

DISSERTATION STATEMENTS

The Stage Reception of Shakespeare's Lancaster-tetralogy (*Richard II*, *Henry IV* Part 1 - 2, *Henry V*) in Kádár-regime Hungary

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1. THE TOPIC OF THE DISSERTATION

The popularity of Shakespeare's Lancaster-tetralogy (*Richard II*, *Henry IV* Part 1-2, *Henry V*), which had seldom appeared on the repertoires of the theatres earlier, grew considerably in 1960s Hungary. This popularity reached its apex in the seventies and eighties during the Kádár-regime. In some cases it also happened that the audience could view two premieres in the same year, or the same director staged a history play twice. *Richard II*, which had been directed only once previously, was staged six times and also adapted for television in the age of socialism. *Henry IV* was put on stage four times, while *Henry V*, which had never been directed in Hungary before, was premiered twice. Two directors, János Sándor in the early seventies, and Imre Kerényi in the late eighties, directly proceeding the change of regime, also staged these history plays as a tetralogy. The dissertation examines both the reasons for and the consequences of this popularity, the historical processes started or rather justified by these stagings, as well as their impact on the present.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

Relying on the findings of *performance criticism*, the dissertation emphasizes that the theatre is a medium appropriate for independent study, for the evaluation of which faithfulness to either the author or to the dramatic text is not decisive. A theatre performance, therefore, does not interpret the written text, but rather recreates the Shakespearean drama using the vocabularies of the theatre.

The theoretical background is primarily provided by *Performance Studies*, hallmarked by Richard Schechner, as well as the "new clone," the *Shakespeare-Performance-Studies*, which can be connected to Zoltán Márkus.

Performance Studies emphasizes that performances are actions, which must be construed as a "broad spectrum." Thus, besides the performing arts – such as the theatre - it also contains, among others, performances from everyday life and the enactment of social and class roles. *Performance Studies*'s most significant contribution to the "new clone" is to expand the concept of the performance to both the proto-performance and the aftermath. Within the scope of the proto-performance, the dissertation studies what kinds of factors and processes lead to the various productions, pertaining to the aftermath, it analyses the stage reception of the plays. The research material is provided by reviews, scripts, photos, memoirs, retrospective volumes, contemporary interviews with directors and players, relevant archive material from the Hungarian Television and Radio, as well as present interviews with two directors of the Lancaster-tetralogy, János Sándor and Imre Kerényi, respectively. Relying on Schechner's "performance quadrilogue," the dissertation also emphasizes the dynamic relationship among four categories of players: sourcers, producers, performers and partakers.

As far as Shakespeare-studies is concerned, it can contribute to the "new clone" by interpreting Shakespeare's honoured role from several viewpoints. Shakespeare as an author can be construed from various points of view: as a special function of the text, or as a by-product of the text's interpretation or appropriation. Shakespeare is thus a "myth," a "cult," a "fetish," who, as opposed to Barthes' famous-infamous theory "did not die," thus, instead of his elimination, his reinterpretation is required. A sub-chapter in the dissertation, therefore, is devoted to the Shakespeare-cult in Kádár-regime Hungary.

Applying Shakespeare-*Performance-Studies* as a theoretical background, the analysis does not primarily focus on evaluating the performances' aesthetical values, but rather concentrates on those ideological, cultural, political and even economic processes which are brought about, manifested or perhaps hidden in the given performance. The "new clone" regards the theatre as the locus of social and political dramas and rituals – in Kádár-regime Hungary as a platform for social criticism and criticism of the communist regime -, and it is especially interested in the political, social as well as cultural issues exposed by the Shakespeare-performances. The role of the premieres on the way towards the change of regime, the style and content of the reviews, or the necessity to change the dialogue between the critics and the theatres (or between the critics and the audience) can all be regarded as such issues.

3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Shakespeare as a "myth", a "fetish" or "cult" was especially appropriated by the communist ideology. Hungary also eagerly cherished the Shakespeare-cult, inherited from the previous periods, supported and urged by the cultural propaganda. The playwright became a

Hungarian socialist author, a prominent part of Hungarian literary and theatrical life. The Shakespeare-cult in Hungary also contributed to the social esteem in which the dramatic art was held, and offered a feeling of *communitas* to the partakers. It became a means for adult education, offering also to the less educated the feeling of belonging to a cult.

The Communist Shakespeare, however, had a deeply ambivalent nature, which could and usually did simultaneously serve and subvert the official ideology. Paradoxically, thus, the Shakespeare-cult was also subversive, because the theatre proved to be excellently appropriate for social criticism, which was exploited by the directors in Hungary as well. The political role of the theatre was to express (in an abstract way) social unrest and dissent. The audience was also part of the theatrical game, and after seeing the guilty king deposed, left the theatre satisfied. The practitioners of the power might have had some twinge of conscience as well, and in the beginning they protested, but later agreed and even applauded demonstratively. The double mirror of stage and society thus seemed to be facing each other.

