

University of Theatre and Film Arts
Doctoral School

HISTORY AND MEMORY
IN CONTEMPORARY HUNGARIAN THEATRE
Theses of Doctoral Dissertation

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The subject of research

In my doctoral research I examined the relationship between historical memory and Hungarian theatre practice. As a theatre professional, I see theatre as a space of art and social publicity that can play a significant role in shaping historical memory. In addition to official historiography and personal memory, theatre staging history provides its participants with a kind of collective interpretation that can complement, substantiate or even transform our concept of history.

One of the defining strands of contemporary historiography is the rewriting of hegemonic master narratives. The main sources of this trend are the micro-historical perspective, oral history and the reinterpretation of the concept of historical document. Reading a historical theatre performance as a document has multiple justifications: the dramaturgy of a historical performance utilises (either confirms or subverts) a narrative that is valid for a larger community. By examining the performance and its theatre-cultural context, we can both critique the dramaturgical interpretation - which analyses the performance as a site of memory from historical, social, aesthetic and theatre-historical perspectives - and draw practical conclusions about the theatrical representation of history.

Structure of the dissertation

The dissertation consists of seven case studies. It consists of a reconstruction and analysis of performances that were produced between 1949 (the nationalization of theatres) and 2020, and which, at the time of their staging, were intended to make a significant contribution to shaping our historical memory. The selection was not based on the aesthetic quality of the performances, but on the complexity of the (theatrical) historical context surrounding them. The three chapters indicate three possible analytical approaches: The chapter 'Schematic Dramaturgical Forms' explores the historical context of the transformation of a genre, the operetta, and the characteristics of an ideologically determined art through the analysis of dramaturgical forms. "Censorship and Memory" deals with a recurring problem of Hungarian theatre, the anachronistic reception of contemporary drama, which also points to the shortcomings of collective cultural memory in the case of works with historical themes. The chapter

"The Plays of Nationhood" discusses performances that sought to shape our collective view of history by staging taboo subjects.

Since my aim was to deal with well-documented but understudied material, I selected performances that were created within the structure of state theatres, but which are not typically included in theatre histories. Legendary performances of the second disclosure before the regime change and of the alternative/independent scene after the regime change are not included in the dissertation - many of them have already been covered by others. Thus, the dissertation is also an attempt to extend the canon of twentieth-century Hungarian theatre history.

Theoretical context of the research

The history of theatre as a whole can be read in terms of memory and evocation. In my research, I have drawn on the conceptual framework of leading theorists of theatre and history.

Marvin Carlson, in his comprehensive work *The Haunted Stage*, defines theatre as a "memory machine", a cultural phenomenon that constantly evokes and recycles elements of the collective memory. In Carlson's model, the theatre is above a place of memory, where every performance recalls our collective memory.

In his work *Performing History*, Freddie Rokem describes theatre as a prominent site for the study of history, as the theatre performance systematically and aesthetically re-enacts the events of the past, through which the actor (and all theatre-makers) becomes both witness and historian.

Hayden White's paradigm-shifting *Metahistory* and his essay *The Historical Text as Literary Artifact* brought the tools of cultural anthropology, linguistics and literary studies to the examination of historical texts. He argues that documents processed by and texts produced by the historian can be analysed as literary works that do not merely record facts but also compose the past - it is history itself, which is never independent of the intentions and situation of its narrator. Tamás Kisantal goes further from this thesis in his essay paraphrasing White, entitled *The Literary Artifact as Historical Text*. He argues that a literary work can be considered as a historical source if the object of research is the view of history that it reveals. On similar grounds, Patrice Pavis, in his encyclopaedic *Dictionary of the Theatre*, states that the relationship between theatre and history is a permanent feature of all dramaturgy.

Dealing with a community's unfinished past is a task that is passed down from generation to generation. Jan Assmann, in describing forms of collective memory, distinguishes between cultural and communicative memory, emphasising the living, contemporaneous character of the latter. Árpád Kékesi Kun uses Assmann's conceptual framework to define the position of theatre in collective memory. According to his approach, theatre combines both practices of memory, repetition and interpretation, so that a performance on a historical subject does not simply revive the past, but also rewrites the tradition.

In examining theatrical memory, we must therefore be aware that it is not only the performances that shape our narratives of history, but also the reconstruction and analysis of performances that shape (theatrical) history. The generations that have produced and written about theatre pass on themes to be worked on to the next generations, and the staging and writing of these themes constitute the coherence of theatre culture - and this justifies the extended focus of this dissertation over a seventy-year period.

