

The Doctoral School of the University of Theatre and  
Film Arts

**Minority (theatre) language –  
minority theatre (policies)**

*The Grange Theatre (Tanyaszínház) of  
Vojvodina as a cultural model*

Theses of doctoral dissertation

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The history of theatre in Hungarian language in Vojvodina is the history of the identity of Hungarians in Vojvodina. The development of professional dramatics in the province is inseparable from the post-World War II history of this multinational, multicultural region.

The backbone of my research is the travelling theatre of Vojvodina, the Grange Theatre (*Tanyaszínház*) which was founded in 1978, the analysis of its activities, its position in social and theatre culture context in the more than four decades of its existence in extremely different political periods. The examination of the plays performed by the troupe – and in parallel, of the performances of permanent theatres in Hungarian language – is justified whereas, in addition to the relationship of the Hungarians in Vojvodina with the majority, they also revealed a number of other problems and social experiences affecting the community, which were thematized not as a historical fact but as an everyday reality. My primary examination aspect is the form in which Erika Fisher-Lichte-like prism characteristic appears and how it comes into being. According to Fischer-Lichte, the theatre collects the problems appearing in cultural activities like a prism and

then it reflects the concentrated beam toward the community resulting in making such problems visible which are not discursive elements of social sciences.<sup>1</sup>

I do not consider the history of the Grange Theatre and the Hungarian theatre in Vojvodina after the Second World War a closed unit, nor can I consider it to be closed. Instead of offering a purely descriptive approach, my intention is to search for connections in the examination of selected productions, starting from the current activities of the region's theatres, closely linking historical and theoretical analyses. I reconstruct the analysed productions using stageplays, remaining photographs, news reports, video recordings, contemporary reviews and recollections of the participants, keeping in mind the analytical aspects of the Philther method.<sup>2</sup> Of course, the reconstruction faces many difficulties in an area as poorly documented as the history of Hungarian theatre in Yugoslavia. The archives of the minority professional

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<sup>1</sup> Fischer-Lichte, Erika: A színház mint kulturális modell. (trans. Meszlényi Gyöngyi), *Theatron* 1999/3. 71.

<sup>2</sup> see Jákfalvi Magdolna: A színházi előadás fogalma a digitális média korában. *Theatron*, 2014/1. 23–28.

theatres in Vojvodina are extremely incomplete. The stageplays of the early years were lost, a significant part of the photographs of the performances remained in the private archives or legacies of photographers, and although the staff of the Hungarian broadcasting of the Novi Sad-based public service television recorded a large number of performances in the 1970s and 1980s, as far as we know, those recordings were destroyed when a bomb hit the provincial television headquarters building during the 1999 NATO intervention. In fact, systematic self-documentation has only become an institutional practice in Hungarian theatres in Vojvodina in the last two decades, but this is not the case with the Grange Theatre. The search for primary sources thus poses serious challenges to the researcher, who is forced to read the past through the descriptions and judgments of contemporary critics, creators and viewers. The authors of the volumes published about the Hungarian theatres in Vojvodina are primarily interested in the history of the institutions, they hardly deal with the placement of certain performances into a social and historical context. A single monography was published about the Grange Theatre so far by Ágnes

Czérna in 2009, nevertheless, it served as a rich basis for my research. It outlines not only the professional theatre in Vojvodina, but also the diverse trends in the history of formation of the Hungarian identity in Vojvodina in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, while seeking answers to the question of how the ever-changing self-definitions of the minority can be brought to the fore.

The first chapter of the dissertation, named *Identity policy lexicon, explanations of terms*, contains articles that attempt to introduce the reader to the twentieth and twenty-first century history of the identity constructions of the Hungarians of Vojvodina (Yugoslavia, Serbia, “*Délvidék*”), which exist in both Yugoslavian and Hungarian cultural space through the description of political and historical concepts and phenomena. A glossary such as this cannot, naturally, strive for completeness, but by listing the most important political factors, social phenomena and processes influencing the self-determination of a minority in alphabetical order, it can help to place theatrical historical events in the historical coordinate system of changing systems and ideologies.

