

BABEŞ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY, CLUJ-NAPOCA
FACULTY OF THEATRE AND TELEVISION

JENŐ JANOVICS:
THE FAMOUS ANONYMOUS
OF THE GENERATION 1900

- Ph.D. Thesis Summary -

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Keywords: Jenő Janovics, generation 1900, theatre, silent film, acting, directing, theatre management, cultural entrepreneurship, Budapest, Cluj, Kolozsvár, Theatre from the Alley of the Wolves, Theatre from the Huniade Square, realism, cinema of attraction, transitional cinema, thematic theatre season, introductory lecture, Proja, Corvinus, Transylvania, The Great Unification of 1918, nationalism, freemasonry, jewishness.

The doctoral thesis *Jenő Janovics: The Famous Anonymous of the Generation 1900* covers the five decades of artistic manifestation of the Hungarian actor, theatre and film director, theatre manager, movie maker and literary historian Jenő Janovics (1872-1945), a career that leads him towards the position of architect of a cultural dynamic that placed the currently Romanian city of Cluj-Napoca (Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg) on the European map of the history of the performing arts and on the world map of the visual arts.

In order to understand the source of such a fertile evolution, one must not neglect the fact that between his first step on the stage of the National Theatre in Budapest, in 1892, and the tragic end of his life, on the stage of the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj, in 1945, there's an avalanche of aesthetic reconfigurations that intercedes in between. First, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, theatre escapes from the position of middle class function-free entertainment and, having as guiding mark its elevated ideals of previous centuries, establishes itself into the modern position, as a factor of reflection upon the human condition and society that reconciles with its fundamental status of source of emotion. Second, after it dominates the first decade of film history, until approximately 1906-1907, the cinema of attraction, non-narrative by definition, with the sole purpose of demonstrating the technology behind the projection of moving images, empties its sources. What follows is a decade of transition, defined by the efforts of detaching itself from the hegemony of theatre in favour of constructing its own language, by the incipient formula of the cinema of narrative integration. Finally, Janovics is a direct witness, as adolescent and young artist, of the development of Budapest, around the year 1900, then, as Transylvanian, of the dismantling of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, as a consequence of the first world conflagration, and, as a Jew, of the rise of Nazism in Europe in the context of the second. The unity, that cannot be denied, of this complex biography is given by the constant capitalization of the opportunities generated by the asthetical, technological or socio-political context it crosses.

In the field literature, the Jenő Janovics subject suffers an inevitable polarization in regard to a blind spot from the history of the Cluj theatre. In May 1919, Romanian authorities take over the main building of the Hungarian Theatre of the city, in order to establish the Romanian National Theatre and Opera. The decision forces Janovics the transfer the activity of the institution he manages to the so-called “Theatre Circle”, used until then as summer theatre and cinema. The fact that the majority of his projects precede this moment, filled with controversy, has contributed decisively to the inclination of the Hungarian studies to concentrate on his career from before the unification of Transylvania with Romania. By contrast, the name of Janovics is mentioned in the Romanian studies of cultural history in the context of the establishment of the National Theatre, recorded at length, as an act of national pride, and remains in their attention from the perspective of the Hungarian-Romanian collaborations that he initiates after 1919.

If in the Hungarian cultural space the name of Janovics gets the proper acknowledgment, at the theoretical level persists a separation of his activity around the two connected fields, theatre and cinema, and as a consequence the problem of establishing his right title is being perpetuated. The two tendencies define him either as a prolific director, either as a valued theatre manager. Both versions are at the same time right and wrong. Janovics stands as more than what a fragmentary research formula can reflect, that does nothing else than forbid an overview, essential in order to identify the specific elements of his career and their degree of equivalence with the set of elements with which historians such as Gyula Szekfű, John Lukacs, Zoltán Horvath, William O. McCagg and Mary Gluck operate around the concept of Hungarian “generation”. In a profoundly unjust manner, from this generational perspective, he is nothing more than an anonymous.

The original contribution of this paper resides in the unitary approach of the plurivalence of Jenő Janovics. The study starts from a fundamental question: if we agree that he is a complex artist and, at the same time, a cultural entrepreneur (an aspect insufficiently articulated in the papers that have been dedicated to him until now), can we speak about him as an isolated case of genius, of vocation and superior faculties spontaneously initiated?

The thesis that is about to be demonstrated is that the complementary and contextualized analysis of the particular aspects of his becoming, of the aesthetical and ideological influences that shape his career, but also of the way in which Jnaovics himself reflects upon them, verify the criteria that define the “generation 1900”, as theorized by John Lukacs in his famous book *Budapest 1900: A Historical Portrait of a City and Its Culture*. First published in 1924, this fresco of the Hungarian capital, captured at the acme of its development, saves an important chapter to the similarities that coagulate a significant number of artists and men of letters or science into a gallery of Hungarian excellence.

