴ *Lear's Death*, 16.

²⁵ I was a great king! I had three daughters! Now here I am whimpering like a miserable worm! (...) But how could they be so vile? I gave them all I had! I raised them alone. Do you know how much Goneril ate when she was little? Her nappies always full

hospital, appear as speakers of Lear's eulogy who lie to put him in a favourable light, are portrayed as rather simple creatures with broad countryside accents who dis their father in front of the TV cameras, but also are seen as victims of child abuse (Cordelia), and finally as the ultimate source of consolation. As if a magic mirror would have refracted the chronological events of *King Lear* into myriad pieces that display us all the viewpoints of the characters, we also hear Goneril's and Regan's woes and Cordelia's aches besides Lear's laments. Since no single narrative can do justice to Lear's journey we get all of them.

We are in Lear's head, therefore everything is uttered in a male voice – all three daughters are played by the Fool and although their portrayal, their tones change from scene to scene, they ultimately all are mediated through the Fool's persona, a male presence. To complicate matters more, the production plays with the similarity of the two actors so often (their faces are morphed into each other on the video screen and even the poster of the production uses this image²⁶) that they seem to be just two faces of the same person, two voices of the same experience. As if their roles could be reversible, their lines could be uttered by the other, their roles could be switched if wished so. Consequently, the Fool can also be read as a projection of Lear's mind, or vice versa, an interpretation that questions the validity of the daughter's utterances even more.

However, no matter what the ultimate source of these two voices is, it is only when they become harmonious; in a somewhat classical reconciliation scene between Lear and Cordelia that Lear's journey nears its end. When the antagonism, the continuous bickering between the Fool (also as Goneril, Regan and Cordelia) and Lear subsides and they mutually forgive each other, is Lear finally ready to die. It is first Lear who asks for Cordelia's forgiveness:

Thank you! You must put up with me. I was cruel to your mother and didn't give a shit about you three. I only cared about gaining more and more power. I got everything. Flat, property, car, country! I got new kidneys, a new liver, a new face. I didn't want you to have the kingdom. I didn't trust any of you. You are too good-hearted. Goneril's stupid. Regan's greedy. Or vice versa. Regan's stupid, and Goneril is greedy. I'm always mixing them up. I wanted to be king even after my death. Please forgive me for everything. I am an old fool. Senseless. I had no sense. Pity.²⁷

of crap! You know how much nappies cost? (...)I always had to buy new clothes for Regan, and games and a horse and a blackamoor! Their mother was to blame, always spoiling them till the day she died! And I was an idiot! Having them taught, and they were girls! I thought they'd be grateful and take care of me when I got old and sick! But they're beasts! My God, what will happen to me when I get sick? *Lear's Death*, 2.

²⁶ <https://mnsz.hu/eloadasok/single/734>

²⁷ *Lear's Death*, 20.

Replying, Cordelia admits that she was stupid to compare her love for her father to salt²⁸. They embrace and plan to stay like that forever. Everything seems to be ready for a celebration.

A festive dinner follows, a burlesque take on the classic drunk butler routine,²⁹ a reconciliatory banquet, or a wake – for Lear who is finally ready to die. The Fool, who this time plays James, Lear’s butler, seats an impressive circle of guests at the table: Goneril, Regan, a guest called: Albany-Cornwall-

Kent-Burgundy-Frank, Mr.Trump, Mr. Bean, Death and finally the filthy, smelly, diabolical Poor Tom, a.k.a. Edgar Gloucester. As a mocking summary of all the previous scenes, the Fool speaks all the lines of the guests and drinks their drinks. As he gets more and more inebriated, Lear keeps asking him where Cordelia is. But she never arrives. After the final dessert course James/The Fool faints/dies so it takes the onstage musician, Zságer to announce that Cordelia has died and will never come.

This utterance turns the banquet retrospectively into an unplanned wake for Cordelia, too. Her death, as in Shakespeare’s play, happens offstage and is only reported by outsider onlookers. She is given no final words, no tragic treatment. If she was projected onto the stage through the Fool’s words, then her death is rather farcical – a drunken stumble and a stunt-like fall. Yet the void that her absence created during the dinner lingers there in the final scene of the play, too. Instead of the pieta we are accustomed to at the end of Shakespeare’s play, here in the last scene we can see an old man agonising *with* and later *on* a stool – Cordelia’s empty chair – that signifies Cordelia, or more specifically her absence.