The first part of the second chapter called *Dramatic institutions in Vojvodina after 1945* deals with the beginnings of professional acting in Hungarian language in Yugoslavia, and it analyses the highly contradictory period following the World War II when a part of the Hungarian population, previously branded a fascist or fascist sympathizer, becomes a victim of the cruel retaliation carried out by the partisans, and while there are still concentration and penitentiary camps in the province, Yugoslavian cultural policy aims to contribute to the ideological re-education of the minority population by opening a national Hungarian language theatre. The first professional Hungarian company in Vojvodina, consisting mostly of amateur actors in their twenties, as the company of the *Magyar Népszínház* (the latter *Népszínház*) starts its work in Subotica. The performance of Béla Balázs's partisan drama *Boszorkánytánc* – which has been lost ever since – on 20 October 1945 is marked as the beginning of institutionalized minority Hungarian-language dramatics in Yugoslavia.

The centre of the second part of the second chapter is the start of institutionalized actor training in Hungarian

in Yugoslavia. The establishment of the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad also served cultural policy purposes. Primarily, it was meant to ensure the supply of artists from the nationalities of Vojvodina. Although most of the minority students study in the state language together with the native Serbian language acting class, their craft exams are, of course, conducted in Hungarian. The subchapter covers the subjects and curriculum, the composition of the teaching staff, as well as the issues of scholarship and subsequent employment. Apart from that, several paragraphs are devoted to the description of the cultural life of Novi Sad in the mid-1970s.

The next content unit of the dissertation deals with the Grange Theatre as a movement, and it closely follows the previous chapter from a chronological point of view, as the founders of the travelling company also include the new professional acting graduates. The first subchapter positions the Grange Theatre among the Hungarian professional permanent theatres in Vojvodina, some of which are still active, some operating only for a short time in the 1950s, from an institutional, formal and program policy points of view.

The central question in the second subchapter is how a minority community can define itself through dramatics. In case of examination of theatres operating outside structure, an important consideration is whether they reconstruct the ideology running the traditional theatres in the region without reflection, or they are critical of it. According to Nikolaus Müller-Schöll, various modes of playing and functioning appearing on the contemporary theatre stage can no longer be properly described in terms of the dividing line between the traditional, permanent and the independent theatre, but through the he contrast between “the theatrical practice of adopting a given framework for a performance and the practice which shows the framework in the usual theatre, dance, performance and art spaces, and utilising the usual forms, as well as the policies of the institutions and the ideology embedded in them.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is important to emphasize that the performances of the Grange Theatre which often reflect on the mechanisms of state power are

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<sup>3</sup> Nikolaus Müller-Schöll: Színház magán kívül. in: Czirák Ádám (edit.): *Kortárs táncművészetek*. Budapest, Kijarat Kiadó, 2013. 221–237. 222.



almost always and everywhere “sold out”, and over the years they have not only thematized the complex process of self-identification of the Hungarian minority, but have also participated in it. In the course of performance analyses, it is worthwhile to approach them from three separate aspects, but not independently from each other. (1) On the one hand, it cannot be ignored that the performances are aesthetically distinct from the productions of the resident Hungarian and Serbian-language theatres in Vojvodina, although their actors often come from those companies. And that does not just mean that outdoor performances legitimately require much wider gestures or increased volume from the actor. As a result of the form languages of great personalities who emerge from time to time, a special image of the theatre was formed and developed through the types of plays, the pieces performed and the playing style during the alternation of successive ensembles. (2) On the other hand, the *ars poetica* of the Grange Theatre (if it had not been formulated in the 1970s) could be considered a kind of TIE (theatre in education), as their performances – although they never reach the level of participation typical of the

applied theatrical forms – like theatre in education sessions “deal with moral, moral, micro- and macro-social issues”, and its goal is to “develop a common frame of thought concerning a consciously selected problem, and a problem in focus, which allows those involved in the process [...] to define their personal attitudes toward the problem to be investigated.”<sup>4</sup> (3) Furthermore, since „the unreflected certainty and security in which they experience being spectators as an unproblematic social behaviour,”<sup>5</sup> an examination of theatre policies is inevitable, all the more so since the company was formed in 1978 in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, experienced the final collapse of the Tito regime (1989), the disintegration of Yugoslavia (1991-1999), the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, the overthrow of the Milošević regime (2000) and remained active until present time. And through all that, it did not stop its activities until the summer of 2021 – with the exception of 2020. My thesis presupposes that the reason for this is that the

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<sup>4</sup> Takács Gábor: Padlíváza a színpadon. *Színház*, 2009/2. 42–49. 42.

