

ZSUZSANNA KOLLÁR

THE DRAMA CONCEPT OF THE HUNGARIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES IN THE 1830S

One of the most significant features of Hungarian drama history is that the dramaturgy of dramas and theatre plays gradually began to diverge from each other in the middle of the 18th century. Drama and stage related to each other like skew lines, as the aspects of writing and theatricalisation are both complex, given the multidimensional nature of theatre. Both sides had quite diverse aesthetics in the 19th century. Beyond aesthetic considerations, many economic and linguistic factors influenced the repertoires. Theatre managers had to work with the available properties of the theatre, stage effects, number of costumes, the members of the troupe, and types of instruments, and they also had to focus on acting, mirroring the social norms, facing the moral expectations of the audiences, and sometimes modifying the plot due to restrictions of censorship, not to mention the essential position held in the 18–19th century when theatre needed to entertain and teach at the same time.¹ While the aesthetics of the translated European dramas were mostly focusing on the style of the evolving Hungarian grammar, rules of rhymes and vocabulary, it was also one of the expectations to find the greatest Hungarian drama writer, the genius who simultaneously has Shakespeare's talent and can be as accurate as Racine. Unfortunately, we are unable to fully examine the original Hungarian dramas and “magyarizations”. My focus will be the comparison between the number of translations and the number of performances to illustrate the impact of academic dramatic theory on Hungarian theatrical traditions in the 1830s.

The origin of the dramatic views of the Academy

This article is intended to illustrate the tangible difference between the theory of writing drama and the stage performance of European classics in Hungary during the first years after two important cultural institutions of Hungary, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Magyar Theatre of Pest were established. In order to recognize the diversifying dramaturgy, it is necessary to focus on the difference between the European drama canon of the Academy – formerly, between 1830 and 1845: the “Hungarian Learned Society” – the promoted plays, which were published by the Academy and the performances that were staged between 1837–1842

¹ KERÉNYI 1981, 36.

in the Magyar Theatre of Pest. (It opened as the first permanent theatre building for Hungarian stage in Pest, and it was renamed as National Theatre three years after its opening.) The corpus was declared by Academics shortly after it began to operate in order to stimulate playwriting, to translate a greater variety of texts, and to provide high dramas for Hungarian stages and for readers, either.²

One of the main reasons for the revival was that in Buda and in Pest German theatre dominated, and it also became a political goal to empower the Hungarian-speaking community. The Hungarian Academy of Sciences (1825) and the first permanent Theatre of Pest (1837) were both located in the Pest side, they were created together at grass-roots level, they were funded by noblemen, and supported by residents from various regions and counties, as a patriotic activity.³ Both institutions incorporated emblematic figures of theatrical and literary elite of the time, focused on Hungarian language and grammar, and both were determined to develop strategies for the de-germanization of the stage.⁴ They worked on strengthening national consciousness, political identity, and cultural rebirth of Hungary.

The Academy was symbolically founded in 1825 on the regional session of the diet by István Széchenyi and other aristocratic magnates who offered a significant percentage of their assets to establish the “Hungarian Learned Society”. Shortly after the donation, the diet submitted the request to the Habsburg Empire for authorization. It was approved by Frances II, King of Hungary and Emperor of Austria in 1826 and codified in 1827. Then, the future members of the institution detailed its memorandum and regulations. The Academy began operations in 1830.⁵ In the memorandum, they stated the main purpose and tasks of the institution in the following order: first, to promote the Hungarian language, second, to publish literary and scientific works in Hungarian, third, to write critical reviews about the published books and papers, fourth to call for applications from individual researchers, and finally, to support the scholars’ journey. In the regulations, twelve exact tasks were highlighted. To urge writers to translate European plays for stage was prioritized.⁶ This aim was rated as fifth in the twelve points in the regulation of the Academy and was one the most exact objective of the document. Thus, having European plays translated into Hungarian was one of the main goals of the Academy during its first two decades. It also shows how interconnected the Academy and the later-built permanent theatre were in the symbolic battle for the survival of the Hungarian language.

² DÖBRENTEI 1833.

³ MÁLYUSZNÉ CSÁSZÁR 1980.

⁴ FREIFELD 1999, 148.

⁵ A *Magyar Tudós Társaság Évkönyvei*, 1833. [From here: Yearbook]

⁶ A *Magyar Tudós Társaság alaprajza és rendszabásai*, 1831.

