

University of Theater and Film Arts
Doctoral School

The Data Miners' Honor
Early experiments of theatrical Sovietization in Budapest, 1948-1955

Thesis of Doctoral Dissertation

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The thesis aims to present how Sovietization was implemented in the prose theatres of Budapest between 1948 and 1955.

To answer this question, in addition to overviewing the literature, I reconstructed and analyzed the following five performances according to the Philther methodology:

1. Tamás Major: *The Miser*, Budapesti Nemzeti Színház (National Theater of Budapest), 1948
2. Kálmán Nádasdy: *Othello*, Budapesti Nemzeti Színház (National Theater of Budapest), 1949
3. Zsuzsa Simon: *Heroes of Everyday Life*, Belvárosi Színház (City Theater), 1949
4. Aleksandr Sokolov: *The Breakup*, Magyar Néphadsereg Színháza (Hungarian People's Army Theater), 1953
5. Endre Gellért – Tamás Major – Endre Marton: *The Tragedy of Man*, Budapesti Nemzeti Színház (National Theater of Budapest), 1955

The analyses exemplify various aspects of the theatrical Sovietization, and at the same time typify the performances of the era. First, in connection with *The Miser* by Molière I examined the role of the performance as an electoral campaign, i.e. **the Sovietization of the spectators**. Secondly, I examined the socialist realist reading and interpretation of Shakespeare in the production of *Othello* and its directives on its theatrical realizations, i.e. **the Sovietization of interpretation**. Thirdly, in the analysis of *The Heroes of Everyday Life* by Éva Mándi, I explored the peculiarities of the new Hungarian schematic drama, i.e. **the Sovietization of the drama**. Fourthly, in the case of *The Breakup* I presented the results of par excellence Sovietization, the results of the Soviet director's cooperation with the Budapest-based company for the first time, i.e. **the Sovietization of the company**. And finally, analyzing the performance of *The Tragedy of Man* by Imre I explored the **possibility of synthesizing Sovietized and Hungarian bourgeois theater traditions**.

Taking into account the epistemological and methodological characteristics of theater history - theater performances have only traces due to their existence, and in most cases we can only work with indirect sources - due to the propagandistic, politicized nature of the texts in the Rákosi era, source criticism becomes a key. Therefore, **in addition to analyzing the performances, I carried out the reconstruction of the acting game on the basis of films,**

and I included contemporary American reports related to Hungarian theater in the study.¹

During Sovietization, following Soviet model socialist realism became the exclusive norm in the field of art. Although the Hungarian state socialist way of speaking made socialist realism seem to be an exclusive and well-defined principle or even a style, the definition of the concept was fundamentally missing. Socialist realism can be interpreted as a political concept, the plasticity of which was at the service of the daily interests of power both in the Soviet Union and in the satellite states. Although based on our historical knowledge and the criteria for narrative, we think of the year 1949 as an epochal boundary: the introduction of Sovietization and socialist realism could not happen with the thoroughness, efficiency, and speed as the leaders of cultural policy would have liked, and as posterity is trying to reconstruct it. The introduction and copying of the Soviet system were not carried out on the basis of ready-made scenarios but were formed by heterogeneous, contentious, and competing parties throughout the cultural policy of the time,² as well as in the particular policies and the artistic branches controlled by them. **Following the Soviet pattern was characterized by contingency and lack of clarity, which often confused artistic, personal, aesthetic values and interests.**³

I put the three performances of the classical cycle of Tamás Major (and the National Theater of Budapest) into the focus of the investigation. Tamás Major, the director of the National Theater, played a prominent role in Hungarian theater policy, who was regarded by the power as a guarantee of theatrical Sovietization.⁴ I chose Classics, which were often staged before and after my research period so that with the help of comparative methods the characteristics of the performances became more visible. I analyzed the electoral comedy of *The Miser* of 1948, and *Othello* from 1949, in which Major's Jago performance became legendary, and the *The tragedy of Man* from 1955. Major, agitating for the Népfront (People's Patriotic Front: It was an electoral alliance that prepared for the total takeover by the Communist Party) in 1949, became a quasi-oppositionary by 1955. The three performances he directed and played,

¹ I published this researchable collection, titled *Cold War Theatre Collection* on the following website: <https://theatre.osaarchivum.org/>

² Scheibner Tamás: A magyar irodalomtudomány szovjetizálása. A szocialista realista kritika és intézményei (Scheibner, Tamás: The Sovietization of Hungarian Literary Studies. The Socialist Realist Critique and Its Institutions.) 1945–1953. Budapest, Ráció, 2014. 19

³ Scheibner i.m. 44.