Methodological framework of the research

During the research and writing of the case studies, I used the Philther method, in which the performances are analysed according to six aspects: 1. theatre-historical context, 2. text and performance dramaturgy, 3. direction, 4. acting, 5. stage and sound design, 6. reception and impact analysis.

The subject of my research led me to focus on three aspects: the context of theatre history, the dramaturgy of text and performance, and the analysis of reception and impact. In the performances studied, the staging of history was typically manifested in the text and dramaturgy, the staging facilitated the historical narrative that could be read from it - not by chance: all seven performances were "premieres", the staging did not position itself in relation to the theatre tradition, but allowed space for the representation of history on stage. The cultural context of the performances was significantly broadened, becoming a historical context, partly incorporating the history of reception (for example, in the case of a work that had not been performed for fifty years, it is difficult to separate the two). The analysis of the individual performances and the documents that accompanied them led to certain historical concepts of the period, to contents that are not visible in the grand narratives of historiography, but which emerge from the past through the genre of theatre.

Theses of the chapters and case studies

Schematic dramaturgical forms

The performances that followed the nationalization of the theatres in 1949 were themed around 'rebuilding' and set the requirements for a reorganisation of genre and aesthetic. Through the analysis of ideologically charged schematic dramaturgical forms, we can examine the development of cultural policy in the Rákosi era. The socialist operetta performance reconstructed in this chapter, *Golden Star*, has fallen out of theatrical memory, but read as a document it can become a site of memory of state-socialist theatre. The accompanying genre study can help us to recognise the ideological implications of the schemes still at work in musical theatre today.

György Hámos – Endre Székely – Imre Apáthi: *Golden Star (Aranycsillag)*, 1950

The most important task of the Margit Gáspár era was to save the operetta genre for the system of state socialism. Staging the first socialist operetta was a representative legitimizing step in this process. The fierce debate surrounding the genre, under the pretext of aesthetic issues, revolved around in fact the social-forming power of theatre art.

By December 1950, the Operetta Theatre had gone through the four-step process that led to the cultural and political acceptance of the genre:

1. old operetta in a new interpretation (*The Violet of Montmartre*)
2. old operetta rewritten (*The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein*)
3. soviet operetta (*Free Wind*)
4. new Hungarian operetta (*Golden Star*)

The script of the *Golden Star* is a dramatized version of the first five-year plan, which, through its obvious propaganda, sought to promote the People's Army and the cooperation between the army, the peasantry and the working class. The plot fitted into the theatrical repertoire that was developing in the spirit of Zhdanov's cultural policy. The reactionary figures depicted were also typified based on the rhetoric of state propaganda. The dramaturgical emphasis was on the ideological transformation of the village community, which, thanks to the protagonists, was naturally achieved with success. The dramaturgy also precisely sets out the ideological development of the bon vivant and the prima donna: István must accept the new socialist type of woman, and Juli must learn to subordinate herself to the greater interest. The question of "who is

right in the comradeship debate?" is transformed into an operetta love affair as the bon vivant and the prima donna facilitate each other's ideological development. In the socialist realist operetta, it is not enough to create a unity of love, the couple must also find common ground ideologically.

Imre Apáthi made his debut with the *Golden Star* as a leading director at the Operetta Theatre. The director's task was in fact to launch the reinterpreted genre, and the professional judgement of his work was also based on this. In the paradigm of the socialist operetta, a theatre production is successful if it contributes to the competition in production, and in the case of the *Golden Star* this meant propagating the People's Army alongside the farmer's cooperatives. Ideological staging, like that of Apáthi, works with symbolic and unmistakable stage gestures.

The recognition of the socialist realistic operetta allowed the traditions of the genre to be carried over into the system of state socialism and made it possible to popularise Hungarian operetta throughout the Eastern Bloc.

Censorship and memory

The official theatre of the Kádár era avoided politically sensitive topics, and shaped theatrical memory mainly by controlling the repertoire. This chapter of the dissertation deals with plays and performances on historical themes whose informal banning, censorship or delayed performance sheds light on the relationship between official theatre and cultural policy: what, when and how did the authorities allow the public to see?

Tibor Déry – Tibor Csizmadia: *Witnesses (A tanúk)*, 1986

The analysis of the *Witnesses* is a study of a missed potential: a contemporary portrayal of the end of the Second World War and the deportation of the Jews of Budapest could have been a major milestone in European theatre history, had it not been performed forty years after it was written.