Lear’s dearest daughter, who has previously been mediated through the Fool is ultimately objectified as a stool, similar to those that stood in for her older sisters in Shakespeare’s mock trial scene. Her role here, however, could not be more different. Her presence in absence is the final push Lear needs to be able to die. Although the play asserts that dying is a lonely act, Cordelia’s nothingness, her non-attendance is vital for Lear’s acceptance of death.



Scene from the performance *Lear’s Death*
(photo by Zoltán Kiss, source: gyulaivarszinhaz.hu)

²⁸ The play continuously uses the Hungarian folk tale motive of the youngest daughter loving her father as much as people love salt instead of the lines from *King Lear’s* love scene where Cordelia says “Nothing”.

²⁹ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8xPhU5132I>

Similarly to *Lady Lear*, *Lear's Death* also interprets *King Lear* as a story told from a male perspective in which female viewpoints can only be mediated through authoritative male voices. Yet, while *Lady Lear* wishes to camouflage this absence, in *Lear's Death* this marked void is interpreted as presence. This reverberates in the final text of the play, a poem by Lajos Kassák, recited in Lear's voice: "Who's gone is gone, said my mother, never grieve over wayward souls./Who's gone is gone, say I as well, but at the same time I feel profoundly /those once with us can never leave us completely."³⁰ With these words Lear climbs back to the Fool's shoulders and the cycle starts again.

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³⁰ *Lear's Death*, 29.



SÁNDOR FAZEKAS

The Hunger and the Sea

New Connections Between *The Sonnets* and *Twelfth Night*,
or *What You Will* of Shakespeare

As a result of four and a half years of work, in the summer of 2023, my new and complete translation of Shakespeare's sonnets was published, in richly annotated and bilingual edition. However, my work on the Sonnets did not end there: the publication of the translations was just the first step. I am working on a new book that contains my own interpretations and thoughts on the Sonnets, because not every aspect could fit into the notes of the 580-page book which is already published. One such area of interest concerns the relationship between the Sonnets and the dramas of Shakespeare; in the following paper I would like to present some aspects of these connection.

Shakespeare regularly uses images, analogies, and motifs that are also present in his plays. I would like to use this opportunity to further analyze the connection between *Twelfth Night* and the Sonnets, as in my previous study, I overlooked several important aspects.¹

Right at the beginning of the play Orsino compares the force of love to the infinite depth and wideness of the sea:

'O spirit of love! how quick and fresh art thou,
That, notwithstanding thy capacity
Receiveth as the sea, nought enters there,
Of what validity and pitch soe'er,
But falls into abatement and low price,
Even in a minute: so full of shapes is fancy
That it alone is high fantastical.' (*Twelfth Night*, I. 1.)

¹ A féreg és a rózsa. A Vízkereszt és a Szonettek összefüggései (The Worm and the Rose. The Linkage Between *Twelfth Night* and the Sonnets, in Hungarian: <http://barkaonline.hu/esszek-tanulmanyok/7067-a-fereg-es-a-rozsa--a-vizkereszt-es-a-szonettek-osszefuggesei>

The speech of Orsino compares the power of love to one of the greatest power in nature, the power of the sea. This is not happening by chance: Orsino later enriches the metaphor and compares a woman's love to appetite and a man's love to the sea:

'There is no woman's sides
Can bide the beating of so strong a passion
As love doth give my heart; no woman's heart
So big, to hold so much; they lack retention
Alas, their love may be call'd appetite,
No motion of the liver, but the palate,
That suffer surfeit, cloyment and revolt;
But mine is all as hungry as the sea,
And can digest as much: make no compare
Between that love a woman can bear me
And that I owe Olivia.' (Twelfth Night, II.4.)
Digression: the Sonnet 75th

The antithesis of superficial and bodily-driven appetite and the real love which is mighty as the infinitely vast sea emerges in several verses of the Sonnets. In Sonnet 56th, it urges its own feelings of love to be more powerful than appetite:

Sweet love, renew thy force; be it not said
Thy edge should blunter be than appetite,[...] (Sonnet 56, 1–2. I give the Sonnets according the English version of my edition).²

The most famous example, of course, the one in the 75th sonnet, whose opening line significantly differs from the version by Lőrinc Szabó: "Az vagy nekem, mi testnek a kenyér." (In English translation: 'So are you to me as bread to the body'. Shakespeare: Sonnets, translated by Lőrinc Szabó, Szukits, Szeged, 2000, 81.) The English original is different: "So are you my thoughts as food to life." As we can see neither body nor bread is mentioned in the original sonnet. In my own version, it goes like this: "My imagination craves you, like its food." In this verse, the imagery of hunger is associated with love, especially in the last six lines:

'Sometime all full with feasting on your sight,
And by and by clean starved for a look;
Possessing or pursuing no delight
Save what is had, or must from you be took.
Thus do I pine and surfeit day by day,
Or gluttoning on all, or all away.' (The Sonnet 75, 9–14.)