The theatre, due to its ephemeral nature, fell under the category of "tolerated" in György Aczél's famously infamous system (3 T – forbidden, supported, tolerated), which means that the theatres were relatively free in compiling their repertoires. Both János Sándor and Imre Kerényi argue that it was very rarely forbidden for them to express their criticism on the stage. Censorship struck very rarely, but when it did, it struck really fiercely. It once happened to Sándor that he was summoned to the local party committee, and by the time he got back to the theatre, even the scenery had been taken apart. There were such instances, but generally, once the repertoire had been accepted by the authorities and the censors, they did not change them and did not make any suggestions for alterations. By the late 1970s and 1980s, the eastern block, with Hungary in it, was drifting towards *détente*, which emboldened some theatre artists to probe old danger zones. Statistics show - based on facts from the archive of the Department of Agitation and Propaganda – that in the 1980s an increasing

number of dramas was banned from being staged. However, as we can see through historical evidence, directors are of a different opinion. The authorities tried hard to stop the dissolution, to reverse the irreversible. Nevertheless, for inventive and courageous directors, the stage remained a platform for criticism.

This example shows that a regime, proceeding towards collapse, cannot be saved by decrees, censorship or even by a system of informers. In the historian Éva Standeisky's view, the slow dissolution was present from the very beginning of the Kádár-regime, in the course of which periods of reform and conservative restoration alternated.

In the 1970s and 1980s a new generation grew up in Hungary. These young intellectuals had no memories of the Second World War, and, because they had been born into the so-called „goulash communism,” took for granted certain changes in the material aspects of life. It is argued that György Aczél, who had practised „carrot and stick” cultural policy previously, did not have enough energy to (re)make the pact with the representatives of this new generation.

The dissolution process can be traced on the podium and in the reviews as well. Though the reviews tended to cling to the faithfulness to both the author and the text and could thus be regarded as obsolete during the whole period, they were prime examples of growing laxity in the ideological discipline, as they contained a growing number of references to social criticism and dissatisfaction. No review from the 1970s records the fact that, for instance, János Sándor expressed his tribute to the victims of 1956 in his *Henry IV*-direction by placing the corpses next to each other (after the battle) in the way they were placed on the streets of the 1956 revolution. This was revealed only by the director in an interview almost four decades later. In the 1980s, however, when Hungary was proceeding towards regime change, many more direct references could be used on the podium, some of which are also mentioned and described in the reviews.

In Imre Kerényi's 1986 *Richard II* direction, for instance, John of Gaunt was put to death with the help of 20th-century medical technology – an operating table, infusion -, the banished, upon leaving the country, were searched by customs officers, the reports were written on typewriters. The gardener was reduced to silence with some vodka, and Exton, the killer of Richard, was granted a passport.

In János Sándor's 1985 *Henry IV* direction the peace symbol - a broken upside-down cross in a circle – was projected on the backdrop. After the death of King Henry IV, his corpse was picked up and carried around ceremonially, mirroring the practice during funerals of the leading Communist politicians. The new king's entry was celebrated by rolling out a red carpet, a reference to a personality cult. For these reasons the end of the performance was considered strange. One thing, however, was not mentioned in the reviews. Sándor also reveals in an interview that there was a tank ditch on the stage, on which the following inscription could be read: "Russky damoy!" (Russians, go home!) The director argues that no reviewer was courageous enough to call the public's attention to this inscription. The performances went on as if nobody had noticed it. Such examples clearly indicate the directors' severe dissatisfaction with and criticism of the contemporary socialist regime.

With this dissertation I wished to give a little bit more detailed and subtle picture of the cultural aspect of a much-disputed political system, the Kádár-regime. I agree with János Sándor, who argues that we should not throw out the baby with the bath water. We can not deny our past, which, I firmly believe, has to be talked about, but –in the words of Ágnes Aczél, the daughter of György Aczél– not with hatred, by posthumously and figuratively „quartering” and „disemboweling” the undoubtedly guilty and irresponsible dead politicians, but with a calm and objective mind. When we study and research forgotten performances, they, in Schechner's words, take on a second or more lives according to who

gets hold of, analyzes, and reconstructs the archival evidence. These productions also offer an excellent opportunity for us to study our past, because if we wish to familiarize ourselves with a former historical period thoroughly and in a more complex way, research beyond high politics and political history is indispensable.