

University of Theatre and Film Arts
Doctoral School

**Traditions at the University of Theatre and Film Arts –
From Nationalisation to the End of State Socialism**

Theses of Doctoral Dissertation

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The topic of my dissertation is the State Socialist period of the University of Theatre and Film Arts and its collective memory. This was the time period when the operational framework of the institution was defined by the Sovietization of the theatre arts, the adapting of Marxist-Leninist ideology, the administrative operation of the Party, and the spy network of State Security. I designated the time limit of my research from nationalisation until the end of State Socialism in Hungary: after 1945 the institution went through multiple changes, with the nationalisation of 1949 later defining the ideological and aesthetic framework of the process. The political and historical moment of the “rendszer váltás” (the change of political system in 1989) structured the investigation as the end of State Socialism in Hungary, while the topics discussed mainly pertain to the fifties and sixties. I go into further detail about case studies dealing with the College (today University) as a place of memory, about local traditions, about the connection between art education and the State, and various instructors’ and students’ interpretations of this period. The narrative of the dissertation offers an institutional history interpretation based on these case studies.

Two prior publications made attempts to investigate the institutional history of SZFE (Színház- és Filmművészeti Egyetem or University of Theatre and Film Arts) in a comprehensive way, and both came about at the behest of the institution itself – which shows us from what kind of historical viewpoint its leadership desired to define the College/University at the time. Ilona Csillag reorganized the institution’s own memory via a short historical summary, an “enumeration” of students and instructors, and a collection of subjective anecdotes of one-time educators in her centennial publication¹ from 1964 titled *A százéves színésziskola* (The Hundred-Year-Old Actor’s School), while István Nánay took the overall stance of a historian, recreating the past of SZFE as a historic narrative in his *Tanodától – egyetemig. Az intézményes magyar színház- és filmművészképzés száznegyven éve* (From School to University. The Hundred and Forty Years of Institutional Hungarian Theatre and Film Training), published in 2005.² Nánay also pointed to the fact that working out a uniform research method was made impossible by the oftentimes chaotic conditions under which the institution operated, by its incomplete documentation, the personal nature of the sources,³ and that this is all connected to the way SZFE functioned based on oral traditions. The institution’s reputation depended on the

¹ Ilona Csillag (ed.): *A százéves színésziskola*. Budapest, Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1964.

² István Nánay: *Tanodától – egyetemig (Az intézményes magyar színház- és filmművészképzés száznegyven éve)*. Budapest, Színház- és Filmművészeti Egyetem, 2005.

³ István Nánay: Bevezető in: István Nánay: *Tanodától – egyetemig...* 9-14.

presence of great artists, though only few took to recording the actor's training program or their own methodology as a part of the institution's history. What we know of the courses we know mainly via witty anecdotes recorded and pieced together from subjective recollections. The "great artists" had an effect on their students not through concrete curricula but their human quality and personality. Instruction was based on anecdotes, which is why it is understandable that teachers and students alike constructed their own recollections via oral traditions.

The theoretical framework and methodology of the dissertation is defined by the interconnected nature of the narratives of memory politics and theatre history, while the specific case studies are based on recently discovered archival sources and oral histories that had not yet been recorded. During my research into the history of SZFE I did oral history interviews with prior students and processed archival materials about the College from the Historical Archives of State Security Services, the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute and the Theatre History Repository of the National Széchényi Library, and also began the work of contextualizing and writing the historic narrative of SZFE's own archival materials. Before my research no one had studied the SZFE Archives in a scientific manner – the name of the Archives did not even exist before. This is the first time its spaces (both orderly and disorderly), records, reports, letters, notes and leaflets come into scholarly focus, making their publication possible. The discovery and invention of the SZFE Archives strengthens both the history and traditions of the institution.

My research is about writing theatre history, complemented by comments based on my own methodology in creative-research praxis. The two practices – that of the researcher and of the artist – could have been kept separately from each other, but I was interested in the interactions between the two, like the writing techniques of intuition and fantasy that complement the history writer's work. What has disappeared or been destroyed – stories never recorded or never told by anyone – can only be imagined via the work of an artist. The search for contexts during the history-oriented processing of these materials motivated me to create my own theatre projects. I define my methodology along the lines of doing research, recording the process, followed by the practice of creating, and recording that process as well. In other words, besides writing chapters about institutional history I also write about my theatre work process in a scientific way: in the fourth and fifth chapters I used the methodology of *art as research* to focus on a few case studies about the collective memory of SZFE that reveal different aspects of the State Socialist power structure at the time. When writing about the interconnected topics of research and theatre creation I search for how I can have a dialogue between the two without

separating them, continuously going from one to the other, thus creating a narrative. In summary I organize the historical and artistic interpretation of the sources into a single text, and with one depending on the other I search for the language that makes the description of such a researcher's experience possible.