² William Shakespeare's Sonnets (bilingual edition), translated by Sándor Fazekas, proofread by Natália Pilkli, ed. by István Szathmáry, MMA Publishing House, Budapest, 2023.

The verse is not among the most popular sonnets in the English-speaking world, while Lőrinc Szabó's translation created one of the most beautiful Hungarian love poems from the basic elements of the verse. Perhaps it is sufficient here to recall the appropriate part of his version to see that something quite different is at play here (I give here the English translation of the poem in prose):

“The magic of your face fills me to the brim,
And I crave for a single glance of thine;
There's no other, no other bliss I seek,
Than what from thee I've got, and I am still to get.
As poor as a beggar, as rich as the kings,
I'm drunken, and I'm always thirsty.”³

In Szabó's version, this section of the verse does not revolve around the motif of hunger at all: as we can see there is no beggar, no poverty, no king, no wealth, no drunkenness, no thirst in the original version. This verse is actually a free paraphrase of the sonnet; in my written study a few years ago, I didn't say this as unequivocally as I do now, just as I only realized, following the warning of Zsolt Almási, that the sin of greed is in the conclusion of the verse, so I had to modify my translation. I only mentioned all this to show: how much the Sonnets can change compared to the previously known version, but at the same time, I also indicate that it was not easy for me to overcome the influence of the canonical translation.

If we recall the beginning of this train of thought, Count Orsino asserts that the true, most powerful and strongest metaphor for his love is none other than the sea. This motif also frequently appears in the Sonnets as a symbol of infinity and impenetrable distance, but it also appears as the metaphor of love in Sonnet 135 – as an expression of endless desire: *'The sea, all water, yet receives rain still,/ And in abundance addeth to his store;'* and may the recipient's (this time presumably a woman) love be like this.

Another interesting aspect is that Count Orsino's views on the strong love of men and the weaker love of women stem from Montaigne's essay *On Friendship*, which Shakespeare could have known from John Florio's translation, and which I believe is crucial to understanding the relationship between the speaker and the male addressees (I discussed this in detail in the preface of my translation). Let's see how Montaigne views women's feelings of love in the context of marriage (I quote the translation which Shakespeare has known):

“Seeing (to speake truely) that the ordinary sufficiencie of women, cannot answer this conference and communication, the nurse of this sacred bond: nor

³ In Hungarian: “Arcod varázsa csordultig betölt, / S egy pillantásodért is sorvadok: / Nincs más, nem is akarok más gyönyört, / Csak amit tőled kaptam, s még kapok; / Koldus-szegény, királyi gazdagon / Részeg vagyok, s mindig szomjazom.” (Shakespeare: Szonettek, ford. Szabó Lőrinc, Szukits, 2001, 81.)

seeme their mindes strong enough to endure the pulling of a knot so hard, so fast, and durable.” (Montaigne *On Friendship*, translated by John Florio, 1603. <https://hyperessays.net/florio/book/I/chapter/27/>)

This statement coincides with Orsino’s, but this stereotype attacked in the very next moment of *Twelfth Night*. Cesario/Viola refutes Orsino’s views, saying that women’s feelings, though not as loud and ostentatious as men’s, are nevertheless more enduring and powerful than theirs.

Another similarity between the *Twelfth Night* and the *Sonnets* is the problem of gender swapping and the interchangeability of gender roles. In several Shakespeare’s plays the protagonist is originally a woman but appears in male clothing for the majority of the play. This can be attributed primarily to the fact that female roles were played by young men in Elizabethan theater. Viola in *Twelfth Night* is not the only example of that: Rosalind also, who begins a new life as the male Ganymede, plays a role for most of the play. Orlando, her lover, believes at first glance that he is dealing with a man who teaches him to court his beloved by calling himself Rosalind. In a splendid performance by Enikő Eszenyi and Attila Kaszás, one of the key elements was that Kaszás occasionally sees through the role-play and glanced at Ganymede as his own female lover – who also occasionally stepped out of her role as male friend. The truly great *Twelfth Night* performances, such as the Globe Theatre production directed by Tim Carroll (who has made more memorable Shakespeare performances also in Hungary), manage to solve the dramaturgical difficulties of the play by having all roles played by men and striving to create an authentic and coherent performance. The dramatic entanglement is resolved by the scene that shows thematic resonance with the *Sonnets*: at its end, Orsino and Cesario become very close to each other – as if Orsino senses that he is dealing with a woman.

