

University of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest

Doctorate School

**The Canon of Puppetry in Hungary**  
**Institutional Functioning during the 1950's**

Theses

Viktória Szántó

2020

**Supervisor:**

**Dr. Magdolna Jákfalvi**

**Regius Professor**

One of the goals of my doctoral dissertation was to analyze the history of Hungarian puppetry during the state socialist era with the help and knowledge of contemporary papers on puppetry, hoping that the broad selection of recent studies would lead to a productive dialogue with the books of the past. Puppetry is changing dynamically. It redefines itself, chooses various innovative forms and conquers unknown territories. According to Claudia Orenstein, today we live in the *puppet moment*<sup>1</sup> – my dissertation acknowledges this recognition. Orenstein demonstrates her statement with the presentation of *The Lion King*,<sup>2</sup> *Avenue Q*<sup>3</sup> and *War Horse*.<sup>4</sup> She says that “[...] cultural attention has turned forcefully towards the manipulated theatrical object.”<sup>5</sup> In reaction to this discourse on puppetry, there has been a turning point in Hungary as well, and over the last ten years more and more articles on puppet theory and studies on puppet history have been published. The puppet professionals have also realized the inspirational attention concentrating on their genre, so artists have started to archive their works themselves.

The period which was examined in this essay begins with a couple of years before the socialization, includes 1949 – the socialization of theatres itself –, and continues into the 1950’s. I made this choice because prior to this work the socialization and its effect on puppeteers and puppet theatres, functioning on the periphery were never studied in-depth or in a complex way. Also, the most important director of the State Puppet Theatre in Budapest, Dezső Szilágyi, started his position in 1958 – a huge milestone in Hungarian puppet history, as this directorial nomination abolished the two other state puppet theatres in the provinces, therefore it marks an institutional structural change. (According to other theatrical structures in Eastern countries, it was incomparable during the state socialist years in Hungary that only one state puppet theatre operated in the entire country.) I only introduce the first couple of years of his thirty-four-year-long leadership, and only those ideas are shown which had an impact on the theatrical institutional system. This introduction is made because his decisions, the aesthetics preferred by him and the puppet theatre model evolved during his domination have a huge impact even

---

<sup>1</sup> Posner, Dassia N. – Orenstein, Claudia – Bell, John (ed.) (2014): *The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance*. London – New York, Routledge, p 2.

<sup>2</sup> The theatrical stage adaptation of the Walt Disney tale, directed by Julie Taymor. There was an interview made by Richard Schechner with Taymor, in which she talks about the working process. Taymor, Julie: From Jacques Lecoq to *The Lion King*, an interview by Richard Schechner. in: Bell, John (ed.) (2001): *Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects*. New York, A TDR Book, 2001. 26–45.

<sup>3</sup> A musical by Robert Lopez and Jeff Marx. It premiered in 2003 at the Off-Broadway, since then it was staged all over the world. In Hungary the premiere was in 2009, directed by Mária Harangi. [https://www.centralszinhaz.hu/eloadasok/a\\_mi\\_utcank\\_avenue\\_q](https://www.centralszinhaz.hu/eloadasok/a_mi_utcank_avenue_q) Last time to download: 01. 22. 2019.

<sup>4</sup> The show is played at the New London Theatre. Jurkowski, Henryk: *A Story of a Horse*. (translated by Géza Balogh), *Art Limes Báb Tár XI.*, 2010/2. 139–143.

<sup>5</sup> Posner, Dassia N. – Orenstein, Claudia – Bell, John: same.

today, even though many professionals do not follow these ideas but go deliberately against them. Although the period examined in this thesis was studied before by other historians,<sup>6</sup> the never-before-seen sources introduced here will shine a light on correlations which can redefine the earlier made interpretations based on hypotheses made by the author of this theses. The gesture of retelling the old story and the structuring of retelling will be meaningful.