In his plays written after 1945, Tibor Déry recorded historical memories that he considered of the utmost importance to share with a wider audience - in order to create our collective memory. He reacted to the events of contemporary history with a speed and sharpness that is to this day unusual in Hungarian drama. The *Witnesses* could have been part of the discourse on the responsibility of Hungarian society that István Bibó's defining essay, *The Jewish Question in Hungary after 1944*, initiated, and to

which the nationalized memory and cultural policy had only one response from 1949 onwards: silence. Déry's work drew attention to the collective tragedy by showing Budapest society in its plurality, a whole that was fragmented not only in terms of ethnicity but also of class and mindset, yet still functioning in coexistence. And which he did not divide along the antagonism of perpetrators and victims, but portrayed through positions of inactive spectatorship (witnesses) and active agency.

The dramaturgy of the *Witnesses* shows a strong Brechtian influence, not only in its recognisable formal elements (episodic structure, narration, songs commenting on scenes, tableaux-s depicting different sections of society), but primarily in its approach to the world and history.

Tibor Csizmadia staged the performance not according to the logic of historical drama, but according to the logic of images. The exaggeration and complex construction of the role of the Janitor and her transformation into a master of ceremonies in permanent contact with the audience drew attention to the contemporary reality of the "janitor-land", taking the figure out of the context of historicisation. Another fundamental intention of the staging was to break taboos: the word "Jew" was spoken thirty-three times in the performance, and this in itself was a provocative gesture to challenge the silence surrounding the subject.

István Eörsi – László Babarczy: *The Interrogation* (A kihallgatás), 1988

Through *The Interrogation*, the techniques of self-legitimation and the performativity of ideological repression of the Kádár regime can be captured. The play's informal prohibition for more than twenty years was not primarily because it was set in a prison, between political prisoners and their captors, but because its relational system modelled the conflicts that led to the 1956 revolution. Prison inmates of different ideologies, from religious fanatics to communists, forged a union of resistance against the manipulating power. The time and place of the plot (a Hungarian prison on 24 December 1953) itself implied content that was tabooed by the regime, and this was only heightened by the fact that its author was a 1956 convict.

The play's status was changed by Eörsi's theatrical connections in West Berlin, as the Schaubühne, led by Peter Stein, premiered *The Interrogation* in 1984, directed by George Tabori.

The context of the dramatic text is shaped by works such as *The Measures Taken* (Bertolt Brecht, 1930), *Darkness at Noon* (Arthur Koestler, 1940), *The Unburied Dead*

(Jean-Paul Sartre, 1946), *Deathwatch* (Jean Genet, 1947), *Freedom Mountain* (József Gáli, 1955), *The Police* (Sławomir Mrożek, 1958), *Mauser* (Heiner Müller, 1970), *Passion* (András Jeles, 1997) or *General Secretaries* (György Spiró, 2020). These texts, like *The Interrogation*, explore the last possibilities of individual freedom, typically in a prison and/or penitentiary situation in which everything is dominated by total exposure to the higher power (the Party, the state, ideology, political power structures, etc.) and a general sense of surveillance/observation.

The dramatic characters are inspired by real people whom Eörsi got to know in prison between 1957 and 1960, and who appear in *The Interrogation* as representations of Hungarian society, explaining the political and moral background of the 1956 revolution. Among the documents belonging to *Das Verhör*, in the archives of the Berlin Schaubühne, is a text by Eörsi in German, which breaks the anonymity of the models of the roles.

The social and ideological typification of the characters brings into play a complex set of views throughout the work, but there is little dramatic tension in the relationships between them. World views, convictions and disillusionments clash within a realist dramaturgical structure, so that the roles often become more like branches of a battle of faith than well-drawn, real-life figures.

The most significant gesture of László Babarczy's direction was the seating of the audience on the stage and around the events. This solution not only placed the audience in a position of enclosure and observation, but also underlined the importance of the two-decade-long delayed encounter between the audience and the play, which was finally able to take place face-to-face.

Erzsébet Galgóczi – József Ruszt: *Iron Trap (Vidravas)*, 1989

The *Iron Trap* performance, based on the censored novel by Erzsébet Galgóczi, asserts the need to clarify the past in the context of the regime change. This work, like the other two plays analysed in this chapter, had lost its delegitimising power by the late 1980s, yet its presentation functioned as an attempt to process the memory of state socialism.

