

Doctoral School of Theatre and Film University

THE ARTISTIC WORK OF COSTUME
DESIGNER NELLY VÁGÓ

Theses of doctoral dissertation



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Costume designer Nelly Vágó is considered to be an exceptional theatrical artist of the 20th century. She was the costume designer of the Hungarian State Opera House and the assistant professor of the University of Fine Arts. She received many awards and honours, and also participated to exhibitions. During her life *"she could work with nearly a hundred directors, and created more than five thousand different costumes for nine thousand artists."*¹ Her art was honoured with Kossuth Prize in 2006.

She was my master, and as her student, I would like to present her complex professional activity through her creations, in the knowledge of which pieces were decisive for her, which values she represented and which artists considered her as their major co-creator. She had nearly a half thousand designs and left behind a huge oeuvre seeming impenetrable at first, so I was forced to systematize my research.

- First of all, I had to rely on my personal impressions that I have experienced over the years we spent together. She proved her principles by showing good example. I completed my experiences by her manuscript *"Our theatrical wear"* published in 1997. There she reveals secrets, tells stories about her former colleagues, present theatrical creation processes, through the eyes of a costume designer. She recalls her films, her National Theatre designs, her Opera House works, the times spent at the Kaposvár Theater, also the Madách Theatre productions, and perhaps her most beloved co-creator, László Seregi, with whom she produced significant ballet performances. By some enjoyable stories, she presents the most memorable stages of her career.
- Another important source for me was Nelly Vágó's collection of her costume drawings. After her sudden death in 2006, we photographed all her plans and paintings with her husband. Unfortunately, most of the figures on the pictures are not named, the directors' or theatres' are not indicated neither. So it was a serious research to identify which design could belong to which performance. I studied these photos one by one, found the performances they belonged to, and placed them in an order. I tried my best to systematize the accumulated artistic material. If I was uncertain about the title of a drawing, I asked the theatrical workers' help who were Nelly Vágó's colleagues in the given performances.
- I had to associate the performances with the paintings. I listed Nelly Vágó's designs from 1962 to 2006, indicating the dates, and the directors of the pieces, and I systematized them. Over four hundred theatrical works were documented so, based on reliable sources. I used the exhibition catalogues of Nelly Vágó and the database of the National Theatre Institute, as well as theatres' archives.
- I searched pictures to illustrate the performances included in the table, since Vágó Nelly's costumes could be found in theatrical photos authentically. I checked a number of performances and asked for pictures from the theatres' archives. I noticed how easy

¹ Nelly Vágó, National Theatre Museum and Institute, 2015.

it was to pair Nelly Vágó's costumes with the stage designs of the performances, because there is only a small difference between the plan and the realized costume. I tried to connect the figures on the drawings with the characters of the photos. Particularly, it caused difficulties when the names of the actors were not shown on the paintings.

- Finally, I searched the clothes of these performances in the costume storages of the theatres. I was lucky because I found many of them in those theatres where Nelly Vágó worked in her last decade. I asked for help from the Hungarian State Opera House and the Madách Theatre. I searched her costumes and photographed them one by one. I took pictures not only about the clothes, but also about the details and the accessories. I realised an extremely rich collection of photos with those costumes. I'm convinced that this research method is a unique process that makes my dissertation special. Only another designer can analyse a costume designer's work by this way, because she is the only person who recognizes the most important features of this profession. I wanted to show that Nelly Vágó's art was more complicated than making beautiful paintings and realising pretty costumes. Her speciality was to create characters on her drawings. A costume designer works through different processes beginning from the design of the plans till the performance. People say that "paper can bear everything", but a costume designer has many difficulties during the production period. First, choosing textiles for the costumes inquires a professional knowledge, followed by other complex challenges. The finished costume certifies the designer's talent and creativity, her historical knowledge, her sense of composition, as well as her taste of colours and decorations.

The dissertation is based on the serious collector work mentioned above. This research permitted to systematize Nelly Vágó's art and define the stages of her creative career. By reviewing her oeuvre, I noticed that I could only analyse her works by genre. Her career's major stages were related to the main institutions of Hungarian theatre life. At the beginning, when she was member of the National Theatre, she created mostly drama performances. These decades were followed by years spent at the Hungarian National Opera House, realising there classical operas and the Ballets of Seregi László, parallelly with numerous open-air performances in Szeged. Finally she designed hundreds of costumes for musicals in Madách Theatre. This chronological life work defined the course of the dissertation.

- First, I analysed Nelly Vágó's drawings and paintings. She approached her work from the fine arts masterpieces, and realised her plans with high artistic level. That point of view were decisive for me, so the analyse of her paintings and artworks became extremely important. "*These plans and images carry informations for a team-work, they represent the artistic thoughts and witness a creator's career.*"² – she confirmed in her manuscript. Nelly tried many artistic techniques to find her own watercolour

² Nelly Vágó: *Színházi viselt dolgaim*, manuscript, 1997

style. She mainly realised her plans with pencil and chalk, but also experimented some collages. I tried to emphasize her frequent technical processes to represent the development of her art. Nelly's paintings show her humour and artistic value. Especially a costume design is intended to show the clothes of a performer, but Nelly focused on the figure's character. She depicted feelings and emotions, filled her figures with life. She turned alive the clothes she planned. She composed groups of her character figures, so her compositions recalled the final views of the performance. These qualities made their creations unique.