In the historical part, the first director of the State Puppet Theatre, László Bod's theatre organizational principles and the ars poetica of his work are introduced. According to my analyses, the puppetry ideal of Bod and his strong belief that puppetry has common roots with fine arts follows the popular theory and tradition of the first part of the twentieth century, in which artistic puppetry was favored, but it also distances itself from the folk traditions of glove puppetry of the fairgrounds, which was the official directive of the time. (Even though when Henrik Kemény lost the opportunity to play at his family fairground theatre, Bod hired him and secured him subsistence.) Stylization in portrayal and the preference of abstract forms over the realistic visualization of the beau ideal of the time were such a brave ars poetica, that they could only appear in a genre which was not in the spotlight, but was able to hide itself from the strict and inquiring look of culture politics. After analyzing the repertoire and the creative team of the theatre, we can say that László Bod intentionally surrounded himself with artists who shared his ideas about the importance of fine arts in puppetry. Thanks to Bod, many artists got involved with puppetry, such as József Jakovits, Lili Ország, Vera Bródy, Endre Bálint, Miklós Mészöly, Szilárd Darvas and Áron Tamási. This statement is also demonstrated by the exhibition organized at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts called *Tiltottak menedéke (Shelter for Banned)*, which opened in February 2020 and presented the artistic works of the creative team working in the scenic workshop of the State Puppet Theatre.

As it turned out after the research made in the archives: between 1955 and 1958 there were two provincial state-aided puppet theatres besides the State Puppet Theatre of Budapest. One of them was the well-known and so-called "oppositional" theatre in Győr, the other one was the *Somogyi Tücsök (Grasshopper of Somogy)*, located in Kaposvár. The history of the State Puppet Theatre of Győr was analyzed with the help of the archives of the Puppet Collection of the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute. It was presented in the paper that many iconic

---

<sup>6</sup> Within this thesis the canonical historical studies which I reflect to were written by Géza Balogh and Elek Selmeczi. Balogh, Géza (2010): *A bábjáték Magyarországon. A Mesebarlangtól a Budapest Bábszínházig*. Budapest, Vince Kiadó – Budapest Bábszínház, and Selmeczi, Elek (1986): *Világhódító bábok. Az Állami Bábszínház krónikája*. Budapest, Corvina.

performances in the repertoire of the theatre in the capital were originally premiered in Győr, and the Szilágyi – Szőnyi (Kató) – Bródy creative-trio, which was emblematic during the Szilágyi-era in Budapest, also started its synergy in Győr. The chapter on the *Somogyi Tücsök* is more detailed, because the founders of the theatre disappeared entirely from the canonical puppet-history books. Even in the Archives of Somogy County it was officially stated that all the records regarding the functioning of the puppet theatre disappeared, this was the reason to use only the articles published in *Somogyi Néplap* on the theatre to show the short history. According to the publications, the originally amateur puppet theatre had large amount of equipment in its headquarters in Balatonberény. In the first couple of years they played floor shows, glove puppet performances from the fairgrounds, and a play by Rózsa Ignác called *Tündér Ibrinkó*. When the company moved to Kaposvár in 1957, they shared the concert room of the music school with the students. But being a professional theatre also meant that the State Puppet Theatre of Budapest decided to delegate two actors and a director from the capital to oversee their operations. The theatre-founder, Tibor Gáts, was pushed aside and the new director of the company became Márta Csutorás, who also directed the premiere of the first show under the professional circumstances. Márta Csutorás was not only a former assistant-director of the State Puppet theatre in Budapest, but she was also the wife of Dezső Szilágyi. After this point even the fresh company in Kaposvár adopted the repertoire from the capital, and they started to play the adaptations written by Szilágyi, the *Jancsi és Juliska (Hansel and Gretel)* story, the *Mackó mukik kalandjai (Adventures of Bear Buddies)*, and Relli Pápa's the *Csalavári csalavér (Fox Family Misery)*. Because of the supervision by the metropolitan theatre many professional conflicts surfaced, and these disputations spoiled the everyday functioning of the theatre, which resulted with the wind-up of the company in 1958.