Instead of a peasant writer, Galgóczi became more and more a critical voice of socialism, who as an artist was more concerned with the fates of marginalized people, hopeless life paths, deviance and the disparate intellectual existence than with the mandatory optimism dictated by official narratives.

The *Iron Trap* novel could only be published in a cut version before the regime change, and its last chapter, dealing with the events of the revolution, did not pass the publishing censorship of the Kádár regime. The script for the performance was based on the censored version, which made the question of the staging of the novel and the impact of the theatrical event problematic from the very beginning.

The performance offered the triple representation of Mátyás Rákosi as an exciting gesture of form. During the scene transitions, a huge portrait of Rákosi appeared on the stage, texts related to the Rajk trial were accompanied by a silhouette of a Rákosi puppet, and by the end of the second act, the "living" Rákosi appeared on stage: an actor walked into the playing area with choreographed movements and a Rákosi mask on his head.

The performance failed in terms of critical reception. The critics were mainly concerned with the problems of the adaptation and perceived the flaws in acting through this. József Ruszt's rather didactic staging was also criticised, along with the failed dramatisation. Compared to the impact of the Galgóczi novel, the production not only underperformed, but also stepped back in the discourse on the subject that had been launched five years earlier: it schematically portrayed an extremely complex problem that triggered social debates - the memory of the Rákosi regime.

The plays of nationhood

This chapter discusses three performances that dealt with traumatic events in Hungarian history with the declared intention of reshaping collective memory. The Treaty of Trianon, the Don River disaster and the 1956 revolution are three historical events whose power to shape national consciousness is evident, but whose discourse has been repeatedly derailed until today. If one assumes, as many historians do, that the way collective trauma works is similar to the way individual trauma is described by psychology - that repressed, unprocessed trauma produces neurosis - then the analysis of the *Silence of the Dead*, the *Dungeons* and *Thirteen Apple Trees* does not only reveal trauma, but also of the collective neuroses that arise from them.

The three performances analysed in this chapter are unusual in Hungarian theatre practice, as it is rare for a director, an author or a company to take on a "hot" historical topic with a non-consensual politics of memory. It is therefore in this chapter that the relationship between historical staging and documents emerges most

strongly, and becomes apparent that dramaturgy is always at the same time interpretation.

István Örkény – István Nemeskürty – Zoltán Várkonyi: *Silence of The Dead (A holtak hallgatása)*, 1973

In several prose and two dramatic works, István Örkény took different approaches to the themes of the Don disaster and the following Soviet captivity. His work moved from a collective and realistic narrative to a more personal and more fictional formulation.

The *Silence of the Dead* seems to sum up the experience of the preceding works: it sought to combine the authenticity of the document with the power of theatrical representation. The play was preceded by István Nemeskürty's 1972 *Requiem for an Army*, a work of military history. Örkény fully adopted the book's (which became one of the historical bestsellers of its time) analysis of the fate of the Second Hungarian Army, so that the historical view of the *Silence of the Dead* is no longer valid.

The genre of documentary theatre has provided an opportunity to create a stage text that can contribute to the processing of the past within an artistic framing. Örkény also reinterpreted his own works, incorporating excerpts from other texts on the subject. The text, subtitled *Documents in 2 parts*, thus mixes real documents (letters, reports, speeches, newspaper articles), Nemeskürty's analytical passages, texts previously written by Örkény and treated as documents but whose status is in fact questionable, and literature. Considering the development of documentary theatre in the forty years since then, the *Silence of the Dead* can be seen as a historical drama that also uses documents, rather than as a text that gives a theatrical form to historically authentic documents.

The twelve actors of the Vígszínház relied on direct, personal communication without traditional roleplaying, a clear sign that the audience was not encountering fiction, but a staged adaptation of real historical events. This created the effect of what we might call, in Jan Assmann's terminology, 'living memory' or the experience of oral history, which is in all cases defined by the direct contact between the rememberer and the receiver and the transmission of personal experience.

The genre of documentary play was divisive. However, the different reactions varied only in their evaluation of the theatrical potential of the collage of texts, ignoring the problem of authenticity. Although the status of the *Silence of the Dead* as a

documentary play is dubious, its status as a history-processing stage work is clear: Örkény, well ahead of the historiographical trends of his time, also classified the narrative of personal memory as a document, thus placing his work in a position to enter into dialogue with historical memory.