After analysing the connection between the College and the State, based on the sources available to me my thesis is that the artists' training at SZFE was protected from the direct, long-term control of the State (and Party) by the oral traditions of the institution, the tightly knit social network surrounding it, the way it was not documented (which in itself suggest a kind chaos), and its seemingly cluttered administrative and decision-making process.

The structure of the dissertation:

1. Introduction
2. The Adapting of Marxist-Leninist Ideology and the Manoeuvring of the College
3. The Founding of the Dramaturgy Department in the Years of Nationalisation
4. The *Közönséggyalázás* (Publikumsbeschimpfung) Scandal: The Place of the Interrupted Actor's Exam in the Canon of Theatre History
5. The Gaze of State Security and Theatre in Practice
6. Summary
7. Bibliography
8. Annexes

The Adapting of Marxist-Leninist Ideology and the Manoeuvring of the College

The 1949 period of theatre nationalisation brought about many changes at the College of Theatre and Film Arts. Government Decree no. 150/1948 gave the institution the College title in the 1947/1948 school year. The institution started using the building under Vas str. 2/d besides its Rákóczi Street property after receiving the management rights to it from the Keresztény Ifjúsági Egylet (Christian Youth's Association). The number of students rose, the critic-dramaturg department was founded "to fill the cadre shortage"⁴, and the number of instructors also rose. Appointed in 1948 succeeding Ferenc Hont, Lajos Bányai (the physical education teacher) lead the nationalisation effort, his main objective being the working out of

⁴ Endre Gellért: Művészeink a szocialista realizmus útján. in: Péter Molnár Gál (ed.): *Helyünk a deszkákon (Gellért Endre színházi írásai)*. Budapest, Népművelési Propaganda Iroda, 1981. 49.

the regular instructional framework of the institution. Ilona Csillag pointed out the fact that the students had difficulty in accepting the pedagogic principle of the new system⁵, and the wording of Endre Gellért leads us to believe that the instructors were of the same view.⁶ As per Ilona Csillag we can interpret the opposition to this regular instruction framework stemming both from the viewpoints of the theatre and film traditions prior to 1945, and also from the fear of both students and teachers that besides educational goals it would aid the State in supervising the work done at the College in a more direct way. When reading the materials at the SZFE Archives or listening to oral history statements, it becomes clear that the leadership and the teaching staff of the institution used the techniques of circumvention and obfuscation to combat the pressure exerted upon the College by the State.

As a consequence of nationalisation the newly founded Hungarian theatre companies needed many more actors, while film production needed many new professional filmmakers. After 1945 it became easier to gain entrance to the College not only for previously oppressed social classes, but for a larger number of people overall. To the outside world the institution emphasized the appearance of students of worker and lower-class peasant background, which became a criterion during the admission process. They wanted to create a new, more inclusive College, but per the principle of the majority they started reorganizing the inner social network of the institution as well by repressing the bourgeoisie. In the later years, after the political pressure lessened, so did the frequency of political assessments and the weight given to them in the student files, and after a time the criteria based on social background was taken less seriously: multiple sources point to the fact that in the following years the proportion of students with worker or peasant class backgrounds became smaller at the College.

During the period of nationalisation the College took a variety of measures that led to a wider array of financial and educational opportunities for students admitted to the institution. The Árpád Horváth Actor's Dorms were opened thanks to celebrated actress Hilda Gobbi's idea and mediation and made it possible for students from rural areas and of less financial means to find accommodation in the capital. A record from which the political affiliations of the dorm students might be deduced is dated 9 February 1948 – it is a conference draft⁷ written by the leadership of the Árpád Horváth Dorms that asked the Party for aid in implementing their plans. Many other provisions helped the social and financial situation of the students: the lowering of

⁵ Csillag, 50.

⁶ Endre Gellért: A színészutánpótlás kérdése. in: Péter Molnár Gál (ed.): *Helyünk a deszkákon...* 59.