The demonstration of the affiliation of Jenő Janovics to the Hungarian generation of 1900 implies the elaboration of a monographic study, both biographic and analytic, according to the three main stages that Lukacs identifies in the destiny of its members: the influence of the quality educational system and of the cosmopolitan experiences in the process of their development, the degree of performance reached in their career and the role of the political context in the individual decisions of leaving or remaining in the country. Given the fact that Janovics activates in more than one field, that is theatre and cinema, the paper is not structured into three chapters, according to this succession, but into four, a research option also facilitated by the succession, in the two fields, of his most important projects.

The first chapter retraces Janovics’ childhood, adolescence and early debut in multiple theatre aspects, mainly through the fragments with memorial character inserted in his monographic book *The Theatre from the Alley of the Wolves (A Farkas-utcai színház)*, in which he evokes the period of his studies and the acting experience preceding his arrival in this prestigious institution from Cluj. It is argued the fact that his option of insisting on the highschool years is not coincidental, but is explained by a phenomenon identified by Lukacs among the writers of the generation 1900, who sign a number of novels under the major impact this educational cycle exerts on them. The fact that, unlike them, Janovics follows a Real school tests the generality of two key aspects for the education in Budapest high schools at the end of the nineteenth century: the exceptional quality of the teachers and the importance of the circles of self-cultivation they organize under the name of “Önképzőkor”. It is this extra-curricular activity that enables, decisively, the first contact of Jenő Janovics with theatre.

In order to verify the diverse early experience and its cosmopolitan feature, associated with all his colleagues of generation, this first chapter also covers the superior studies of acting, the debut on the scene of the National Theatre of Budapest, the acting sojourns in Szolnok, Zaláu, Şimleu Silvaniei, Târgu-Mureş, Dej, Buda, Bratislava and Oradea, as a member of the theatre companies of Miskolc, Seghedin, Timişoara and Cluj, the doctoral studies, the stages in Berlin, London and Paris, followed by the undertaking, almost concomitant, of the functions of actor, director and manager in the Theatre from the Alley of the Wolves.

Out of the entirety of his activity in this institution, two initiatives are analysed individually. The first demonstrates the openness that Janovics manifests towards the innovative concept of the intersection of theatre and cinema of attraction, in the performance *Live Photography (Mozgó fényképek)*, the Cluj premiere of which he coordinates in 1899. The second traces the connection between the organizing, in national premiere, of a series of theatre shows with a didactic purpose and the program *Theses and Agreements*, launched in 1900, by the “Unió” freemason lodge from Cluj, whose member he becomes at the beginning of the following year. By the processing of archived documents, this portrait of young Janovics is complemented with unpublished details regarding his family background and his early option to give up Judaism in favour of the Reformed Catholic Church.

The second chapter examines the history of the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj during the period 1906-1919, when, under the artistic management of Jenő Janovics, the institution follows an aesthetic, artistic and logistic reconfiguration. Between the inaugural moments of the new building in the Huniade Square and the relocation in the Summer Theatre, three directions of development are being followed. The first targets the repertory that, along the tradition of staging classical plays by Shakespeare or Molière, proves a simultaneous precouparation for modern Hungarian drama and the aesthetical trends of modern European theatre from the beginning of the twentieth century. The national premieres become a constant practice, so that texts by national playwrights, beginners or well-known, are put alongside plays by Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Maurice Maeterlinck, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson or Maxim Gorki. The second direction follows the development of the theatre company and, in this regard, artists who make their debut and find success are mentioned, such as Lili Berky or Gábor Rajnai, but also great national actors that honor Janovics’ invitation, such as Mari Jászai, Lujza Blaha or Ede Ujházi. The third

direction is linked to the building of the “Theatre Circle” / “Színkör”, a theatre destined at first for summer theatrical seasons.

The artistic vision of director and actor Jenő Janovics, of realist inspiration, respective stanislavskian one, is followed within the definitive projects of his theatre career. Case studies, based mainly on the reviews published in the press, detail the three thematical theatre seasons he organizes, The Series of the History of Hungarian Drama (1911-1912), The Series of Ancient Drama (1912-1913) and the Shakespeare Cycle (1913-1914). A special case brings attention to the performance of *The Tragedy of Man*, in 1913, in which he uses, for the first time, inserts of cinema projections with an active role in the narrative. From the point of his simultaneous role of manager, director and actor, the influence on Janovics of the conceptions of Austrian director Max Reinhardt on the art of theatre is underlined. Last but not least, the activity of the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj during World War I is presented, it being the only institution of its kind in the whole country that does not close its doors during the conflict.

The third chapter rewrites the history of the Cluj silent film, from multiple perspectives. The activity of the cinema production companies founded by Jenő Janovics that function consecutively under the names “Proja”, “Corvin” și “Transsylvania” is detailed by a series of case studies that support three directions of research. First, its dynamic in regard to the innovations stimulated by the period on which it superimposes on, that of the transitional cinema, is being compared. We refer to the changes that, during the second decade of the twentieth century, intervene worldwide in the circumstances of projection, filming and post-production techniques and the directorial aesthetics, developed in parallel with the competition initiated on the European distribution market along with the outbreak of World War I.