János Térey – András Papp – Péter Gothár: *Dungeons (Kazamaták)*, 2006

In 2006, the 1956 anniversary context put a strain on the reception of the *Dungeons*: its chosen theme was seen by many as a site of memory for the 1956 revolution as a whole, and this is a misreading not only of the politics of memory but also of the dramatic text. The story of the October 30th raid of the Party Headquarter in Republic Square is a subversive micro-narrative within a memory discourse that still has no consensus version.

Three aspects are worth highlighting in the dramaturgical analysis of the *Dungeons*:

1. the topic of myth and legend
2. authorial and spectatorial perspective
3. mass dramaturgy.

The play continued the mythological world set in a contemporary milieu of *Paulus* and the *Nibelung Resort*, and the linguistic apparatus of verse, thus easily fitting into a Hungarian dramatic tradition marked by the names of Vörösmarty, Madách and Weöres. The dramaturgical decision that the *Dungeons* adapts a provocative event in relation to the conflicting main narratives about the revolution drew attention to the founding significance and the unfinished nature of the myth of 1956.

The alternation of outside and inside rhythmized the dramaturgy. The confrontation between the two antagonistic groups instead of a moralising didaxis (who is the hero? who is the guilty?), was presented as a static spatial position: the regime forces were prisoners of the HOUSE, the revolutionaries of the SQUARE. Mass dramaturgy should be examined together with the heterogeneity of the text. The play is a montage of different qualities, not only because it alternates between verse and prose, but also because it operates parallel intertexts. The ensemble of Katona József Theatre, which excels in psychological portrayal and chiselled character building, encountered a text with a dramaturgy not based on character development, a structure that does little to unravel the psychological background, and a story framed in crowd scenes - a play where everyone is a supporting character. This orchestral quality was able to make the intertextuality of the text work on stage.

The scenes that were strong, both in terms of acting and directing, were those that went beyond the mere staging of the text with some kind of performative gesture. Although these gestures pointed out that the performance was not a reenactment of a historical event, but a theatrical construction, in lack of a consistent language, they remained scattered theatrical ideas.

Albert Wass – Attila Vidnyánszky: *Thirteen Apple Trees (Tizenhárom almafa)*, 2020

The theatrical representation of Trianon was not only made necessary by the centenary year, but also by the ideological and cultural-political position of the National Theatre under the directorship of Attila Vidnyánszky. A commitment to national heroes, symbols and mythologies, a desire to build rather than deconstruct national consciousness, has shaped the theatre's repertoire in visible ways since 2013.

The plot of *Thirteen Apple Trees* is basically monotonous, despite the great historical mechanisms, because its central figure is meant to represent a specific and defined mentality, the "Székely", who does not change, even if the borders of the country are drawn across his own land. The performance tried to counteract this monotony with a heterogeneous, polyphonic dramaturgy. This resulted in a not always consistent use of time and space, and a structure that sometimes washed events into each other.

The *Thirteen Apple Trees* is linked to the tradition of anecdotal-satirical novels, to the tradition of Jókai and Mikszáth, but also to Jaroslav Hašek's *Švejk*. A characteristic - and surprising - feature of the original work is that Mózes Tánczos Csuda has no particular sympathy for Hungarians either, and would prefer to be left alone by those who come to Transylvania from Hungary. The focus of the performance on Trianon makes the question of identification somewhat confusing: in the first part, Mózi's Székely identity is offered as a model, and this viewpoint, which distances him from those in Hungary, is in tension with the clearly Hungarian-centred interpretation of Trianon in the second part, which idealises the historical role of Hungarians.

The portrayal of the Romanian and Jewish ethnic groups is narrowed down to a single character, a cliché. With the Jewish character, the staging sidesteps the issue of Wass' anti-Semitism, although at one point it is confusingly evoked in the form of a human-sized rat. (The rat in Wass' oeuvre is a clear reference to the infamous text, *The Conquest by the Rats - A Fable for Young Hungarians*.)

In the second part of the performance, Zoltán Rátóti, as Count Albert Apponyi, dominates the stage for forty minutes with a historic speech. A serious performance and an impressive gesture of directing, but the way in which it deals with the memory of the Treaty of Trianon is highly questionable, as the speech, left completely unreflected, gives a simplistic, idealising reading of the historical event, which makes Hungarians into victims only.

Summary

The seven case studies have resulted in seven micro-histories that do not claim that theatrical representations of historical events can be captured by a single narrative. I believe that the achievement of the research lies precisely in the diversity of approaches to history in the performances analysed, a diversity that is worth looking at from the perspective of theatre work.

Publications related to the topic of the dissertation

Book excerpts:

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