

University of Theater and Film Arts

Doctoral School

Alternatives of action

Political Puppet Theater in Hungary at the end of the '60s and in the '70s

Theses of Doctoral Dissertation

Réka Ágnes Tóth

2021

Supervisor:

Dr. Magdolna Jákfalvi

Regius professor

Current doctoral dissertation examines the genre of Hungarian political puppet theater through the performances of the Orfeo Puppet Ensemble, which started in the late sixties in Budapest. The statement, that Orfeo, which operated from 1969 to 1975, was an isolated example of Hungarian political puppet theater, is the central idea of the dissertation. This statement is founded on the multi-year research I did of the records of Orfeo's puppet performances, reconstructing them using the *Philther*-method. From the horizon of reconstructions, it was possible to examine the two decades after the socialization, in which several puppet ensembles operated parallel with the State Puppet Theater due to the work of the amateur puppet movement, although their performances received unfairly little attention.

The Orfeo Puppet Ensemble was named as an amateur puppet group, because it was formed by itself, they organized independently. Its operation can only be indirectly linked to the leaders of the amateur puppet movement through the creation of rehearsal rooms provided by houses of culture and opportunities for presentation at Hungarian and foreign puppet festivals. Orfeo's activities were dominated by the political ideology jointly developed and articulated by the creators, with which they reconsidered not only the puppet genre: they drew attention in parallel with their work and putting social reforms into practice and their puppet theater performances. Among the creators of the group, which includes several branches of art (in addition to the puppet, there were also fine arts, music and theater formations), we can typically list young, intellectual artists. Although they could not enter the Hungarian canon of theatrical forms as creators of the secondary publicity,¹ the representatives of the neo-avant-garde followed the work of the group from a fine art point of view, the theatrical creators reflected on it as a puppet theater group. The myth surrounding Orfeo is due to out-of-structure functioning, an externality that has been studied by social scientists and historians. However, the examination of Orfeo's performances from puppet aesthetic point of view has so far been carried out only incidentally or not at all. One of the goals of this dissertation is to attempt to fill this gap by approaching the lectures of the Orfeo group from the concepts of political puppet theater, thereby elevating them into the discourse of Hungarian puppet history.

István Malgot named Orfeo's joint puppet performances alternatives of action² - which is why

¹ Magdolna Jákfalvi: *Avant-garde-Theater-Politic*. Budapest, Balassi Kiadó, 2006. 186.

² István Nánay: The Orfeo-case (With the memoirs of Tamás Fodor and István Malgot). *Beszélő*, 1998/3. <http://beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/az-orfeo-ugy> Last time to download: 2020. 11. 22.

this term was chosen as the title of the dissertation, which marks the strong attachment of performances and creators to the socio-political background of the 1968 events. In the secondary publicity, Orfeo was apostrophized as an opposition group, although from their artistic program we see the operation of a company committed to socialist society, which wanted to be the part of the active political dialogue of the 1960s. „Understanding and changing the real world.”³ Symbolically and practically, this was also the aim of their theatrical and community functioning, as the performative statement of the action was not only found in their performances. They have, in fact, drawn attention to themselves with their statements about society, even with the redefined communal existence in which the categories of communion, co-creation and life are inextricably intertwined. Two houses were built together in Pilisborosjenő, these houses functioned not only as living spaces, but also as rehearsal and lecture halls when the members of the group were excluded from the community centers of Budapest. The seemingly compelling solution, however, was the same performative action as *Mr. Mockinpott's ordeals* or *The Prodigal Country*. We can find many personal memories of their coexistence, and several mosaic pieces can be inserted into their story, which can further nuance the image of the group. Throughout my research, however, the main focus was on the aesthetics of their puppet shows as well as the puppet theater operation of the group.

The relationship between puppetry and politics, like theater, is a *sui generis* relationship that is worth researching from the development of puppetry – this large-scale task cannot be undertaken by the present dissertation. As Eileen Blumenthal states, "Puppets are inveterate political animals⁴. [...] they can play on both sides of the fence."⁵ However, the concept of political puppet theater was also marginalized in the history of theater, similarly to the history of Hungarian puppetry. It's relationship with the current ruling system is easily read on one hand, but lurks beneath the surface on the other. As well as the events of the history of Hungarian puppetry, most of which can also be classified as unexplored and waiting to be summarized. One of the major turning points in this was the socialization of the 1950s, which

³ *The Puppet Theater of Uncle Cipolla*. 1973. Playbill. Source: OSA Archive.

⁴ The concept comes from Aristotle: “Politicians are those [animals] who have a work in common for all of them (ἐν τι καὶ κοινὸν γίνεται πάντων τὸ ἔργον). (Such joint work is not done by all animals in a flock.) Such is man, bee, wasp, ant, and crane.” In: Attila Simon: *Language, Communication, Community and Politic in Aristotle*. In: Márton Miklós-Molnár Gábor- Tózsér János (szerk.): *Different Minds*. Budapest, L'Harmattan Kiadó, 2017. 27.

⁵ Eileen Blumenthal: *Puppetry and Puppets. An Illustrated World Survey*. Thames and Hudson, London. 2005. 163.

put puppetry at the service of Marxist-Leninist ideology⁶ by creating an institutional system with the professional and amateur categories. The centralization of puppetry has not only been accompanied by a change in the operational structure: measures have been taken during this period that have focused on the management of program policy and age group restrictions. Therefore, the performances of the State Puppet Theater operating in the institutional system must be examined from a different point of view than the work of the amateur puppet groups of the era.

We don't have summarizing studies which we could use as ready-made panels to define the genre of political puppet theater. Therefore, my dissertation tried to outline its definition with several theatrical and puppetry texts that first discuss the concepts of political theater: the politics of theater, the place of politics in performances, and the connections between politics and theater. The examination of the politics of puppet theater can be done primarily in the performances by analyzing the formal language, aesthetics and perception of the puppet. During the examination of the fine art representation and phenomenological features of the puppet, we can grasp concepts, like the tension of "double vision"⁷ or the visual application of the "double speak"⁸, a specific speech form of the state socialist era, through which politics can become transparent. In addition to the theoretical approach, the easiest way to explore the politics of puppetry is through historical examples from different eras. In the dissertation, the changing and varied relationship between politics and puppetry is presented with many historical examples, this correlation can be established through genres and creators, in which the cantastoria, puppetry, cabaret and object play meet on the horizon of a common reading. In examining the politics of puppetry, we have to clarify the theses and concepts highlighted over and over again when discussing examples from performance reconstructions, as we are confronted with terms that have not been incorporated into puppet theater discourse. With their analysis, the tools of the Hungarian political puppet theater become clear.

With the help of these, we examine the operation of the Orfeo puppet ensemble through performance reconstructions, presenting the seven performances in chronological order that

⁶ Henryk Jurkowski: *Aspects of Puppet Theater*. Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 122.

⁷ Steve Tillis: *Towards an Aesthetics of the Puppet*. Master Thesis. San Jose State University 1990.

https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1024&context=etd_theses 126. Last time to download: 2021. 03. 16

⁸ Magdolna Jákfalvi: *Double speak-Straigh understanding*. In: Kisantal Tamás-Menyhért Anna (szerk.): *Art and power. The art of the Kádár-Era*. Budapest, L'Harmattan-József Attila Kör, 2005. 95.

were performed by them as an amateur ensemble from 1969-1975. By juxtaposing the reconstructions, the dissertation undertakes to write the history of the group. The main goal of my dissertation is to present an alternative puppet history in which these theatrical experiments of the periphery can have a permanent place.