University Eötvös Loránd
Faculty of Humanities

DOCTORAL (PhD) DISSERTATION THESES

Dániel Molnár

Transformational attempts of the revue- and variety sphere in Budapest in the Rákosi period (1949-1952)

Doctoral School of History,
Dr. Erdődy Gábor DSc, Head of the Doctoral School
Atelier European Social Studies and Historiography Doctoral Programme
Dr. Sonkoly Gábor CSc, Head of the Programme

Members of the Committee:
Dr. Varga Zsuzsanna DSc, Chairman
Dr. Teller Katalin PhD, Opponent
Dr. Bozó Péter PhD, Opponent
Dr. Klement Judit PhD, Secretary
Dr. Vörös Boldizsár CSc, Member
Dr. Ring Orsolya PhD, Member
Dr. Erdősi Péter PhD, Member

Supervisor:
Dr. Heltai Gyöngyi PhD

Budapest, 2016
This dissertation focuses on the struggle to transform and adjust the traditional theatre industry in Pest and its genres to the new communist theatre structure being established after 1945. It examines the question of how did the communist regime handle the repertoire of the traditional entertainment industry and its mass cultural tradition. To circumscribe the topic, Bourdieu's field theory was used: the main subject matter of this study is the so called ‘show business’ productions on the field of mass culture; the ‘not canonized’ ones (les genres non consacrées, Bourdieu). The characteristics of these genres (revues, variety shows, etc.) is heterogeneous and depends on their time period. In the introduction, a comprehensive presentation of the sources and historiographies can be found. The narrower topic – the genre of revue in Hungary between 1949 and 1952 – have never been examined from a scientific point of view, not even historically nor aesthetically. While reviewing foreign literature pertinent to this area, I concentrated on countries I was able to visit and pursue research there either on my own or by the help of a scholarship. Therefore, I reference German, Austrian, French and Polish academic literature.

Applied methods and sources

The subject required systematic basic research and investigative work. The research is based on first and foremost primary sources which were provided by seven Hungarian and two foreign archives. The most significant materials can be found in the Budapest City Archives, because in 1949, every entertainment theatre in Pest – with the exception of the nationalised Municipal Operetta Theatre – became municipal property. The Budapest City Archives possesses the documents of each individual establishment as well as the supervising Municipal Council's. However, the documents of the highest governing levels and the Magyar Dolgozók Pártja (Hungarian Worker's Party) are located in the National Archives of Hungary. The Archives of Political History and of Trade Unions is currently unavailable for research for the reason of its troubled situation, but in spite of this I was able to integrate my earlier research there into this dissertation. The special collections of the National Széchényi Library contain the performances' documentation, such as posters, programmes or even scripts for a number of scenes. In addition, many dancers' legacies can be found in the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute’s Dance Archives. Nevertheless, these collections cover only a little more than half of the sources used in this paper. Considering the low status of this sphere, it never became the
primary goal to collect its memorabilia for any public collections, hence I researched the collections of seven more private collectors or heirs. Among these stands out the collection of Béla Karády (1922-2016), who was also the artistic leader of the first institutional attempt to create a communist revue. Additionally, oral history methods were used on remaining participants and their descendants. Overall 30 interviews between nine individuals provided further sources to my work. Finally, professional journals, newspaper articles and memoirs were also included in the research process.

This paper examines its topic from two main viewpoints that could be considered unique compared to even the foreign historiography I have knowledge of. The first one focuses on the changes in the history of regulations and local government, as well as the institutional changes of the field. The second is a structural analysis of the theory and practice of show production alongside with the effects and show elements. The formation of the new municipal entertainment company was a unique phenomenon in the city, without any precedent or model at the time, therefore its operation and fall can add important materials to the history of theatre and culture of that era. At the same time, analysing the effects and show elements of the performances in their own context and tradition helps us to reveal the results of this revue reform also justifying the reactions of the audience and the professionals. The examination of the revue components was based on Patrice Pavis' reconstruction analysis, Marco De Marinis' analysis of performing styles and I used Richard Dyer's theory of entertainment. The shows' scenographical analysis were influenced by Hedvig Belitska-Scholtz's research of theatrical scenery and Mária István's study on the history of scenic design in the early modern Hungarian theatre.

Content and structure

The first chapter reviews the changes of the revue sphere in a cultural context dividing three separate time periods: from 1931 to 1944, from 1945 to 1949, and finally the period between 1949 and 1952. I put the main focus on the transformation of the possibilities operating the theatre industry in terms of operation, supervision and regulation from the institutional to the governmental levels. In 1949, the Fővárosi Népszórakoztató Intézmények (FŐNI, Municipal Institutions of People's entertainment) was founded which was a new, capital-owned entertainment company that had no precedent in Hungary. Entertainment theatres were seized last and instead of nationalising them, they became municipal property. Plans to take over this sphere were found in the management of Városi Színház (City Theatre), which was already
municipalised, and led by a prominent party member Margit Gáspár. Around her, a group of young cadres also a close circle of friends (Karády Béla, Kublin János, Sólyom András) planned to take over the entertainment industry in Pest. Research showed that the entertainment scene was not reorganized based on the instruction of the Party, nor copying a Soviet example; but rather the interests of the aforementioned group.

