

The Hungarian Romantic Drama on Stage – *Csongor and Tünde* by Vörösmarty Mihály

In my thesis I investigated the extremely important stage performances held in the national theatres of Budapest and Cluj between 1879 and 1941 of the romantic drama *Csongor and Tünde*: I examined in detail the premiere and the presentation held at Cluj – with special attention given to the antecedents, as well as to subsequent productions. My inquiry revolved around three questions: when, why and how was *Csongor and Tünde* staged? What determined the director of the premiere performance, Paulay Ede to choose this piece for representation on stage in 1879, fifty years after the publication of the drama? To what occasions are linked the presentations of the drama? What kind of directorial and dramaturgical principles guided Paulay Ede in the stage configuration? How did his conscious creative decisions influence the subsequent bequeathing of the directing of the drama? In the study I used the play reconstruction method developed by Székely György and Kerényi Ferenc. The elements of the performances were subjected to description and analysis: the text generated during the dramaturgical work, the scenery, the costumes, the lights and sounds effects, as well as the musical accompaniment. Articles from the media helped to uncover the performance's impact on the audience. The scenic work's placement in a broader historical and cultural context required the usage of the results of other disciplines, such as history, cultural history, ethnology, anthropology, semiography.

The premiere of *Csongor and Tünde* was not the result of the need of the stage or the audience, but rather that of the respect for the author and for the work itself. The drama was rarely staged as a main performance and it did not involve a wider social and cultural context which was beyond its own significance and it did not enjoy success with the audience. Initially it was presented with the occasion of anniversary celebrations held in the memory of Vörösmarty, as well as during ceremonies tightly or loosely associated with the imperial-royal family.

On 1 December 1879 there was a celebration in the National Theatre of Pest, where the premiere of *Csongor* took place with the occasion of the commemoration of Vörösmarty's 79th birthday and the 50th anniversary of the work's publication. From the second half of the 19th century the National Theatre has celebrated for nearly fifty years the anniversaries tied to the name of Vörösmarty. Posterity paid tribute to the poet, playwright, theatre critic and dramaturge for the creation of national dramatics, original Hungarian drama literature and dramaturgical works in an age when the theatrical efforts of the Enlightenment and the Reform Period have

already triumphed. It is not by chance that from the beginning of the 20th century up until the present the existence of the National Theatre was celebrated with this drama: with the occasion of the 100th anniversary in 1937 it was presented to the public in the direction of Németh Antal, on the 125th anniversary in 1962 it was directed by Marton Endre, while on the 175th anniversary in 2012 it will be performed under the direction of Tengely Gábor. In the 19th century the work was already considered a dramatic poem meant for reading. In the sign of theatre building and elite literary endeavour, Paulay Ede included the work in the programme with the purpose of language nursing and ethical improvement. His directorial principles are demonstrated in preliminary news reports published in the media, as well as in the script's ethical aspects. The drama's potential to be presented on stage was promoted by its fairy tale nature and universality, which meant a democratic choice in selection for the multinational and multicultural audience of the Monarchy. *Csongor* appeared to be a widely and easily understandable work regardless of education and national-linguistic identity. The strength of the cross-border love story is the expression of a pacifist thought, which even after the dissolution of the Monarchy, first in 1937, then during the war in 1941 might have seemed a productive analogy for Németh Antal.

The shortened text based on the dramaturgical principles of Gyulai Pál, as well as the adaptation to the stage are significantly different from the spatiality-temporality and the underlying tone reflected in the instructions of the author that are present in the original text. The drama was written at a time when the Hungarian troupe from Pest did not have a permanent stone theatre and the ill-fated actors were constrained to travelling or to share the stage with German ensembles. The drama's adaptation to the stage took place fifty years later in the golden age of the National Theatre. The economic prosperity of the dualism fruitfully influenced the culture, including theatre art as well. Thus, the implemented performance did not take place in that barren, flat space where the fairy tree would be a miraculous phenomenon. In the case of *Vörösmarty* the scenery representation is the visual projection of the existential insecurity, of the barrenness and the searching of the soul – it is the philosophical content. Paulay is the first notable representative of historicism and meningenism in Hungary: he attempted the staging of spectacular, colourful and dynamic plays of classical Hungarian and world literature. His eclectic productions are dominated by maze-like spaces, realistic city representations, sinks, flying structures, Greek fires, numerous and hectic crowd scenes, oriental scenery and costume elements. The dramaturgical work sought to achieve simplicity and clarity in the tale structure, but at its conclusion the work lost from its ontological and philosophical contents: the lovers

were not left alone, instead, besides the pageant, the ballet and the Greek fire, the entire playing staff marched in to create a fortunate denouement. During the later stages of the scenic existence of the drama, these deliberate dramaturgical and scenographical decisions inevitably diverted the unique case of fairytale slapstick (formed at the beginning of the 19th century) in the direction of fairy plays.