⁴ Korossy Zsuzsa: Korossy Zsuzsa: Színházirányítás a Rákosi-korszak első felében (Theatre management in the first half of the Rákosi era), in: Gajdó Tamás (szerk.): Színház és politika, Budapest, Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet, 2007, 45-139, 52.

from presovietized comedy to the national tragedy of Hungary that brought about the synthesis of Soviet and Hungarian traditions, draw the arch of the change of the National Theater. By 1955 Major and his fellow directors not only annoyed the ministry administrators but also questioned the system itself. They did this with theatrical means that later characterized the Kádár era opposition performances.

Dialectically and in Hegelian terms, Sovietization is the antithesis of bourgeois, pre-war Hungary. The country, which was rebuilt on the Soviet model, and its theater during the Rákosi era wanted to be the opposite and counterexample of the bourgeois (Horthy era) country and theater. In the other two case studies of my thesis, which are not National Theater performances, therefore I sought to examine other aspects of this Hegelian antithesis: the manifestations of theatrical Sovietization in which Soviet patterns could be more concretely detected. I analyzed *The Heroes of Everyday Life* as a typical theatrical representation of the Hungarian schematic drama. The performance of the Lavrenev drama *The Breakup* was included in the thesis because of the person of the first Soviet guest director in Budapest (Aleksandr Sokolov). The significance of both performances in theater history lies in the fact that they realized the ideal type of Zhdanovist theater within the Hungarian theater environment.

The Stanislavski method (often in the literature and speak of the time: system) found its way and place in domestic acting with difficulties – like Sovietization itself. Sovietization was rapid in the Hungarian theater as long as it could be ensured by laws and regulations: nationalization, program policy, wage settlement, rehearsal order, but showed considerable slowness when it was supposed to be carried out in the performance, directing, acting, set, costume, sound, co-ordination and speech mode on stage. Although the Stanislavski system, which primarily concerned acting, formulated a more tangible and professional framework compared to the unclear political guidelines of socialist realism, there were no cultural traditions in Hungary to accommodate it. The directors of Budapest understood German and French, while Russian literacy and language knowledge were the privileges of only a few Muscovites (Gyula Hágy, Ferenc Hont, Béla Balázs).

In order to get acquainted with Soviet patterns, it was essential to translate and publish the Soviet theatrical literature, which took place from 1949 onwards. Two years after the nationalization in 1951, the Stanislavski Circles, organized from above, began to operate in Hungarian theaters. They tried to get closer to the Stanislavski method through conversations,

debates, readings, and sharing reading experiences. However, the activities of the Circles did failed to produce the desired effect, actors and directors often skipped the meetings, retraining was not given a sufficiently prominent role in the running of the theatrical plant. According to the minutes kept in the Hungarian Theater Museum and Institute, reporting malfunctions and exercising self-criticism and criticism were followed by meaningful dialogue only after the death of Stalin in 1953, in the climate of the thaw.⁵

1. Based on the results of the analysis of the performances under scrutiny, it can be stated that Sovietization was achieved with mixed success in the years around the 1949 caesura of nationalization. While the operating order and mode of theaters were standardized, socialist realism and the Stanislavski system, interpreted as its theatrical code, could not be established overnight in the National Theater which served as the model of acting to be followed. At the 1948 premiere of *The Miser*, Márton Rátkai (who returned to the National Theater with this role) was rehabilitated by director Tamás Major. Gyula Illyés's new translation also debuted in this performance, but the success of the performance was certainly ensured by the experienced protagonist's acting. Although the reviews highlighted the unprecedented genius of the Stanislavski realism in the actor's play, according to our retrospective reconstruction the success was due more to the new translation, and to a lesser extent to the realistic solutions of the directing and the set. Based on the performance, the transcription entitled *Kárhozó Péter, a szőrösszívű kulák* (*Peter Damner, the Stone-hearted Kulak*) was made: a kulak-mocking, which entered the history of Hungarian theater as Tamás Major's only agitation production. As an act of the 1949 "Népfront" campaign, he toured the Budapest-based plants and rural towns to agitate for the People's Front in front of tens of thousands of spectators. **Sovietization in this case should be understood not so much as the way of performance, but as its reception and afterlife.** Major took over the lead role of the People's Front Damner. **Rather than Sovietizing his style of play and his organizing principles, he used his own raucous, fairground comedy style of play for the sake of the Sovietization of the drama and of spectators.**

2. The guest director of *Othello*, which premiered in 1949, was Kálmán Nádasdy, whose second prose production was directed at the National Theater. The contemporary