- I only mentioned Nelly Vágó's film designs, because - despite some notable exceptions -, they are not relevant in her entire oeuvre. She made costumes for approximately forty movies, while she realised more than five hundred theatrical design. She created her most important film design for the movie 'Sindbad', which is emblematic in her life. Zoltan Huszárik, the producer of the film was himself an artist, so he inspired Nelly. From her point of view, this design was memorable because of the wonderful hats and their decorations that became remarkable part of the film's macro world.
- Nelly Vágó realised her drama designs during the decades spent at the National Theatre. She was involved in all major prose performances of theatrical history, and realised some of them even several times, with different directors. She had the opportunity to design dramas of Shakespeare, Moliere or Gyula Illyés. Between 1962 and 1987, she created the costumes for nearly hundred performances. She worked with directors Endre Marton, Tamás Major, or István Egri. *"At that time, the National Theater's actors consisted of such great talents like the 6:3 Gold Football Team. We analysed and interpreted."*³-she remembered so in her manuscript. The great drama period was awarded by a golden jubilee ring that she received mainly for her works designed in the National Theatre.
- Nelly Vágó's opera designs mean a considerable artistic value. From 1985 to 2003 she was member of the Hungarian State Opera House. She realised several costume designs each year, including operas and ballets as well. During that period she designed about thirty operas and ten ballets. She mostly worked with Viktor Nagy, but also with Imre Kerényi, András Békés and János Tóth. Her most important creations were realised in ballet, with László Seregi, when she designed costumes for the coreographer's three Shakespeare performance. Nelly found an inspiring partner in him and, despite of being good in all opera genres, she is the greatest in ballet. She also designed costumes for Verdi's operas, such as *Rigoletto*, *Othello* or *Aida*. She was brilliant in operas of Strauss too, such as the 'Flittermouse', or the 'Gipsy baron'. She attended the highest artistical level by realizing the *Wagner Ring*, designing unique ancient costumes. Perhaps there was no historical period that she should not have put on stage. *"I was lucky to design all kind of masterpieces of the opera history, from*

³ Nelly Vágó: *Színházi viselt dolgaink*, manuscript, 1997

*Verdi to Wagner, including works of contemporary authors too. Maybe that's why I was nominated a "Meritorious Artist."*⁴ - she confirmed in her last interview. She remains forever the "titular artist master costume designer" of the Hungarian State Opera House.

- Nelly Vágó realised her most important musical designs in the last decade of her career. During the 90's she participated in many musical successes, such as "*Twist Oliver*" in 1997, or "*The miserables*" in 1999 at the Madách Theatre. This theatre serie borned from the cooperation of three artists: Tamás Szirtes, László Seregi and Vágó Nelly. Among the musicals she designed then, the "*Phantom of the opera*", the "*Cats*" and the "*Christmas Carol*" are still on show. For me, I consider these works as the ultimate era of Nelly Vágó's carrer. Here, she proves great knowledge, exceptional drawing talent and unique creativity.

While choosing the analysed performances, I focused on a costume designer's point of view. Thereby, such important performances, as "*Platonov*", directed by Tamás Ascher, was negligated. I rather favorised spectacular productions, showing up many decorative costumes and historical clothes.

During my research, I discovered not only Nelly's oeuvre, but all kind of professions relied to costume design. For example, weaving in the case of the opera "*The Spinning room*" or shoemaking in case of the musical "*The Producers*". I estimated useful to present all these details in a handbook, that became the second part of my dissertation. I visited the artisans of various costume-producing professions, and took photos to illustrate their descriptions. My goal was to present how complex profession costume designing is. Perhaps the outsiders do not even think about how many people's work is involved in the creation of a theatrical figure: from textile artists to the shoemakers, or the glove-makers, many types of occupation are engaged in realising a stage dress. "*I've been looking for books in libraries for a long time, which approach the theatre from the perspective of costume creation. I didn't find anything.*" – tells Nelly Vágó's in her *Manuscript*.⁵ So far, there has not been a book of this kind yet, which can be helpful for those who are interested in costume design, to improve their professional knowledge. I tried to summarize professional specializations related to theatrical costume design, such as:

- tailoring
- weaving
- textile painting
- hairdressing
- makeup
- wig making

⁴ Scenery series - Nelly Vágó, publication of National Theatre Museum and Institute

⁵ Nelly Vágó: *Színházi viselt dolgaink*, manuscript, 1997.

- hat making
- shoemaking
- glove making
- mask making
- leather goods making
- modern machine techniques.

The designer has to explain her demands clearly to the manufacturers, and communicate precisely her ideas with them. For this reason, the techniques and capabilities of these professions should be known. I wanted to provide a general insight into the various theatrical creative production techniques. Perhaps, I succeed to make an impression in the readers who may be the costume designers of the future.

I wanted to show how complicated profession theatre cloth designing is. For me, Nelly Vágó was the exemplary representative of that domain. I considered important to document her oeuvre and to share the knowledge I learned from her. My aim was to create a complex lecture by presenting the work of Nelly Vágó for all those people who are interested in this profession, to give them an insight to the costume designers' work.