The Academy supported the idea of a permanent theatre in multiple ways. They appointed the director of the theatre of Kosice (called Vince Berzeviczy) in order to support acting in the country, then, they created the “Standing Committee on the theatre” to get adjudicators for the playwriting competition. Then, they set up an application with the following question: “How would it be possible to establish a permanent theatre for Budapest?” This question was answered by different political figures, such as the founder of the Academy. In addition to the Committee of the Academy, the statutory meeting of Pest County also set up their committee with similar tasks. The two shared lots of elements and members.⁷

Because several plays have been transplanted to Hungarian since the beginning of the 19th century, the appeal of European classical plays emerged, and it has been endorsed by various social actors. This paper draws on studies from Ferenc Kerényi who researched the history of the Magyar Theatre of Pest, the roots of the first Hungarian acting troupes,⁸ and the hidden paradigm of Göttingen, which was a vigorous intellectual guidepost for peregrinate students at that time.⁹ Based on reports of performances, translations and publications, it is also important to identify the strong presence of French and English tradition, and to evaluate the enduring appeal of Shakespeare’s work in 19th century Hungarian literature. Many scholars have already proposed extensive studies and analyses of this phenomenon.¹⁰ I also wish to highlight the strong impact of the German culture in the examined corpus, showing that in spite of the Academy’s attempt to focus on the European classics a large number of German plays were translated, published, and performed in Hungarian. Several Shakespeare-plays were even translated from the German language. As Alice Freifeld remarked: “There is an element of irony in the Hungarians adopting the German idea of theater as a powerful tactic in their contest with the Germans. The solidification of a Magyar Budapest stage would mark the de-Germanization of Budapest culture but also an affirmation of the German idea of theater.”¹¹ The reason for this discrepancy is rooted in the significant number of German-Hungarian bilingual inhabitants, the language of schools, and intellectual life and privacy. (What is called as de-Germanization in Freifeld’s study is described as “magyarization” in Hungarian. For example, Mályuszné who wrote that the German population was being deluded by Hungarian settlers.¹²

It seems also important that the children from noble families used to attend German universities to take advantage of the opportunities of their education, to

⁷ GERGELY 1963; KERÉNYI 2002, 56–57.

⁸ KERÉNYI 2002; KERÉNYI 1981.

⁹ BÉKÉS 1997; BURKE 2008.

¹⁰ BARTHA 2017; BARTHA 2010; DÁVIDHÁZI 1998; DÁVIDHÁZI 1996.

¹¹ FREIFELD 1999, 154.

¹² MÁLYUSZNÉ CSÁSZÁR 1980.

explore Western-European scientific communities, to collect freshly published books in foreign languages, and to watch ongoing theatre plays.¹³ These elements contributed to the strong presence of German culture in the upper-classes; thus, English and French playwrights and aesthetics were far less significant than the German ones. Returning to the educational spheres: German speaking cities were the targets for the members of the high society. Young nobles studied in different cities such as Basel, Halle, Jena, Leipzig and Göttingen where the Georg-August University is located. It was well-known for its scientific community and their unique way of collaboration. Nobles and scholars virtually built a social network and came back to the Hungarian Kingdom with a set of knowledge especially from the field of popular philosophy.¹⁴ The importance of popular philosophy seemed higher in the past 10-15 years than we thought before. Many studies state that Johann August Ernesti, Johann Jakob Engel, Christian Garve, Moses Mendelssohn, Johann August Eberhard, Ernst Platner, Johann Georg Sulzer, Johann Georg Heinrich Feder and Christoph Meiners had an inherently strong impact on Hungary.¹⁵ Many of the young Hungarian scholars started to spread a new way of drama aesthetics. For example, Gábor Döbrentei in his periodical's drama program, or the first director of the Academy, József Teleki (1790–1855), who studied aesthetics from professor Friedrich Bouterwek, then in the 1820s he wrote book critics and the first essay about the comprehensive features of ancient and new poetry citing directly Bouterwek.¹⁶ His essay is also considered as the first paper with a romantic approach.¹⁷ It is also known that Bouterwek also influenced Dániel Berzsenyi's philosophical work called *Poetic Harmony*. Another important example can be Ludwig Schedius, who taught aesthetics and drama theory in Pest at the University for decades, had also roots in Göttingen.¹⁸ The canon was partly shaped by the drama concept of Bouterwek and some other popular philosophers, and also influenced by the ongoing trends of the Western-European stages and taste, but literature and reading methods had a rather strong impact on the corpus, too. Those nobles who came back after a couple of years from the well-developed German regions, began to build small communities, and later, they established Hungarian periodicals and small elite societies.¹⁹ Finally, these intentions slowly but systematically turned into modern educational institutions such as the Academy and, in its own way, the Magyar Theatre of Pest.²⁰

¹³ MITTERAURER, 1990, 25–40.; HERRMANN 1993.