⁷ A Színművészeti Főiskola konferenciája – Horváth Árpád Kollégium tervezete 1948. febr. 9. OSZMI 2010.94.1.

tuition fees and the expansion of scholarship opportunities, operation of the College's own cafeteria, and providing medical care and sport opportunities to the students. Extracurricular learning and acquisition of knowledge was helped by the expansion of the institution's library, with season tickets and free cinema and theatre visits also being provided to the students. These were the years when employment of students after finishing the College became assured, because "with the aid of the Ministry of Folk Cultivation not a single student went without a signed contract."⁸

During the years of State Socialism the teaching of Marxism and Leninism was present at the College of Theatre and Film Arts just like at other universities, and was clearly agitation at work in the institution, combating hostile views that may have affected the students. The syllabus of the Marxism-Leninism course made it clear that the goal of instruction was to form how reality is depicted in art: "Only a Marxist-Leninist artist is capable of portraying reality with deep knowledge of the ideology, in a versatile and artistically perfected way. The education of Marxism and Leninism at the College aims to facilitate this – along with the other subjects."⁹

During the events of October 1956 many of the students stood up for the uprising's revolutionary principles¹⁰, which is why during the later restoration State Security tried to gain control over the internal operation of the institution: they recruited two students (István Szabó under the name "Endre Képesi", Zsolt Kézdi-Kovács under the name "Tibor Lévai") and the head teacher (Félix Máriássy under the name "Jenei") of the film director's class of 1956-1960 as agents, who all reported on the 1956 "counter-revolutionary" activities and subsequent solidified political stances of the students and teachers. Still, when reading these agent reports, besides the expected sense of fear and suspicion, signs of wilfulness and sloppiness are also revealed again and again. The founding and later activities of KISZ (Magyar Kommunista Ifjúsági Szövetség or Hungarian Young Communist League) at the College after 1956 are also a testament to this. During its thirty-two-year operation KISZ regularly organised external performances for College students (assisting their appearance outside of the institution), but other events and excursions as well, also publishing the College magazine, *Sirály* (Seagull) – this is important because due to these activities the role of KISZ can be examined not only from a political, but from a professional and community viewpoint as well.

⁸ Zoltán Sándor: *Múlt és jelen*. in: *Értesítő*. 1955. 12.

⁹ *A Színház- és Filmművészeti Főiskola színész-főtantervétől a tanterv felosztása és programja*. 1966. 93.

¹⁰ Zsolt Kézdi-Kovács's 2002 documentary *Az a nap a miénk* (That Day is Ours) deals with the events at the College in 1956.

The Founding of the Dramaturgy Department in the Years of Nationalisation

After 1945 the rebuilt and Sovietized Hungarian theatre arts needed new stories which staged Socialist topics and portrayed the worker and peasant classes in a way that helped the new audience identify with them. During the years of nationalisation the goal of writing a new type Hungarian play gained great emphasis on various professional theatre forums and was supported by Party directives as well. The ideological need for new plays immediately drew attention – perhaps for the first time in the Hungarian theatre tradition – to the importance of the dramaturg. The growing workload made an increase in employment and education of dramaturgs necessary. Dramaturg training at the College was started in 1951 by a playwright who had been in prolonged emigration and had achieved success abroad: Gyula Háy came from Moscow and immediately became the theatre engine of the writer's community that was rebuilding itself, also becoming the promoter of a Hungarian dramaturgical practice that was committed to Socialist-Realism.

Háy's activities in forming professional policy greatly aided the disciplinary legitimacy of the dramaturg profession. All elements of Háy's approach to theatre were organically connected to his Marxist worldview, his theoretical work was defined by an idealistic approach to the role of the artist and the belief that the power of a writer's creativity could change society. Aesthetic and political aspects were part of an inseparable whole in his statements. Háy defined the realist tradition, more precisely socialist realism as the only possible route for a playwright. A written example of his work as an instructor is *Dramaturgia*, which is made up of his notes from the College lectures he gave to students of set and costume design during two semesters in the 1950/1951 school year, while his studies published in the press in my view are also connected to his work as a teacher – by analysing them I present Háy's thinking as a theatre maker.