The aim of the study was to place *Csongor and Tünde* in the context of national programme groups, as well as to identify its theatrical elements and its generic-stylistic units. The result of the research has demonstrated the influence of three genres: the drama can be evaluated in the „cross section” of the 19th century fairytale slapstick that was still present on the German and Hungarian stages of Pest, the folk play which was a variant of the former with the omission of magical elements, and the new romantic operetta. The above mentioned popular and entertaining musical genres of the 19th century were connected by two essential elements: the simple tale structure which often included a love story and a happy ending, and the musical insertions.

The fairytale slapstick arrived to Hungary from the Viennese folk theatres, its German versions could have been seen by Vörösmarty in the already existing German Theatre of Pest. This drama type mediated civic values through the intermission of a real and supernatural plot, where the fairy concept was a moralizing instrument – the intervention of supernatural beings resolved the complication of the plot, as well as the conflict. The typical frame-story of the Hungaricized German fairytale slapstick was the so-called Árgirus story. According to the theatrical-anthropological understanding of the slapstick, the story of the lovers revolved around the maintenance of social and natural order, while the dramatic conflict is represented by the clash between the old and the young generations, adultery, infidelity – by crimes against love. The farce is the result of the constant unmasking and metamorphosis of the surface, of the appearance. *Csongor and Tünde* is related to the fairytale slapstick through its dichotomic structure and character types.

Folk play is defined by the scientific literature as a variant of the fairytale slapstick which disregards the magical elements. Its initial, pre-1848 variant was also known as social drama, because it was a genre that was strongly actualizing and it openly or secretly transmitted liberal political messages. At this time these were truly for the people and about the people, defining them in accordance with their moral identity, not their material one. Thus, folk plays depicted the entire social division, both the urban and the rural milieu could appear in them. After 1848 this

form of folk play served for nearly a decade the preservation of values. In the 1870s the genre started to pick up again, but this time instead of the social aspects it tried to illustrate the issues of private life, and this would inevitably lead to the premature death of the genre. It presented the rural life to the metropolitan public in an idealized manner and as being something exotic. The specific Hungarian folk songs (nóta) or the art songs became a characteristic element of these plays. At the turn of the century this genre was replaced by the new romantic operetta, one of its most significant examples being the critically acclaimed *János vitéz* by Kacsóh Pongrác. The library catalogues list *Csongor* in the category of folk plays. The secondary characters, the costumes, the love story and the happy ending, the surroundings of the house of Mirigy, as well as the music of Erkel Gyula undoubtedly approximates the drama to the folk play.

In the year that followed the premiere, the playbills already included the name of Allaga Géza, one of our first operetta authors. Its tale structure and scenery, its relation with the scenic antecedents, as well as with the *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the *Gólyakirály*, while in the case of Ivánfi with *János vitéz*, links it to the new romantic operetta. The operetta is a musical and dance comedy of French origin, its text is simple, entertaining, its music is melodic, catchy and the costumes and scenery make it even more attractive. The popularity of the operetta was increased by the quirky story which, much like the folk play, expressed desires and ended with the administration of justice, an element typical to tales.

The performers had to have a high degree of theatrical and musical preparedness. Nevertheless, it is striking that in the performances of *Csongor* the leading roles were not given to the acclaimed dramatic heroes and prima donnas, but to the company's young and promising actors. Even at the turn of the century the playbills advertised it as a youth performance. It seemed to be an appropriate choice for the troupe, the rejuvenation of the programme schedule, the educated audience and the training of the actors. At the time of the premiere fairytales may have seemed outdated at the triumph of the national scenic performances during the era of the bourgeois realist theatre. Nor in its style, nor in its content could *Csongor* express the social problems, the expectations in matters of taste, feelings and way of thinking of the urban middle class. It was staged mainly due to the respect for the author and the drama itself.

Beyond the education of the actors and of the audience, *Csongor* represented a transitional period in the life of Vörösmarty and that of the national theatrical life. If the theatre is interpreted as the art of vision, then the classical drama of Vörösmarty legitimized the appearance of new theatrical genres and the transformation of the programmes and of the

theatrical canon. This explains the evolution of the genre itself, the path covered during its existence starting from the fairytale slapstick through the folk play and operetta up until the fairy play.

KEYWORDS: romantic drama, stage performance, first performance, commemoration of Vörösmarty's date of birth, scenery elements, Zauberposse (fairytale slapstick), folk play, operetta, fairy play, historicism, meiningenism, stage reception, history of genre, history of cult, theatre and audience, realistic theatre, semiology of theatre, theatre anthropology, libretto, playbill

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