¹⁴ BÖHR 2003; BACHMANN-MEDICK 1989.

¹⁵ FÓRIZS 2007.

¹⁶ TELEKI 1818.

¹⁷ TELEKI 1818.

¹⁸ BALOGH 2007.

¹⁹ BODOLAY 1963.

²⁰ MENDELSSOHN 1784.; VIERHAUS 1992.

In order to shape the taste of the audience, in 1814, Gábor Döbrentei founded “Erdélyi Muzéum”, a Hungarian periodical published monthly. He first described a classification and an aesthetic horizon of the expectations of his paper. He set a prize for playwrights and announced that he wanted to find the best Hungarian playwrights to promote and publish their work.²¹ This attempt failed: 4 years later, in the last issue of his periodical he confessed that he failed to find the best original play. Though he promoted a few texts, he noted that each of them needed a thorough editing in both grammar and dramaturgy. A couple of years later, another periodical was established and entitled as “Tudományos Gyűjtemény”. It particularly continued the job of Döbrentei, considering that Döbrentei was also one of its authors, but also because it continued to publish theoretical thoughts and critical reviews.

Count Jr. József Teleki, Pál Szemere, Ferenc Kölcsey, András Fáy, Mihály Vörösmarty, Ferenc Kazinczy and others published multiple literary criticisms, and some of them wrote essays about the principals of the ideal texts for plays. Finally, the same group of scholars established the Academy and continued to plan their investigation in order to find the most talented Hungarian playwrights and the best translations. The formerly mentioned periodicals published more theoretical structures than the Academy did. The Academy not only undertook this work because its literary interest was nurtured by periodicals first – as has been presented above – but also because they acutely perceived the political power of Hungarian literature and theatre.²² Another interesting feature of the Academy’s influence is that in the Standing Committee on the Theatre, the members were appointed from writers, literary and theatrical experts of the reformed era, and they effectively managed and evaluated 77 additional dramatic plays during the first year. Furthermore, they had free box-seats in the Pesti Magyar Theatre to inspect performances and they required that every play had to have at least 3 rehearsals before the premiere. Establishing the Committee was a notable gesture from the politicians and from the Academy, and it showed the importance of the symbolic representation of the nation.²³ It illustrated that theatre needed to be regulated by non-stage figures in power. Despite the original goals, the Academy tended to behave as an authority, which won its legitimacy from another oppressive power (the Austrian Emperor); therefore, it could not accomplish its goal.

As mentioned before, the goal was to symbolically integrate Hungarian theatrical tradition into the European one, to promote Hungarian theatre, and to get closer to West-European trends.²⁴ To reach these goals, theatre became a constant part of the

²¹ DÖBRENTEI 1814.

²² POÓR 1988.

²³ IMRE 2008.

²⁴ IMRE 2008, 76–77.

agenda during the sessions of the Academy. Special emphasis was placed on writing new, original dramatic plays and on translating plays with high literary value. The Academy set prizes of 100-200 golds yearly to reward original Hungarian dramatic plays or the best translations of foreign works. The program gradually reached a wide base: additional prizes were set for studies, for translating foreign dissertations, and for every award, there was a group of experts (adjudicators) involved who were academics and had relevant experiences and skills to justify their evaluation.²⁵

Who created the list that included the 71 plays? Earlier, Pál Gergely claimed in „The role of the Hungarian Academy in establishing the National Theater of Pest” that the person who technically composed the list of the plays was Ferenc Schedel.²⁶ However, a manuscript of the plan with the list of the plays is available in the National Széchényi Library, and it is unlikely that the suggested corpus was declared only by one of the Academics. The rules of the Academy were apparently composed by former editors and authors of the *Tudományos Gyűjtemény* and by other figures of the academic community. The first theatrical delegation created the list of plays and it was composed partly by Mihály Vörösmarty and the first adjudicators and judges of the play writing competition in 1831.