Second, the activity of Janovics as cultural entrepreneur is being underlined, by adding to the list of intensely vehiculated names, such as Michael Curtiz, Sir Alexander Korda, Márton Garas or Victor Varconi, the ones of important personalities who are being launched, develop or experiment with diverse artistic roles under his companies. We refer to the Cluj cinema experience of theatre director Adolf Mérei, of cameraman Árpád Virágh, of actor Oszkár Beregi or of opera composer Nicolae Bretan, of national recognized female artists Mári Jászai și Lujza Blaha, who accept their only film parts; or the involvement in screenwriting of writers Sándor Incze, Samu Sebesi and Ernő Ligeti. Equally unknown are the swaps of local actors in the field of directing, such being the cases of Mihály Fekete and Elemér Hetényi, or of screenwriting, as

Ferenc Vendrey and Lili Berky, the actress proving, alongside journalist and painter Margit Vészi, the female involvement in the production of Hungarian silent cinema.

Third, the movie maker Janovics is being analysed from the point of the relation of his theatrical experience and the specificity of the language of the seventh art, analysis based on the artistic vision and technical level of the Cluj film productions. Each of these lines of research has benefited substantially from the recent recovery of three silent movies of the period, in almost integral form, considered lost for a long time, which bring, by their viewing through the instruments of the new theories concerning silent cinema, new evidence in favour of the claim, often enunciated by Janovics, according to which the Hungarian film, and we would add at least one scientific dimension of the world cinema, was born in Transylvania.

The last chapter aims to establish the statute of Jenő Janovics in regard to the two categories of members of the generation 1900 established by John Lukacs, the “émigrés” and “the stay-at-homes”. The only obvious aspect is that the artist belongs to the first wave of emigration identified by the historian, that of 1919. Janovics remains in Transylvania, under Romanian political authority, but in the lack of detailed motivations behind his choice, of the circumstances of development and direction of the last stage of his career, the verdict seems to be that of a stay-at-home. In order to prove that it is a false one, the chapter begins with a relevant re-enactment, with the help of a fragment of Janovics’ diary, of the decisive moment when him and, on his example, the entire Cluj theatre company decide to remain in the city. The uncertainty regarding the future of the institution transforms into a painful certainty when, half a year later, the building of the Theatre from the Huniade Square is being confiscated by the Romanian authorities. The conflict that starts between Janovics and the representatives of the Transylvanian Government is followed from the perspectives of both sides involved, rendered with the help of testimonies, archive and press material.

The core of this chapter lays in a synthesis of all the ways in which Janovics builds a genuine communication between the Hungarian and the Romanian cultural environments, after 1919. They start with the invitations honored by important artist of the Romanian lyrical stage, among which tenor Traian Grozăvescu, baritone Jean Athanasiu, soprano Aca de Barbu and conductor Jean Bobescu, who perform on the Hungarian stage to great acclaim. But it is the theatrical scene that stimulates consistent cultural exchange. Several plays by Romanian writers such as I.L. Caragiale, Lucian Blaga, Ion Minulescu, Octavian Goga, Mihail Sadoveanu are

being translated into Hungarian and then staged, and with the help of case studies, it is underlined the premiere of the award winning play *Zamolxe* by Lucian Blaga and the two tours performed in Bucharest by the Cluj Hungarian theatre company are followed by their reflection in the press.

From the point of view of the collaboration in the field of cinema, the project of creating a Romanian film industry is being discussed, a project that Janovics conceives and addresses to the Ministry of Culture, in 1935, and that he puts into practice immediately, by producing short didactic documentaries.

After summarizing the last years of Janovics' biography, marked by the Nazi persecution and by several specific episodes of the last stage of his activity, it is argued the conclusion that, by his active role of protecting the Hungarian culture after the retreat of the Hungarian borders, he is a "stay-at-home" of the generation 1900.

The doctoral thesis *Jenő Janovics: The Famous Anonymous of the Generation 1900* represents, we believe, a research endeavour with an impact both national and international. The rectification of the anonymity of Jenő Janovics, from a generational perspective, initiates a wide area of research containing the complex levels of his theatre, cinema and historical-literary activity. Due to the analytical limitations that the thesis implies, the present study represents in this regard only a starting point. From the Hungarian cultural perspective, the coagulation of the bibliographic resources around an integrating approach of Janovics has not only the purpose of adding a name to the list of the stay-at-homes of the generation 1900, but also has the potential of generating a reevaluation of its diversity, given the possible uniqueness of a cultural entrepreneur as its member.

Finally, the thesis answers to the historical and aesthetical reconfiguration of silent film started in the international academic medium, in the eighties, in the context of which the Transylvanian silent cinema gains a growing attention. However, the often invoked figure of Jenő Janovics remains an enigmatic one.

The present study responds to these research gaps by proposing a much needed complex portrait of this personality in an attempt to direct future research on Jenő Janovics from the perspective of "product" of Budapest of "Fin de Siècle". Seen in this way, he becomes, probably, the most famous, until now, anonymous of the Hungarian generation of 1900.