The first break in Gyula Háy's new Hungarian career was when his theoretical works were publicly attacked for their aristocratism and Háy's method of hero analysis – the practice of Socialist-Realist reality building is clearly present in the professional discussions.¹¹ During Háy's later career an inner struggle between his loyalty to the Party and his own professional principles is obvious, with the latter prevailing in the end. In the foreword of his 1953 book titled *A magyar dramaturgia haladó hagyományai* (The Progressive Traditions of Hungarian Dramaturgy) he associated concrete ideological functions with the work of the dramaturg: Háy

¹¹ „Instead of the perception of reality, the building of reality becomes a process of ideology and performative language, with theatre becoming a political training ground.” Magdolna Jákfalvi, *A valóság szenvedélye*. DSc-treatise (Budapest, 2019) 5.

indicated that the most important task of the dramaturg is facilitating compliance with political directives.¹² Among SZFE alumni he was not remembered as someone who took Party directives too seriously – according to his student, Zsuzsa Bíró, the College was a protected space.¹³ Reading the teachers’ assessments in the SZFE Archives it is conspicuous how Háy only wrote about his students from a strictly professional point of view: there are no signs of detailed political characterisation or mentions of them belonging to one social class or another. On 23 October 1956 Gyula Háy marched in the crowd along with his College students. After his incarceration, later defection and emigration his memory was kept alive mainly by his students. His work was blocked in Hungary for decades due to his activities during the uprising of 1956, and after the end of State Socialism his writings and analyses became difficult to examine separately from their Marxist-Leninist foundations – this is why Háy’s name and work have been all but erased from Hungarian theatre history and memory. By rereading Háy’s pedagogic works I attempt to not only find a place for his writer’s oeuvre in the Hungarian theatre canon, but to make visible an important chapter in the history of the dramaturg profession in Hungary.

The *Közönséggyalázás (Publikumsbeschimpfung)* Scandal: The Place of the Interrupted Actor’s Exam in the Canon of Theatre History

The period of State Socialism at SZFE is an inexhaustible source of legends, gossip, matters redacted and covered up, stories undocumented. Of these one event has pride of place in collective memory: the notorious and scandalous exam performance of Peter Handke’s *Közönséggyalázás (Publikumsbeschimpfung)*, directed by András Békés in the 1969/1970 school year. The different witnesses contradict each other in their recollections of the performance. The exam was not open to the public, was interrupted and destroyed as a product: no documentation (video, photo, review or playbill) survived, and but for a few exceptions no contemporaries recorded their experiences, which is why what happened can only be reconstructed from oral histories and memories recorded forty-five years later. In my dissertation I define this legendary actor’s exam as a theatre performance, and following Philther’s methodology¹⁴ I analyze it as András Békés’s direction, part of a theatre historical process, while I also present the completion of my own theatre production *Miközben ezt a címet*

¹² Gyula Háy: Előszó. in: Ilona Csillag – Géza Hegedüs (ed.): *A magyar dramaturgia haladó hagyományai*. Budapest, Művelt Nép Könyvkiadó, 1953. 7.

¹³ Oral history interview with Zsuzsa Bíró. Made by Kelemen Kristóf, 2019.04.26., Budapest

¹⁴ For more about the Philther methodology: Magdolna Jákfalvi (ed.): *A 20. századi magyar színháztörténeti kánon alakulása*. Budapest, Balassi Kiadó – Színház- és Filmművészeti Egyetem, 2011.

*olvassák, mi magukról beszélünk*¹⁵ (While You Are Reading This Title We Are Talking About You), which was created based upon my research, and also aided the canonization of the Handke-performance. I also thematize a possible function and historical use for oral history as source material.

The Gaze of State Security and Theatre in Practice

As a part of my doctoral research I processed agent reports connected to the history of SZFE at the Historical Archives of State Security Services (ÁBTL). As an archive surrounded by secrets kept from the public eye ÁBTL brought the examining gaze of the secret police of the time into my research. I looked into the documents not for information about the agents themselves, but from the point of view of the College's history, and – just as in the case of the SZFE Archives where the texts and leaflets survived seemingly randomly – I was again and again confronted with the fact that the precise context of the texts were obscure or completely invisible, which is why I treated the information and stories in the reports as *artefacts*, organizing them into a new narrative. Using the method of *art as research* I selected and processed the documentation of a single concrete case pertaining to the College from the ÁBTL files, that is I created a theatre performance titled *Megfigyelők*¹⁶ (Observers). In *Megfigyelők* I placed the documents into a fictional framework – because the lack of context made the information within them resemble fiction more than fact – and via stage dialogue I formed them into a dramatic story, again and again referring both to the fact that the reality behind the reports was inaccessible, and to the function of *document as monument*. During the project I looked for research-based and creative strategies that would allow me to free myself from rereading the state security documents within their own power structure. In this chapter I go into detail about how the performance was realized, continuously placing the ÁBTL documents, my drama adaptation and the staged performance next to each other – in other words I present how the reports became theatre scenes.