Analysing the canon

In the suggested drama corpus, there were 8 Italian (from Alfieri, Viascolo and Alberto Nota), 18 French (from Voltaire, Racine, Moliere), 22 German (Goethe, Schiller, Schröder, Lessing, etc.) and 25 English ones, respectively. Most of the texts were tragedies, as less than one third of the European classics are comedies. Despite the dramatic rules of neoclassicism, 22 texts from the 71 were written by William Shakespeare, and it is also notable that all of Shakespeare’s historical plays were included in the list. Although, Vörösmarty, as a dramatist, admired the way Shakespeare broke the neoclassical rules and still wrote great plays, it was not only Vörösmarty’s taste and preferences that resulted in the fact that almost one third of the canon was made up of Shakespeare’s work. Gilberta Golinelli contended that „throughout the 18th century until the mid-19th the term *genius* with reference to Shakespeare was central to the first major critical and aesthetic reflections, and it became profoundly connected to the formation and diversification of the various national European cultures and identities.”²⁷ The term *genius* also refers to *Bildung*, which meant self-cultivation/self-education in the enlightenment.²⁸ The purpose of the Academy’s translating

²⁵ GERGELY 1963.

²⁶ GERGELY 1963.

²⁷ GOLINELLI 2005, 139.

²⁸ HUMBOLDT 1793.

European classical plays was to develop an adequate way to write plays that will be better than the original ones. The goal of translations – as they expected – was to pave the way for the appearance of national tragedies. Although Shakespeare's King dramas were great examples to express reformist political views, political purposes didn't accomplish the goal; only a few of the translated texts were performed in the National Theatre of Pest. Academics expected the rebirth of the Hungarian language and literature. They thought that the golden days of Hungarian drama would arrive, if dramatists translated Shakespeare's genius into Hungarian, even if the suggested corpus included the most well-known pieces of Shakespeare's comedies. Moreover, later, Shakespeare's comedies slowly became more and more popular on the stage of the National Theatre of Pest in addition to the works of Kotzebue and other seasonal German playwrights. With regards to the corpus, Moore's *The gamester* and Sheridan's (Richard Brinsley Sheridan): *The School for Scandal* and *The Rivals* were on the list in addition to Shakespeare.

However, the canon contains exact titles, in many cases only the writers are specified, which would have made it possible for Hungarian playwrights to choose from a broader selection of plays. For instance, during the competition, playwrights could have chosen Spanish texts, anything from Calderon or Lope de Vega – with a small additional limitation “to be popular on the German stage.” – This implied condition reveals a lot about the needs of the theatre. The list of the French and German texts was similar at a point, as both had contemporary names and classics, either. Next to Corneille, Racine, Molière, Voltaire we find the following names: Regnard, Legrand, Colinn d' Harleville, Casimir Delavigne. After the 25 English drama German was second in line with 22 pieces in the list. The list here also brought under one roof popular ones (Schröder, Leisewitz, Iffland, the legendary Kotzebue, Müllner, Raupach, Houwald), and those ones who endured such as Goethe, Lessing, Schiller. From these three playwrights, every one of their works is on stage still today, but was barely a few part of the repertoires in the 19th century. What were the guidelines and the basic rules for translations? Translations must have shown as much resemblance to the source texts as possible. According to arlier trends and tendencies, dramatists wrote 'original' (new) texts from the combination of different existing dramas, while playwrights varied adaptations and changed the names of characters, cut complete roles from a play, or they omitted dialogues. This competition required informal but stricter translations. Even with this rule, there were some translators later who didn't compose their works with the purpose of taking part in the competition, but in order to transmit European dramas. For instance, Döbrentei translated Shakespeare's Macbeth skipped the famous 'hurly-burly dance' of the witches because he found it incompatible with contemporary theatrical traditions.²⁹ In addition, Italian *Versi*

²⁹ DÖBRENTÉI 1830.

sciolti, *French Alexandrines* and every poetic text and verse was required to be translated into Hungarian in *Iambic Pentameter*, except for French comedies; those could be translated in any style that 'suits the source text'.³⁰ Although there are plays on the list which already had their Hungarian version, it was recommended to translate „the greatest ones” again. Probably it was one of the reasons why the judges promoted three translations from Ferenc Kazinczy. The so-called *Singspiele* could have been translated in a loose manner, but it had to reflect the source text. The adjudicators welcomed additional remarks, comments and biographical supplementation from the dramatists.

