

Doctorate School at the University of Theatre and Film Arts

THE PERSON WHO ENTERTAINS
BUDAPEST WHILE HE DREAMS OF
KOLOZSVÁR...

BIOGRAPHY OF MÓR DITRÓI

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Mór Ditrói, the first director of Vígszínház, the person who made the theatre triumphant with the aid of the young company brought from Kolozsvár and introduced new acting style on the Hungarian stages, dies as an impoverished tobacconist at a very old age.

Probably, these are the few lexical details spread about him in Hungarian theater-related public conversations. However, some conversations in the theatre, or false reference in the Vígszínház convinced me that the people do not know even this much about him...

When among the official dissertation topics of the Doctorate School at the University of Theatre and Film Arts I found “*The discussion and elaboration of the role of Mór Ditrói in the Hungarian theatre*”, as a continuation of my earlier Vígszínház related studies and researches (Pannon University Theatre Studies Department, 2009), I had to grasp the possibility to deal with the details of Ditrói’s life work, which had been forgot or not treated at its proper local value. So far nobody tried to provide a comprehensive elaboration of his theatrical career, except one valuable study full of lessons and anecdotes, which includes great resources and which was written by the husband of Mór Ditrói’s grandchild, Tibor Mészöly, dramaturge and theatre director.¹ This work, however, only highlights the years spent in the Vígszínház and regards the daily operation of this theatre.

For me Mór Ditrói is significant as the Hungarian inventor of naturalist and realist theatre, and as the key figure of the transition between the 19th century romantic theatre concept and the 20th century modern, civic theatre. He was a theatre leader who could represent a forward-thinking quality on the stage (he did not only question, but used the past experience of the theatre) and while doing this he did not lose the audience, but rather gained more. His theatrical innovations and preservations that affected the whole Hungarian theatre were articulated in such theatrical mediums, formations that were not marginalized, or if they were, they themselves chose the periphery. His theatrical innovations and preservations were rather articulated in significant theatres playing for a broad audience, like the National Theatre of Kolozsvár and the Vígszínház of Budapest. In this context, I claim that Ditrói’s impact on acting and theatrical operation is a valid and inevitable reference point for the researchers and readers of Hungarian theatre history.

¹Tibor Mészöly: *Theatre on the Threshold of the Century. (Színház a század küszöbén.)* Budapest, Múzsák Közművelődési Kiadó, 1986.

My Ditrói biography is basically a positivistic approach to the history on theatre, but it is still a chosen micro-story, which by marking its own boundaries tries to enrich the 19th - 20th century Hungarian macro theatre history through the presentation of a considerable Hungarian theatrical career. My work is chronological and it follows the remained memoir of Mór Ditrói². I try to tell the story of Ditrói by reading the memoir closely and commenting it, and presenting the individual essays inspired by reading.

I deal in details with Ditrói's roots at Kolozsvár, and with his family background. I present Mór Ditrói, the actor, who as a student of Ede Paulay experienced several levels of the 19th century Hungarian country-side theatrical life, so as to be able to turn to his evident ambition, that of directing and being a theatre director. I try to map the effects that influenced him: the way his master, Ede Paulay and the number one and the most suitable director of the country-side, Ignác Krecsányi formed his artistic attitude, or as an Ernesto Rossi type Othello role or his wife's Mari Eibenschütz's (the most important country-side actress of the end of the 1800's) theatrical performance influenced his artistic attitude.

I deal in particular with Mór Ditrói, the director of the National Theatre of Kolozsvár (1887-1895). I analyze the composition of his company, repertoire policy, the Hungarian drama cycle and Shakespeare cycle that were of great importance from the point of view of theatre history. The way he gave new meaning to the *national theatre* function in the theatre of Kolozsvár that was proud of its traditions, how he imposed order at the rehearsals, on stage and in the head of the actors, and how he became a real actor-raising teacher. As the head of the National Theatre of Kolozsvár, Mór Ditrói was the director of the theatre with full powers. He was supported mainly by the audience of Kolozsvár. The Transylvanian aristocracy was his patron, or his superior, but sometimes also his main opponent. The writer of the dissertation investigates the theatre of Ditrói, as well as the relation of the contemporary Transylvanian society.

So far Mór Ditrói has been the only director of our theatre history who was the director of a *National Theatre* and the *Vígyszínház* too. How was he able to preserve his national theatre ambition in an independent and profit oriented playhouse? More precisely, how could he preserve his ambition as an art director because Ditrói is an employee in the Vígyszínház; his

² Mór Ditrói: *Comedians (Komédiások)*. Budapest, Közlekedési Nyomda, 1929.

hiring and casting competency was often limited and held no authority with regards to repertory. The dissertation examines the period spent by Ditrói at the Vígszínház from the point of view of the conflict between his possibilities and ambitions. I focus on the way he presented naturalism or psychological realism in French comedies and farces, which until that time had not been presented on the Hungarian theaters in such a unique and consequent way. Also, I present the directing method he used to form the interplay of the Vígszínház. How could he realize as the director of the legendary ensemble his Kolozsvár dreams, while he entertained the audience in Budapest? I dedicate a separate chapter to the acting school of Vígszínház founded by Ditrói.

Furthermore, the notion of *Vígszínház style*, which has been used in the Hungarian works on the history of the theatre for decades, will be investigated in a separate chapter: how and to what extent it can be related to revolution of acting style and what further factors formed it.

The period from the moment Mór Ditrói left the Vígszínház until his death (1917-1945) remains barely known even if we consider the anecdotes of the theatre. I try to reconstruct the professional and private life outcomes of Mór Ditrói's oeuvre from the press and fragments of personal correspondence, family reminiscences and documents.

I examine in an individual study Ditrói's place on a contemporary European theatre map. *The end of the 19th century Szamos River version of Meiningerism is connected to Mór Ditrói.*³

*Mór Ditrói really did in Hungary what Stanislawski did in Moskow.*⁴

*Due to great inspiration that Ditrói had, he was the first who removed false theatrical elements.*⁵

Does Ditrói consciously follow a particular school or a trend? Which of the above quotations suit most to Ditrói's theatre? Besides the brief historical overview, I seek the possible answers to questions by sometimes initiating a discourse between Ditrói and the emblematic figures of the epoch.

³ György Székely (editor in chief.): *Hungarian History of Theatre 1873-1920.* (edited by Tamás Gajdó), Budapest, Magyar Könyvklub, OSzMI, 2001. 277.

⁴ Ignótus: Destiny. *Magyar Hírlap*, 14 May 1933. In: Mészöly i.m. 71.

⁵ Dániel Jób: Ditrói. *A Reggel*, 26 May 1924. In: Mészöly i.m. 65.

In final section of my work, I study Ditrói's oeuvre from the point of view of recent past and present: how it is regarded nowadays, how it inspired the artists of the subsequent generations of Vígszínház and, moreover, the entire Hungarian theatre. I find it of great importance to underline that he was not reluctant to sacrifice a good portion of his dreams at both theatres not to lose audience and to obey his unwritten, however, clearly perceivable underlying principle: without audience, a theatre may not exist. And the most venturesome, the most patriotic, the modernest or the most lyric theatrical efforts may not succeed when playing in front of empty rows.

Moreover, I was determined to find the living man among the lines written on the history of theatre. The research carried out in this field besides the daily acting practice of the previous years provided useful experience and I hope my work helps to introduce an outstanding and dedicated artist to the reader.