⁵ [N. n.]: A kenyér mint bécsiszelet (Vita Szatnyiszlavszkijról anno 1953) (A bread as a Viennese slice, Debate on Stanislavsky year 1953.) *Színház*, 1991. augusztus 31., 31.

reception of the performance, however, primarily celebrated Tamás Major in the role of Jago, contrasting him with József Timár's Othello, which was seen as lifeless and gray in comparison. In the 1954 renewal, Major took the director's chair, Miklós Gábor was given his first negative role (according to many as punishment) of Jago, while the role of Othello earned Ferenc Bessenyei the Kossuth Prize, a role in a film (unfortunately lost to posterity), and an unquestionable status in the National Theater and a rising career – no matter that my micro-research conducted to reconstruct Bessenyei's mode of play could not detect any Stanislavski method in this performance.

Othello was brought into the research as the type of Tamás Major's Shakespeare cycle and because of Stanislavski's "latent" directorial copy: Gyula Háý, I suppose, gave Major the copy as a score, which could have been the guideline for Nádasdy's 1949 production. It was later translated into Hungarian, published in Hungary, and the play was renewed in 1954 to correct the flaws of the '49 performance and to create a more accurate copy of Stanislavski's performance so that Othello could fit into the well-known and understood system of expectations of socialist realism.

The thorough Marxist interpretation of the drama presented by Ágnes Heller in 1954, a new translation by Dezső Mészöly and a director's copy of Stanislavski, also published in Hungarian that year, as well as Othello of Bessenyei and Jago of Major, prescribed the socialist realist *Othello* and its future stage representations in Hungarian state socialism.

The performance Sovietized not the playing, but the reading and interpretation of *Othello*.

3. *The heroes of Everyday Life*, also staged in 1949, just after the nationalization and the turnaround in theater politics, was introduced as a typical example of the new Hungarian schematic drama and performance. Zsuzsa Simon was given the direction of the Belvárosi Színház (City Theater), with the instructions to help the new Hungarian drama to develop. Éva Mándi's play is perhaps the best achieved and most typical example of Hungarian schematic drama, and in the performance directed by Simon, the conquest of the proletariat and the flash of state feminism are the most interesting moments for posterity. On the stage of the Belvárosi Színház, a realistic replica of the Weisz Manfréd foundry in Csepel was built, and the costumes and the props were loaned by the plant. The trio of female authors, directors, and actors discussed the state-socialist framework of equality. Critics regarded this play as the first realization of socialist realism in Budapest, so praise for the directing and acting was largely neglected. Based

on the text of the play, however, it can be assumed that a dynamic and truly realistic performance was born, which in its visuality and theme fully complied with the Zhdanov principles of socialist realism. At the same time, however, the diction and the weaving of the plot were more reminiscent of the bourgeois traditions of conversational dramas. Foundry workers did appear on the hyperrealistic stage and in the tradition of well-done plays ending with the obligatory marriage, the final scene here was replaced by an increase in the size of the self-capital pool (and thus production), yet the schematic drama and its performance still followed the dramaturgy of pre-war acting. **The performance Sovietized the sujet and the drama but did not Sovietize the dramaturgy.**

4. Although it was **self-evident in the fellow artistic branches that the adaption of Soviet vision and techniques could be accelerated by inviting Soviet-Russian artists and theorists to Budapest, this did not happen in the Hungarian theater until 1953.**

Thanks to the personal intervention of Ferenc Horváth, Aleksandr Sokolov arrived in Budapest in February 1953 to stage a Soviet classic, Lavrenev's *Breakup*, in the Néphadsereg Színháza (Hungarian People's Army Theater) to celebrate the eighth anniversary of the liberation of Hungary. The play that brought the events of the Great Socialist Revolution to the stage received a great deal of press attention. The audience in Budapest was impressed by the Soviet imperial revue, in which the props of operetta, large numbers of figurants, songs, choreographed mass scenes, imposing scenery and lighting techniques evoked the most important events of Soviet history. Although the critics wanted to present the directing and acting as being specific to the Stanislavski system, it was clear that the performance was driven not by this but by admiration provoked by the visuals and the toolbox of the revue theater. While the criticisms of Nádasdy and the *Othello* set in 1949 drew particular attention to the bourgeois vestige of the hunt for effect, in this performance the director's courageous and exemplary use of tools was praised. The plasticity of socialist realism is also exemplified by this double standard: the work of the Soviet guest director is brilliant, even if he uses the most trivial means of effect hunting. During Sokolov's stay in Budapest, in the middle of the rehearsal process, however, Stalin died, and by the summer of 1953 the profession was already discussing the theatrical consequences of the new phase. Sokolov's guest appearance in Budapest is a metaphor for belated Sovietization: by the time he got here, the system had practically ceased to exist. With Stalin's death, Zhdanovism became history, paradoxically or quite understandably, it became precisely the stage of political détente in

which Sovietization was able to have a meaningful impact on real acting habits and methods. **The Soviet director and the performance Sovietized the company.**