<sup>5</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann: *Posztdramatikus színház*. (trans. Berecz Zsuzsa et alii), Budapest, Balassi. 2009. 121.

creators of performances that focus on the national identification of the eclectically changing community(ies) in the context of the eclectically changing circumstances - as members of the community - legitimately had to redefine themselves again and again.

The performances of the Grange Theatre can be considered as *aesthetic dramas* (in the sense Victor Turner defines them), which are able to model the *social dramas* of the social changes in Vojvodina - which exponentially affected the minority Hungarians – that came to pass since 1978 to present day. According to Turner, these two “drama types” interact: if there is a change in one, it will be demonstrable in the other, moreover, theatrical activity can be interpreted as a community act.<sup>6</sup> Thus, during the examination of the performances, the momentary social changes and problems that have influenced (and are influencing) the identification of the Hungarians living in Vojvodina in more than the last four decades can be outlined.

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<sup>6</sup> Victor Turner: *On the Edge of the Bush*. Tucson, University of Arizona Press. 1985. 300.

In the last part of the chapter on the Grange Theatre as a movement, I examine the first five seasons of the company's experimentation in order to find form and its program policy. Although the first five years of Grange Theatre's work cannot be considered a closed period, the analysis of the performances presented from 1978 to 1982 points to the most striking features of a constantly evolving theatrical language, which, with a few exceptions, still defines the company's productions. On the one hand, outdoor playing conditions require performers to replace the psychological and realistic tools of the gesture system used in non-traveling, traditional theatres with slightly wider, more powerful - sometimes quite caricatured - facial expressions and movements without sound, which are accompanied by an increase in the volume of speech in the performances as the prose passages are still spoken without the help of sound system. On the other hand, since a significant portion of the audience watches the performances standing up, they rarely last longer than 70-75 minutes. In addition to the essential abbreviations, the texts are often characterized by localization, thanks to which the stories acquire special

local colours, and the characters placed in Vojvodina are given Hungarian (or sometimes Serbian) names. Like in the Elizabethan dramas, the Grange Theatre's performances feature character comics, chunky, obscene humour and elevated thought content, which is why the productions are often made up of loosely intertwined etudes, usually connected by musical inserts. Also, they very often use the opportunities offered by metaphorical and allegorical wording, so non-localized stories also respond directly to current social and political events for the Hungarian community in Vojvodina.

The final chapter of the dissertation contains nine case studies from different periods of minority politics in the last forty years. Five of the reconstructed plays were performed by the Grange Theatre, while four were staged in the Hungarian-language permanent theatres of Vojvodina during the same period. Each production sets the stage for minority self-definition while responding to contemporary social problems. The last analysis confers the extremely significant 2021 production of the Grange Theatre's *Kazimír és Karolina*, thus symbolically concluding the research in the present day.

## **Publications related to the topic of the dissertation:**

Oláh, Tamás: "Magyar a magyar ellen". Ödön von Horváth–Lénárd Róbert: Kazimír és Karolina (r.: Lénárd Róbert, Tanyaszínház, 2021). *Híd*, 2022/1. 73–87.

Oláh, Tamás: „A мүrcүs az enyim!“. Lénárd Róbert: „Pajzán históriák” (Tanyaszínház, 2014), *Symbolon*, 2021/special. 95–103.

Oláh, Tamás: Undorító tavasz: A Zitzer Szellemi Köztársaság és a polgári ellenállás performatív aktusai. *Theatron*, 2021/2. 62–76.

Oláh, Tamás: Drogszeánszok és lovasparádé. Vicsek Károly: A zöld hajú lány (Népszínház, Szabadka), 1981. *Theatron*, 2020/2. 19–26.

Oláh, Tamás: „Eljutunk még Shakespeare-ig!“. A Tanyaszínház első öt évadának színházi formakereséséről (1978–1982). *Híd*, 2019/8. 100–110.

Oláh, Tamás: A vajdasági Tanyaszínház mint kulturális modell. Bevezető egy kutatás elé, *Symbolon*, 2017/special. 181–186.