The reward

Among the judges was Mihály Vörösmarty, the poet of many lyric, epic, and dramatic works, András Fáy, novelist and economist, Gábor Döbrentei, the secretary of the Academy, who also wrote plays and introduced a competition in a monthly periodical (*Erdélyi Múzeum*). Ferenc Schedel, also a playwright, member of the Academy and co-founder of the Kisfaludy Society, Jr. József Teleki, the director of the Academy, a historian and critic, Pál Szemere, author of periodicals, poet, and member of the Academy and of the Kisfaludy Society, too.

The reward was 200 golds for each drama, free publishing, and one third of the revenue that the sale of the book generated for 15 years. (During the first 15 years, the owner of the text was the Academy.) The purpose was to provide more and better plays in the Hungarian language for theatres, to have more grammatically „pure” texts, and to help promote the Hungarian language. In case good texts were lacking, awarding the prize was not mandatory for the Academy. This rule might have come from Gábor Döbrentei who was very disappointed in 1818. After 4 years of waiting to find excellent texts, he realized that none of the submitted plays was acceptable. (The competition in *Erdélyi Múzeum* was famous for the missing invention of *Bánk bán*, Katona's best play which was written in order to enter the periodical's competition. It is likely that József Katona's *Bánk bán* never arrived to Döbrentei.) The Academy had a certain procedure and strict rules to evaluate the dramas. It came from a former periodical where authors and editors cooperated to select texts. Among the members of the previously mentioned Committee, apart from the names above, we also find the name of Ferenc Kölcsey.

Between 1830–1834, altogether 51 dramas were translated, which means that experts and critics read and evaluated 51 dramatic plays. It is important that the Reading Committee evaluated all submissions; they read 77 additional texts. Several

³⁰ Yearbook, 1, 1833, 74.

of its members did not accept a salary for their work; instead they offered it as a contribution to the prizes to be given to authors of dramatic works and translations which were hoped to be produced in a steadily increasing number. They selected best plays to be printed by a secret ballot. The winning plays were printed in 500 copies or more: 750 pieces/exemplars, which was quite a high number. The Committee held so much as 15–20 sessions a year, while the Academic judges evaluated the chosen plays in a public session where not only academics but lay persons were also permitted to participate. Among the signers of the minutes of meeting, in addition to the names of writers and poets, we found names of actors who were invited to the sessions of the Reading Committee, such as Márton Lendvay, Zsigmond Szentpétery, Gábor Egressy and Károly Megyery. After publishing books, the last volume (Miss Sarah Sampson from Lessing, translated by Kazinczy) was never printed; the reasons are unknown. Each volume had a number, this is why we know that the 19th book, the drama of Kazinczy, was never published as that number is missing from the existing books. The names of the authors and critics of the dramatic texts are also available from different sources, such as the Academic Library where the registered reports of the Academic sessions are located. Later, the winning playwrights became each other's judges, and they began to work together in the theatre, and they formed the elite of theatre-makers.

The legacy of the award

If we take a look at the legacy of the award, we may see that the Academy expected a different kind of audience and a different type of theatre. Out of 71 works only 51 were written, 21 were published and just 17 were performed on the stage of the National Theatre of Pest until 1842,³¹ though 16 additional plays were translated by other theatre-makers of the permanent theatre. While the number of educated theatre patrons was increasing in Pest, professionals were still scarce in numbers. In addition, the aristocracy and other nobilities who purchased the season passes, in fact, avoided the National Theatre.³² The founders and academics gradually realized that the audience would prefer visual enjoyment, gloom, and a more populist theatre in general. The attempt to create a philosophical, high-minded theatre failed, as the financial aspects of the theatre-sector were not taken into consideration. Low price theatre geared towards the common-folk and village audiences required cheap sensations, spectacular costumes, and pageantry. Neither authentic national literature nor plays with high literary values fit the expectations.

³¹ Comp: Yearbook, 1, 1833; GAZDA 2014; KERÉNYI 1987.

³² KERÉNYI 2002.

Although academics did not have significant impact on theatrical tendencies in Pest-Buda between 1830–1842, still the observation, the critical approach, and the award itself motorized playwrights to translate more dramatic texts into Hungarian.