Thus, the homoerotic reading is not inevitable even though all roles are played by men. It demands a great performance from the actors playing women. Carroll’s production’s charming idea is that Cesario looks exactly like the famous portrait of the Earl of Southampton, the most important addressee of the *Sonnets*: it is hardly a coincidence that Cesario’s appearance is modelled after a probable muse of the *Sonnets* (as I suggested earlier: the perfect friend). This also suggests a reading of the *Sonnets*: the gender-changing, or androgynous young man assumes the position of the speaker (since he delivers love messages between Olivia and Orsino). And in the *Sonnets*, it is not the speaker who is gender-ambiguous (he is very much male), but one of the addressees. This intriguing anomaly can be resolved in two ways. One version is that Viola/Cesario can be identified in some way not only with the addressee, but also with the speaker: she can write poetry in Southampton’s name, not just to him; we know he supported the poet, and Shakespeare also

dedicates two extensive narrative poems, Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece, to him. (It should be added that the Earl of Pembroke is also a legitimate candidate for the recipient position; we can assume that we find poems addressed to both of them in the Sonnets which are created in a longer period of time.)

The alternative interpretation explains this gender swapping with the peculiarities of the Petrarchan poetry: to a poet it is evidently possible to have both male and female patrons. I mention this simple remark because I have found a new connection between rival poets and Shakespeare. In sonnet 80 Shakespeare refers directly to the first poem of Michael Drayton's *Idea*. We know that Shakespeare was a good friend of Drayton, his countryman and fellow poet. So as we can see in the 80th sonnet, the speaker mentions that he has a rival poet who writes to the same muse as he does (highlighting from me, FS):

The Sonnet LXXX

'O! how I faint when I of you do write,
Knowing a better spirit doth use your name,
And in the praise thereof spends all his might,
To make me tongue-tied speaking of your fame.
But since your worth, wide as the ocean is,
The humble as the proudest sail doth bear,
My saucy bark, inferior far to his,
On your broad main doth wilfully appear.
Your shallowest help will hold me up afloat,
Whilst he upon your soundless deep doth ride;
Or, being wrecked, I am a worthless boat,
He of tall building, and of goodly pride.
Then if he thrive, and I be cast away,
The worst was this: my love was my decay.'

If Shakespeare wrote verses to Drayton's muse as well, why do we insist on considering his poetry as documentation of his own emotional life, like a sort of lyrical autobiography? The situation is similar to that of the poet Balassi Bálint in Hungarian literature. In Balassi's acrostics and poems, appear different female names, not just Julia's: Morgai Kata, Dobó Krisztina, Célia, Zsuzsanna, and Annamária all appear in the verses – and the list goes on. I can hardly believe that the poet harbored such powerful emotions for every girl included in the verses as he did for Julia (Anna Losonczy). It is more likely that he wrote courtship poems for his noble friends (especially Ferenc Batthyány), and it is certain that he sent them (thus the only poem manuscript of his own hands, the 'Sajátkezű versfüzér' ('Stanza garland'), has been preserved. Shakespeare may have also written verses for several individuals – both male and female – but he

concealed their names: he has only jokingly refer to them, like Anne Hathaway, his wife, with the expression “hate away” in Sonnet 126. It is by no means certain that he was in love with every addressee: as he used cleverly and creatively the Petrarchan templates, or transcending them, it does not necessarily mean that there are sincere emotions involved. Numerous speculations have arisen about the figures portrayed in the Sonnets, but these remain mere speculations; in my view, it is more important to consider what motif system he uses, what emotions we can reconstruct from the texts without identifying specific persons, and what relationship exists between the various genres of his oeuvre.