In the 1965/1966 school year a British citizen of Hungarian descent was a guest student in János Herskó's second-year film director's class. He immediately aroused the interest of the Hungarian state security services, who had started paying attention to him back when he first applied for his trip in London, and who suspected that the guest student will be spying for

¹⁵ *Miközben ezt a címet olvassák, mi magukról beszélünk*. Premier: 2016.03.19., Trafó House of Contemporary Arts. <https://trafo.hu/programok/3-mikozben> Last checked: 2021.10.16.

¹⁶ *Megfigyelők*. Premier: 2018.11.24., Trafó House of Contemporary Arts. <https://trafo.hu/programok/megfigyelok> Last checked: 2019.07.05.

English intelligence service in Hungary. This is the reason why they observed him on many channels, mainly through one of his classmates, who they first questioned as a social contact, then recruited on 15 April 1966¹⁷ and later continued to employ as an agent. By observing the operative work (both as organizer and archiver) of the State Security officer in charge of the concrete case files I realized that the epic-style, multiple hundreds of pages long collection of texts is ideal source material for theatre. This realization (which somewhat resembled theatrical thinking) stemmed from how the work of the officer mentioned reminded me of the work done by a writer and a director: specifically, when he instructed agents to create certain situations per the rules of operative work, then recorded their outcome afterwards. After reading the academic doctoral thesis¹⁸ of Magdolna Jákfalvi the resemblance between the work done by a holding officer and the Socialist-Realist theatre tradition became apparent to me: even though State Security wanted to perceive reality, it frequently organized its own praxis along the lines of building it.

Publications, Conference Presentations and Artworks Related to the Topic of the Dissertation

Publications:

Actor Training at the University of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest (transl.: Panna Adorjáni), *howlround.com*, 4 April 2017.

Ádám Ottó kivonulása a *Közönséggyalázásról* – az Oral History és a Színházi Főtanszak értekezletének jegyzőkönyve alapján, *Symbolon*, XVIII. special edition, 2017. 121-128.

Ez nem hadgyakorlat. Egy kooperatív módszerű színházi munkafolyamat in: Kornélia Deres, Noémi Herczog (ed.): *Színház és társadalom*, JAK-Prae, Budapest, 2018. 213-226.

Színháztörténeti kutatások. A KISZ megalakulása és működése a Színház- és Filmművészeti Főiskolán, *szinhaztortenet.hu* (PIM-OSZMI), 2018.

Kellemetlen kérdések (Gianina Cărbunariu *Artists Talk* című előadásáról Kelemen Kristóf és Gáspár Ildikó levelezése), *Színház*, 2018/4. 69-72.

A BM tekintete és a hiányzó történetek, *Theatron*, XIV/1. (Spring 2020), 24-42.

¹⁷ ÁBTL Bt-882 29.

¹⁸ Jákfalvi, 5.

Dramaturgia az államosítás éveiben. Háy Gyula in: Jákfalvi Magdolna, Kékesi Kun Árpád, Kiss Gabriella, Ring Orsolya (ed.): *Újjáépítés és államosítás (Tanulmánykötet a kultúra államosításának kezdeti éveiről)*, Arktisz-TMA, Budapest, 2020. 21-50.

A KISZ megalakulása és működése a Színház- és Filmművészeti Főiskolán. *Theatron*, XIV/4. (Winter 2020), 17-25.

A marxista-leninista ideológia gyakorlata a Színház- és Filmművészeti Főiskolán, *Theatron*, XV/2. (Summer 2021), 42-61.

Conference Presentations:

Philther-konferencia, Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA), Budapest, 19 June 2017.

Újjáépítés és államosítás, Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA), Budapest, 3 December 2018.

Theatrical Works:

Miközben ezt a címet olvassák, mi magukról beszélünk. Premier: 2016.03.19., Trafó House of Contemporary Arts, Budapest, Hungary

Magyar akác. Premier: 24 May 2017., Trafó House of Contemporary Arts, Budapest, Hungary

Megfigyelők. Premier: 24 November 2018., Trafó House of Contemporary Arts, Budapest, Hungary