

EVERYMAN
IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN DRAMA

DOCTORAL THESIS

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Doctoral Thesis
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As a theatre director, I have experienced a wide variety of reactions. I believe that from the intensity of the applause, the professional feedback and the posterior reactions of the general public, as well as from my own impressions, I can relatively well judge how “successful” a given work was.

We had the first night of a theatre play staged on the basis of *Sibylle Berg: Helges Leben (Helge’s Life)* in Kecskemét, in 2005. The elemental success of the production inspired my contemplation: To our greatest surprise, in this countryside city this contemporary German text was received with significant understanding. Might this have a deeper reason besides, of course, the outstanding performance from the creators of the performance?

I decided to examine the phenomenon thoroughly. This experience and decision formed the basis of my doctoral thesis.

Helges Leben (Helge’s Life) – contemporary morality. With allegoric characters. An Everyman story in postmodern apparel.

Thus, I started my research with the thorough examination and analysis of the medieval antecedent, the *Everyman* and continued with its 20th century revival, the *Jedermann (Everyman)* of *Hofmannstahl*. This process is reflected in the structure of my thesis: the first chapters summarize what I found in the course of these examinations.

I was striving to study the most and latest possible pieces of the European drama literature of the 1990s and 2000s. I conducted consultations with translators; I read synopses and complete plays – some of them I even put to stage as director.

Following the above, I set a criteria system, on the basis of which I could define which of the studied pieces do (or may) fall into the category of *the contemporary Everyman*. My criteria were the following:

1. The main character’s name is Everyman,

If this is not the case, at least two of the following criteria must be fulfilled in order for them to be categorized as contemporary Everyman:

2. They are surrounded with allegoric characters;
and in the play there must appear:
3. God and/ or Death – in some form, but at least to an extent so that the ‘main character’ may learn about the proceeding end;
4. the fight of Good and Bad – if possible in the image of allegoric figures;
5. the history of the main character’s life, or some key episodes from it.

In my thesis I present eight contemporary Everymen. I examine how the various authors handled the ‘lost properties’; what dramaturgic solutions they applied for the elaboration of the Everyman story; what are the conspicuous similarities and characteristic differences between the individual works and whether these might lead to a rather general conclusion. I examined these plays necessarily deprived of the literary context, the genre tradition and the social and political background they were created in.

Following the above, I placed the presentation and analysis of the eight plays in the next chapters, discussed in three groups.

Among the authors of the eight theatre plays, there are some, who keep the Everyman in the abstract theatric environment, and raise him/ her out from among his/ her real human relations, as did the author of the 15th century Everyman. Thus were the plays of Tadeusz Slobodzianek (*The Pea-roller*) and Katalin Thuróczy (*Akárki (Everyman)*) organized in one group.

There are some who, based on the 1911 adaptation of Hofmannstahl, rather intuitively following and further elaborating its directions, created realistic life situations and human relationships around the major character. The plays of Péter Kárpáti (*Akárki (Everyman)*), László Garaczi (*Jederman (Everyman)*), Roland Schimmelpfennig (*Berlin, Greifswalderstrasse (Boulevard of the Brave)*) and István Tasnádi (*Finito*) belong to this group.

Finally, there are those who move the real life events and relations of Everyman to the abstract, leading the ‘Big Story’ back to the fertile environment of the theatrical, like Sibylle Berg (*Helges Leben (Helge’s Life)*) and Szilárd Borbély (*Akár Akárki (Even Everyman)*).

Naturally I could not undertake to the revealing and describing of correlations far exceeding my knowledge in social sciences, sociology, philosophy and religious history.

However, as a result of my research work, I phrased some statements that are (as it seems) valid. Let me list those below, as the theses of my PhD.

1. It was the choice of topic that made the audience excited at Kecskemét. Also, the same play has been presented since then at several places in Europe, everywhere with significant success.

And this topic is human life. The life of any one of us. Of the *Everyman*. From birth to death.

This – nothing less, nothing more. Helges Leben is also the 21st century rephrasing of *Everyman*, the morality play that appeared in the 15th century and has been living on in European cultural memory; on pages of its books and on its stages since then, up to our present days, in the meantime having become a moving motif.

2. Its success might result in the same reason as that of its predecessor of half a millennium earlier – its central theme being the conflict of Human and Death. Furthermore, an inevitable part of the play is discussing God, Faith, and the social situation of the time of its creation – the meaning of human life, with a not negligible attitude of social criticism, in a manner that is available and understandable for the widest possible audience. This also results from the medieval moralities, their pedagogical nature: the moral had to be understood by all.

3. At the turn of the second millennium, several playwrights feel that they can talk about our world, the most actual today, validly and successfully(!) by reaching back to an example of over half a millennium earlier, with renewing a dominant theatre genre (while using its framework, structure and specific attributes) – by writing a morality play.

They have found a similar form to express their globalizing European playwright existence and their related social criticism, as their ‘five hundred years old’ colleagues.

4. The process of the gradual loss of the individual begun already at the beginning of the 20th century. And that was the exact moment when the *Everyman* was reborn: Hofmannstahl wrote the *Jedermann* (*Everyman*).

In case of all the plays examined in my research it can be stated that the fundamental experience and prophecy phrased in the first decades of the 20th century (by Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Heidegger and others) is ‘at its peak’ in the age of the mass societies named globalization.

EVERYMAN (/EVERYWOMAN) has become a key figure of drama literature for the expression of this basic experience in a form that is understandable, entertaining and still motivates to thinking and retrospection, while offering the possibility of catharsis.

WHO lives in the city. In a secularized world. Left by God. Lonely. Transcendence is missing from his/ her life the central element of which is money. A mass character – does not have an unrepeatable personality. Can be copied and can be substituted. Has roles that (s)he uses and changes even if they are not coherent with each other. Globalization has reached him/ her.

Yet, this statement is also true in a way that the reason why there are more and more contemporary Everyman paraphrases is that (s)he is the mass person on the turn of the second millennium, the allegory of that – has no unrepeatable personality, is a multiplication, a reproduction, and is still lonely. And will be, not only in his/ her death. Has roles that (s)he uses and changes even if they are not coherent with each other. Mostly lives in the city. Does not believe in miracles. Has no god. Yet just finds no rational explanation of his/her life and death, provided that (s)he takes the courage and tries to search it. His/ her days are pervaded by irrationality.

Nothing (or rather the Nothing itself) substituted the religiousness of the medieval age, thus in these contemporary moralities the question of rationality- irrationality has a central role. The structural projection of this content, the organic world building, is substituted with construction. The fertile field of representation for the mixing of reality and non-reality is the dream. And the theatre. These receive special emphasis in these plays, separately as well as combined.

5. If our contemporary Everyman receives an opportunity in the theatre, and it seems that (s)he does, in the majority of cases (s)he tries to give the theatre goer (not only the middle-class ones) an experience that is in the majority of cases impressive, (partly or fully) set in the form of a music and dance show, and not-immediately-forgettable (disposable, one-way).

Thus, the morality, what once was positioned somewhere in between secular and religious genres, now flourishes in a completely profane form.

The envisaging, the retrospection, the searching of the self, the search for the meaning of life has strengthened in the past few years and decades; in our world deprived of ideologies, the longing for transcendence is an everyday experience.

At the same time, the human world built out around us, our society is threatened with collapse. To judge, criticize or at least represent it is a *moral* necessity.

The character of the Everyman can be especially well formulated with such a background. Sharply, with strong outlines. Plain.