In the continuation of the cited scene from “Twelfth Night,” another common motif emerges, namely the reference to the cankerworm, as seen in the Sonnets (see sonnet 35, line 4; sonnet 54, line 5; sonnet 70, line 7; sonnet 95, line 2; sonnet 99, line 13). This little bug is specifically specialized in attacking rosebuds, and it has captured the poet’s imagination because it corrupts the rose before it even blossoms, thus serving as a great metaphor for the premature demise of the young. This theme of corruption by Time (particularly in 1–17th sonnets) or by Nature (in sonnet 18) is quite fundamental in the first series of Sonnets, which was born out of a commission: the speaker (presumably several) tries to persuade the addressee(s) according to their role to perpetuate their valuable qualities and, of course, their wealth. The cankerworm means not the corrupting force of Time, but of sins and mistakes. The cankerworm metaphor reappears in “Twelfth Night” as well. Viola mentions the worm that attacks the bud to illustrate the silent but intense love of women in Act 2, Scene 4: “She never told her love,/ But let concealment, like a worm in th’ bud, Feed on her damask cheek.” (Twelfth Night, II. 4.) The otherwise nice and convincing Hungarian version of Ádám Nádasdy⁴ is confusing in these lines, and it is not aesthetic. The worm-eaten face rather suggests a rotting corpse than a lover consumed by desire. Perhaps the version ‘like a worm eating the bud, it consumes her rosy face’⁵ would be better, especially because sorrow is known to consume people. But if I mention this objection, I must also mention that “her rosy face” is spot on: the damask rose was a pink rose variety whose descendants still exist in further cultivated forms today, under the name Damask rose; and the rosy face fits perfectly here.

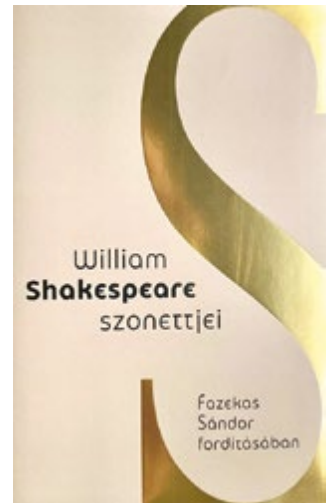
The strongest relationship is between the basic conflict of Twelfth Night and the main conflict of the Sonnets. The structure of the comedy is actually more tragic than comedic, and it ends with a happy ending just because of a rather steep dramaturgical solution: it would have been much easier to write

⁴ In Hungarian: “Hagyta, hogy mint féreg a bimbót, kirágja rózsás arcát.” Shakespeare: *Vízkereszt, vagy bánom is én*, ford. Nádasdy Ádám, Shakespeare: *Drámák*, ford. Uő, Magvető, Budapest, 2008, 193.)

⁵ In Hungarian: “Hagyta, hogy mint a féreg a bimbót, a vágy eméssze rózsás arcát.”

a tragic finish to it than a comedic one. In some parts of the Sonnets, the rhetorical situation is a love triangle, where one character cannot choose between a woman and a man. In the Sonnets, the addressee (in different sonnets that could be different persons, like the Earl of Southampton and/or Pembroke, and maybe also others) is a man whom the speaker (the poet) desires for his companionship and love. However, this gentleman is in love with a lady (she could be the Dark Lady, who can be matched with several real individuals as well), who – being quite generous in this area – might reciprocate his feelings. The speaker does not know this exactly, only suspects it, but his accusation appears in several sonnets; the most famous example of this is *Sonnet 144*:

‘Two loves I have, of comfort and despair,
Which, like two spirits, do suggest me still:
The better angel is a man right fair,
The worser spirit a woman coloured ill.
To win me soon to hell, my female evil
Tempteth my better angel from my side,
And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,
Wooing his purity with her foul pride;
And whether that my angel be turn’d fiend,
Suspect I may, yet not directly tell;
But being both from me, both to each friend,
I guess one angel in another’s hell.
Yet this shall I ne’er know, but live in doubt,
Till my bad angel fire my good one out.’