The FŐNI integrated the entertaining venues people regardless of social class, located at different locations in the urban space. However, during these appropriations, the company also erased a major part of the entertainment industry: the family businesses and attractions which entertained the lowest social classes. Thus the primary area for the entertainment productions were reduced to the former private theatres on the boulevard. Karády and his friends were constantly in ideological conflict with the Municipal Council. The more ambitious cadres of the company, who were not in power (because of Karády's special company structure) exploited this strained relationship and at the end of season in 1949/1950, they brought down the leaders of the company. A cleaning lady was appointed as the head of the FŐNI but the new cadres simply could not operate a company that was designed for Karády and Kublin. Therefore, the company soon disbanded in 1951. Part of the first major governmental reorganization of the theatre sector, the municipal leaders tried to find a solution for the legitimist problem of the revue. For this reason, István Fejér was appointed as the head of the Fővárosi Varieté (Municipal Variety) which was reopened as Fővárosi Víg Színház (Municipal Comedy Theatre) and tried to get the genre accepted by the political system – unsuccessfully.

The second chapter analyses the changes of the theatrical engagement policies of the performers (actors, dancers and artistes) and the influence of the new political views throughout the selection process. Political aspects were present, however they did not overwrite everything as the audience were mainly interested in the already well-known stars and performers. The theatre protection, which had already existed before 1949, continued. Now not only directors and journalists could be protectors but also the ÁVH (State Protection Authority), as I illustrate with the example of Ida Boros. The best indicator of the transformation of this (originally cosmopolitan) field's international relations is the examination of the foreign artists' contracts. From 1949, the primary direction became the Eastern Bloc, despite the fact that there were western artists who performed in Budapest even in 1950. However, establishing a new professional network with Eastern countries was not an easy task; partly because the sphere had low priority in institutional bureaucracy and partly because of the Cold War atmosphere. Moreover, this research disproves the belief present in the literature of Hungarian circus, that western agents boycotted the Hungarian shows. This period was defining even for the dancers,
since ballet and folk dances received state subsidies and were favoured by the state, based on
the Soviet example. Nevertheless, variety dancers and show dance remained only on the
periphery as non-recognised genres. Because of the ban of Hungarian modern dance (so-called
"mozgásművészet"), the only opportunity for many dancers to perform (like the group of Sára
Berczik) was in variety shows. Engagement of solo dancers from the Opera also became regular.

The third chapter presents the theoretical background of the new, reformed revues after
1949 through the theoretical essays of the managements. Despite that leftist political revues
were produced during the 1930's by certain workers' companies, the attempt ignored these, and
aspired to adapt the well-known urban entertainment product. I defined three different
adaptation attempts in this period:

- In 1949, the Meserevű (Fairytale Revue) which was created against the variety shows
  still produced by private companies;
- Béla Karády's historical-ideological concept that was the basis of the revues produced
  by the FŐNI;
- and the concept of István Fejér and György Rácz at the Fővárosi Víg Színház.

The main strategy of all three experiments' was trying to assimilate the revue to the legitimate
theatrical genres. Béla Karády's goal was to introduce a historical reasoning just like Margit
Gáspár had done with operetta, but he did not succeed. (Gáspár succeeded to make the operetta
genre accepted; but mostly through her character.) The spectacular effects and show elements,
which had been a fundamental part of the revues, were taken away and instead the plot and the
written text received more emphasis. The new concept was led by István Fejér and György Rácz
and it pressed for a naturalistic scenery and a psychorealistic performance which were not
featured in the genre before, nor after.

In the fourth chapter, I analyse the elements of the revue-structure and the production-
making practice by using the documents and scripts of the productions. First, the genre’s
traditional, capitalist practices are demonstrated through a Parisian revue from 1952 which was
from many point of view, similar to the former capitalist practice in Budapest. Then I present
how this earlier practice changed and what was the result during the two seasons under the
FŐNI and later in the Fővárosi Víg Színház. The flexibility of the genre allowed transferring
the emphasis, but shortly the productions started to follow the same dramaturgical pattern. This
is followed by the description of the traditional revue shows' thematic toposes and their
reinterpreting attempts in communist context. Most of the toposes (Budapest, exotics, self-
reflexion, history/nostalgia, attractions and love) could reappear, but the parodies of other
entertainment products (e. g. hit shows, operettas) and elements related to the nightlife or even
to the night itself were left out. The jazz, as a popular music genre, became "banned but preserved" (Gyöngyi Heltai).