5. From a theatrical and professional point of view, the new phase was primarily about the rehabilitation of bourgeois traditions, calling for explicit synthesis – Major put on show *The Tragedy of Man*, which György Lukács and his circles had previously classified as a retrograde piece. The common denominator of the *Tragedy* interpretations is the Hegelian synthesis theory which asks the questions of the Marxist conception of history, but gives the wrong, at least not Marxist answers to them. Imre Waldapfel rehabilitated the drama with a new edition and explanations, and the stage realization was achieved by the never-before-seen three directors: Endre Gellért, Tamás Major and Endre Marton. On January 7, 1955, **after a 7-year ban, the National Theater presented *The Tragedy of Man* by Imre Madách**, which proved to be grandiose and sensational in all its indicators. The performance was a huge success at the National Theater, tickets were extremely hard to come by. The set was created by Gusztáv Oláh, the most famous designer of the Opera House: he evoked the Horthy era, using his own set design from 1923 with minor modifications. The audience found themselves in the representation space of the Horthy era, in which the company performed a previously banned piece. The party leadership obviously did not like it. As in the case of Sokolov, the events in Moscow changed the afterlife of the performance: Rákosi received confirmation, and the hopes for liberalization of the new phase were evaporated. Rákosi went to see the performance in February. The viewing is included in the theatrical legend: he summoned all three directors to his lodge, shouted, and threatened them. **The play could not be banned, but on central orders the number of performances was significantly reduced.** The popularity of the show, which has become a forbidden fruit in this way, skyrocketed. Major later bragged that *The Tragedy* was presented without a ministerial permission; however my research has proven this to be not true. Permission was given, but the political situation changed. Nevertheless, an important circumstance of the performance is that it was implemented from a quasi-opposition position. The director's star trio, reinforced by Gusztáv Oláh and the star actors and actresses, showed a force against which the ministry and cultural policy were reluctant to fight. The grandiose performance was surrounded by an army of legitimacy tricks, and huge press coverage accompanied even the rehearsal process. **Major and the company of National Theater, who campaigned for the communists with Molière in 1949, developed techniques to**

circumvent the system by 1955, and tried to outsmart cultural policy and censors with their audiences as accomplice. The 1955 performance of *Tragedy* predates the Hungarian oppositional theatrical tradition of the 1980s, namely the Theater of Kaposvár and the Katona József Theater.

The performance synthesized the “old” bourgeois traditions and “new” Soviet patterns, not by Sovietizing *Tragedy*, but by incorporating Sovietization itself into the Hungarian tradition.

Although the doctoral thesis is a closed work, I continue my research. I would like to focus on the deepening of domestic Chekhov playing and the Stanislavski method. It would also be an attractive and important task to write the Hungarian theatrical Sovietization from an international perspective, primarily studying the theater history of the Eastern bloc countries in the 1950s. However, as an archivist, I still consider it my job to digitize and publish theatrical resources in order to preserve the data miner’s integrity.

The thesis concludes with the chronology of Hungarian historical, cultural policy, and theater history events, as well as the annex with the collection of sources of the *Cold War Theater Collection*, which is also published on the Web.

Selected List of Publications Related to The Topic of Dissertation:

Martinászok polgári köntösben. *Theatron*, 2020. (14. évf.) 3. sz., 71–77.

A Nemzetis Harpagon és a Népfrontos Kárhozó. in: Jákfalvi Magdolna – Kékesi Kun Árpád (szerk.): *Nemzeti Színháztörténet. Előadáskonstrukciók, 1948-1996*, Budapest, Arktisz-TMA, 2022., 14-24

A páston Othello és Jago. in: Jákfalvi Magdolna – Kékesi Kun Árpád (szerk.): *Nemzeti Színháztörténet. Előadáskonstrukciók, 1948-1996*, Budapest, Arktisz-TMA, 2022., 25-34

A szintézis akarása. in: Jákfalvi Magdolna – Kékesi Kun Árpád (szerk.): *Nemzeti Színháztörténet. Előadáskonstrukciók, 1948-1996*, Budapest, Arktisz-TMA, 2022., 56-71

A szovjetizált színházmodell: Szokolov birodalmi színháza Budapesten. in: Jákfalvi Magdolna, Kékesi Kun Árpád, Kiss Gabriella (szerk.): *Újjáépítés és államosítás*. Budapest, Arktisz-TMA, 2020., 11-20