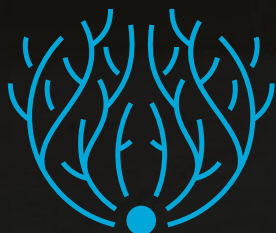
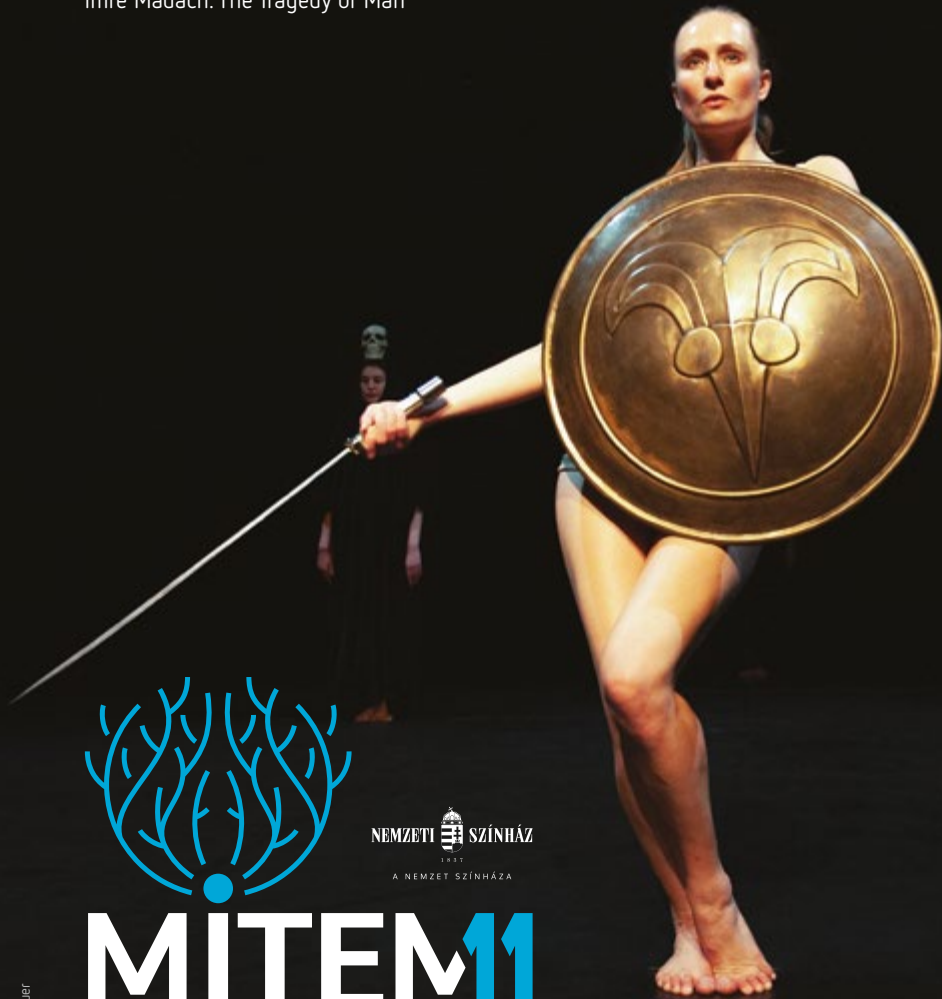
This poem is a very important piece of the sonnet cycle, for several reasons; here and now, we only highlight the two most important aspects of it from a theatrical point of view. One is that “*Twelfth Night*” has a very similar love triangle as the basic situation of the Sonnets, where the sweet sufferings of love are the most sublime part of the play: Viola, who serves Duke Orsino disguised as Cesario, falls in love with him. However, Orsino is in love with Countess Olivia, a mourning lady, who, instead of Orsino, sets her eyes on Cesario/Viola. The girl in men’s clothing is in big trouble: she definitely doesn’t want to hurt Orsino’s feelings, as she loves him, but she is unable to reciprocate Olivia’s unexpected love. The countess tells her that she is willing to speak only to Cesario, she wants to hear nothing of Orsino’s other messengers, or even of the duke himself. This is where the comic solution emerges: Sebastian, Viola’s twin brother will save the situation, who, after living apart from his twin sister throughout the whole play, believing her to be dead, appears in the last act and rescues his sister from her multiple predicaments: he defends her honor against a duel-seeking buffoon and he takes Countess Olivia as his wife, who

immediately falls into his arms when she sees him – apparently he had strong similarity with his disguised twin sister. Sebastian can't believe his luck, but nevertheless, he promptly takes her as his wife. Orsino, who previously pursued Olivia with his love for a long time, immediately falls in love with Viola, who has finally returned to her girl's attire, and asks the girl to marry him, who of course happily agrees.