The structure of the shows changed radically: they became plot driven and so they rather resembled operettas and musical comedies. The reason for this is the still prevalent differentiation between the productions that were based on a written drama the ones that were not based on drama. (I analyse the professional attitude and expectations towards the productions of the FŐNI through the professional dispute of the revue, entitled Májusfa.) The authors were trying to use the toposes favoured by the audience in their productions, but at the same time the influence of the traditional role type radically decreased. They altered the types according to the accepted socialist realistic ones, nonetheless, it remained important to adjust each role according to the actor's personality. These usually contained a direct or indirect political message, for instance the character of caretaker Sikora (played by Kálmán Latabár in Májusfa). For an artist, called Alfonzó, the creators always crafted a special role what let him perform his skills. Star roles remained (as well as the related dramaturgical patterns), but their significance were greatly reduced compared to the "progressive hero" and the "progressive heroine" types. Besides the classic communist stock characters, completely new role types appeared in revues, like the "astonished countryman" which was frequently used to present the city (as a part of the Budapest topos).

The fifth chapter concentrates on the traditionally dominant element of the genre, the scenery. This analysis was made with the help of László Székely and Róbert Wegenast, the two doyens of Hungarian scenic design. For the study, I used photos mainly from private collections and from published articles. My central question was how much freedom was left for the designer's imagination apart from the socialist realism's naturalistic requirements. The scenic toposes of the period between the two world wars are illustrated by two productions: Halló, Amerika! (Hullo, America! 1925) produced by the Fővárosi Operettszínház; and Start! (1929) at the Royal Orfeum. Two productions at the Moulin Rouge were used to demonstrate the revue's scenery, scenic structures and costume solutions. By comparing the scenic design before the war with the one during the communist period, I examine how much freedom did the designer had, which visual toposes could remain, and what kind of changes were made in the context of the two periods. New propagandistic visual toposes (shop-window, propaganda for socialist companies) were built in the productions besides the surviving visual toposes (the boat, allegory and abstraction, history, Budapest, self-repetition). At the same time stage eroticism was restricted. The survival of the mentioned toposes was mainly depending on the designer. Eric Vogel, who designed scenery and costumes for productions before the war remained in
position.

Apart from the possibilities of the scenic- and costume design, I examined the technological aspect as well. The design of the FŐNI's productions was largely influenced by the poor infrastructural state of the buildings and the lack of materials, so they continued to recycle costumes and other parts of the scenery. While they calculated with a large quantity of costumes, the fact that the productions gradually became rather musical comedies, and the required naturalism meant no such extravagant revue costumes like before the war. At the end of the reform attempts, the revue rather lost its spectacular elements and resembled musical comedies and operettas. As for the scenic design, the emphasis remained on picturesque design, but the vertically organised scenes, the mass attractions and the adoption of the human form as a design element disappeared. The requirement for the visual elements and the scenery to be defined by the writers and the scripts, did not indicate that the designer was completely overshadowed. Their personality and style bleeded through the new revues and sometimes the designer did not adhere to the rules and requirements. However, they became subservient compared to the pre-war period, since the script and the fixed choreographies limited their work.

The main observations of this dissertation can be found in the sixth chapter. The attempts to create a new kind of revue and to legitimise the genre were unsuccessful, even though it enjoyed the support of the state. The main reason behind the failure is that it did not have a prominent communist intellectual like Margit Gáspár in the case of the operetta. In theory, the nationalised theatre structure could have been able to survive or at least the parts which were not erased. In the state-party structure the maintenance and support meant a high number of expectations on the administrative and production levels that the new leaders could not meet. It was clear to the participants from the beginning that this complex mass entertaining genre cannot be reformed. The ineffectiveness of the reforms is also illustrated by the fact that people rushed to buy tickets for the productions of the Fővárosi Operettszínház but they did not for revue shows. It is likely that these futile new revue attempts significantly contributed to that today Budapest does not have a representative revue theatre, like the Moulin Rouge in Paris or the Friedrichstadt-Palast in Berlin.

The conclusion is followed by a reference list organized by the different types of sources, then the appendices: an encyclopaedia of each person referenced in this paper with a short description, then the statistics of performances based on documents from the archives, and finally additional images. The dissertation ends with a list of the pictures and the abbreviations.
Major achievements

- This dissertation is the first to examine a topic which has never been analysed in Hungary before. The research of a sphere traditionally considered to be "below theatre", further expands the picture of the communist cultural government.
- It carries out the basic research, revealing the public and private collections, written and oral sources
- An attempt to accommodate the political and professional tradition and the genre in the context of performances
- Also an attempt to create an interpretation of revues and variety shows and its effects and components.

Publications on the topic by the candidate


« A szocialista szellem vasútján túl: a városligeti Vurstli és az Angol Park átalakítási tervei, 1949-1950» In: Kultúra és Közösség 2017/1 (to be published)