Contemporary Hungarian theatre theorists decided to look at theatre history with the help of the *Philther-method*, they are studying the past from the aesthetic horizon of the performances, so the shows and their modes of action is in the focus of research. This is why I chose to analyze three performances of the era in the second part of my dissertation. Consequently, three premiere dates were researched and examined trough the historical and political aspects of these dates. The detailed description of stage-settings, the exposition of the critics from the period and the analyses of photos taken of the performances are able to help us to approximate the puppet aesthetics of the 1950's. The selected performances were the most popular with the audiences: the *Sztárparádé (Starparade)* (1951), the first attempt of artistic puppetry on the official stage, *Szarvaskirály (The Deer King)* (1951), and an iconic children's play, *Csalavári*

*csalavér (Fox Family Misery)* (1954). The influence of the soviet aesthetic and the impact of its most decisive figure, Sergey Obraztsov, presented in the historical sinks. Even the process of research is reflected upon in this study. Through the usage of the *Philther-method* many questions arose, as the performances chosen to be researched were premiered almost seventy years ago, at a time when puppet theatre was not a mainstream genre, so these shows are not well-documented. However, these difficulties turned out to be more liberating than restrictive, because after the careful selection of the performances the category of theatre historical context became so powerful that it motivated me to rewrite the story of the 1950's. Due to the lack of video recordings, I looked at the creators of the shows, researching their artistic and personal lives and past, which was even more difficult after realizing that the narrative of this specific historical time is full of reticence, brutality and misery. I was looking from the perspective of contemporary norms at the old documents found in archives, the minute-books of the Stanislavski-discussions, the records kept at the season-opening and ending seances of the theatre. I tried to navigate myself with rational understanding while reading these documents and to use only that information which was relevant to the reconstruction of the artistic work (When were the puppets available during the rehearsal period? How many actors animated a puppet figure? Was the author of the play present during the rehearsals? Etc.). After close investigation of these questions we can state that the *Philther-method* does not exclude the institution-history but implicates it. It fructifies it, because it involves new research categories, which were not relevant in previous studies. Alternative histories may come into existence while the usage of the method, because after the selection of the analyzed performances the storytelling becomes personal because the focus of research was chosen by me. Had I chosen different shows to reconstruct, it would have resulted in a different story with different emphases. This aesthetic approach made it possible to analyze from a perspective with contemporary theatre theory, which hopefully generates a conversation with the trends of nowadays.

After the presentation of the institutional functioning of the past and the reconstruction of the performances we can say that the state's drastic gesture of theatre-organization, the socialization, was an ongoing process in the history of puppetry. In 1949 only the official puppet theatre, the *Mesebarlang (Talecave)* was given to the hands of the government, the abolishment of the puppeteers working in the People's Park and in the City Park happened when these places were socialized in 1952. The founding of puppet theatres in the suburbs during the 1950's demonstrates that among amateur puppeteers there was a huge desire to be able to work

professionally and they rejected the extremely centralized structure of puppet theatres, though these initiatives vanished with the directorial nomination of Dezső Szilágyi in 1958. His appointment was a historical milestone which enabled the strong will of the government to centralize power. It appears that he not only played an important role in the wind-up of the theatre in Győr, but, with the help of his wife, he also pulled the strings from behind the scenes in the case of the *Somogyi Tücsök*.

The stories (re)written in this paper did not break away from the traditions and the history of puppetry in Hungary as we learned it – nor was this the intention of the research. But by using the *Philther-method*, I was able to deal a lot more with sceneries, with the visual character of puppetry, with the possibility of reconstruction of the work of actors, or just the opposite: the disappearing character of the work of puppeteers, the sensibility of transience. To be able to turn towards the stories of the fifties, our biggest help were the puppets themselves, as they carry on their bodies almost all the necessary information to analyze the performances.