How can so many unexpected and not too well-prepared twists be authenticated? This is a common problem for productions of 'Twelfth Night,' but the task is solvable. There are some former good examples of this here in Hungary as well, but I will now recall the production of 'Twelfth Night' by the Globe Theatre, which wonderfully defused the play's dramaturgical poison. When in the above mentioned situation Orsino and Cesario talk as men about the love emotions of men and women, Orsino nearly kisses Cesario. The contemporary viewer is accustomed to women's roles being played by men, so they are less likely to be stuck on this solution, but this scene foreshadows and justifies Orsino's change of partner: we can understand it as Orsino realizing during the scene that he is actually dealing with a woman – and he is touched by the girl's attachment, who of course in his words constantly hints at her own feelings towards Orsino. The situation is similar in 'As You Like It': in my view, it hardly makes sense to play the play naively, both men (Orsino in 'Twelfth Night' and Orlando in 'As You Like It') do better in their comedies if they occasionally wink at the audience and indicate at doubtful points: it's possible that they know everything, they just play that they are misled. Perhaps this is how plays can be played in a new light, like 'The Taming of the Shrew,' whose male-centric worldview (if we read it literally) is quite far from today's spirit. Yes, Shakespeare uses anti-feminist stereotypes, but always presents them as the opinions of others, and often refutes them in his plays (Orsino and Cesario/ Viola's recalled conversation is a good example of this: the suppressed female perspective clearly emerges victorious, even if does it implicitly. Viola's love is victorious over Orsino's love for Olivia. Cesario cannot win Orsino's heart openly, as he is playing a boy, and his role-playing would be exposed, which he tries to avoid at all costs. But maybe Orsino is not a fool: he also can see beyond the mask, as can Orlando: the former is already quite unbelievable that he cannot distinguish a man from a disguised woman, but the latter case is even more tense: the disguised Rosalind teaches Orlando to court her by asking him to imagine his lover (i.e., Rosalind) in place of Ganymede (the disguised Rosalind). These are excessively heightened comic situations, but the possibility of this 'winking out' can make these strange dramatic situations credible. It certainly has a psychological credibility: sometimes people are particularly pleased when they are deceived – and they go along with the game, especially when it comes to love games, and they feel that the game is not against them or the romantic relationship, but precisely for it.

"Oh, is there no place, sacred poesy,
Left for thee in this dull, grey world of prose?"

Imre Madách: The Tragedy of Man



NEMZETI SZÍNHÁZ
1837
A NEMZET SZÍNHÁZA

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“Thousands of years of civilization and we still do not know where things stand with freedom and love. Humans, seeing blind, walk towards destruction. Humans rule upon the world and drag their own species into the abyss. Humans cry out their opposition against all kinds of injustice, but become chained and punished. Humanism has become a crime. From one day to the next, freedom becomes a fatal aim. The smell of burnt skin fills the room in my house, and we, 21st century mortals, we hope for salvation in vain.”
(*Johan de Boose*)

“...since the turn of the 19th century – roughly parallel to the gradual loss of the priority of classics within the academic sphere – the marginalization of the classical tradition has been registered in living culture, as well as in literature. The influence of the ancient cultural ‘repository’ dwindled, and the formal and thematic elements of classical antiquity in European literary culture were gradually effaced—even if the process was not uniform everywhere, nor was it evenly staged.” (*Attila Simon*)

“How to accomplish the tragic, nowadays? What language is it, that which through Sophocles, we wish to tell the spectator? And what tongue is it in? Sophocles’ Greek was deliberately elevated and musical, a language which tears us from the plane of reality and places us on a level of transcendence. How to deliver the perfect dramatization of the perfect myth to the public in a language that is not hostile and conceptual, but rather musical, instinctual and sensual?” (*Alessandro Serra*)

“20 years ago I had the shocking experience that everything is changing at a terrifying pace (...) That time I felt that something was disappearing forever, and now I feel that everything has changed. Now we have to find ourselves, our own subjects in this changed world,. What a paradox, for example, that the daughter of Gertrudis and Endre II is Saint Elizabeth, the patron saint of Europe! That is why in my new production of *The Viceroy Bánk* I send one of the child characters with a bouquet of roses to Gertrudis, who is covered in blood, and some of the audience reacts vividly, realising that this story is not so obvious.” (*Attila Vidnyánszky*)

“The more unified the world becomes, the more people will try to express the singularity of their heritage and affirm their links to a particular country, religion, ethnicity and history. This is not necessarily a negative impulse, but it portends that art and culture will increasingly be presented in an environment where people are searching for a national identity, with politicians attempting to take advantage of that need.” (*Mattia Sebastian Giorgetti*)

