

Faces of an artistic existence

László Márkus' importance in the Hungarian theatre and opera performances in
the first half of the 20th century

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László Márkus (1881-1948) had an all-round artist character: he was a journalist, a critic, an essayist, a playwright, a designer of scenery and costumes, a theatre and film director, a theatre manager and a professor - all in one person. The rich life-work has been forgotten almost completely. His artistic activity has not been revealed yet so the interpretation of his theatre aesthetic principles has been done in the framework of a survey of the history of theatre.

The first stage of the work was compiling the Márkus-bibliography, which meant not only the basis of further work but also became the organic part of my thesis. Until writing the thesis I found articles written by Márkus in fifty-one monthlies, dailies and weeklies, which had been published between 1902 and 1948. His writings come to several thousand pages. His art critiques and writings on theatre aesthetics are especially important. The bibliography involves his writings on political, economical and social issues as well as his works published as books and also the dramas, the drama translations and the ballet librettos that had been performed but never published. I have listed his articles, studies and scene designs that were published in books and annuals. The major part of the bibliography is the list of his activity as a film director, scriptwriter and scene designer as well as that of his theatre and opera jobs. I also gave the finding-list of the most important interviews made with him.

The first part contains the biography and the career while the second part presents the theatre aesthetic principles of László Márkus.

Data of the biography and the career

- 1881 László Márkus was born in Szentes on 19 November. His mother was Erzsébet Dobay and his father was Ágoston Márkus, an engineer. The parents got married on 31 October 1880.
- 1884 István, his younger brother was born on 27 April.
- 1888 His mother died at the age of 28 on 4 July.
- 1899 Passed his final exams at the Reformed Secondary School of Máramarossziget then enrolled for the medical faculty in Budapest. After two semesters he transferred to the Faculty of Law. Following the first term he broke off his studies.
- 1902 His first article was published in Alkotmány, a Catholic daily.
- 1904 His writings were regularly published in Hét and Művészet from the year on. At the end of the year, he joined the Thália Society.
- 1906 The periodical Magyar Szemle also published his writings from the year on.
- 1907 Travelled to Paris in spring in order to study psychology and philosophy. After five months, he returned home and signed a contract as a director with Magyar Theatre in December. Later, besides being a director, he became the main scenist of the theatre.
- 1909 Belonged to the team of the periodical Élet from the year on. His studies were published in the periodical Magyar Iparművészet /Hungarian Decorative Arts/ as well.
- 1911 His drama titled *Attila* was shown in the National Theatre on 13 October. It was also published by Singer and Wolfner in 1912.
- 1914 Worked for the weekly Új Nemzedék from the year on.
- 1916 married Anna Kiss, the daughter of a Budapest chemist, on 28 October. [The witnesses were László Beöthy and Dr. Dezső Battlay.] His collection of

- writings titled *Hungarian Troubles* was published in the same year. The writings had appeared in Új Nemzedék.
- 1917-19 Worked for the daily Déli Hírlap.
During the time of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, Márkus was appointed to the art commissary of the United Film and Motion Picture Works on 28 May 1919. The commissar of public education appointed him to a professor of the College of Dramatic Art on 24 June.
In September, he became the managing art director of Apollo Cabaret. He directed the cabaret until 1922.
- 1917-22 He directed, wrote and designed the scenes of several silent films in this period.
- 1922 On 1 September, he signed a contract with the director of Renaissance Theatre to design scenes and costumes. The originally one year contract was prolonged by Artúr Bárdos so László Márkus regularly designed for the theatre until 1925. He began to work for the daily Pesti Hírlap.
- 1923 Became the stage manager of the Opera House. His writings appeared in the weekly Reggel.
- 1924 At the end of June, Jr. Gyula Wlassics director-general appointed him to the art director of the Opera House. He resigned the appointment on 4 October.
- 1925-26 Designed scenery also for Belvárosi Theatre managed by Artúr Bárdos.
- 1930 Began to work for the daily Nemzeti Újság.
- 1932 He was appointed to the director of the National Theatre. He resigned on 30 June 1933.
- 1934 At the beginning of the year, with László Márkus presiding, New Thália was founded. At the beginning of October, he was chosen to be the life member of the Opera House. The Szabó and Uzsalý Pressing House published [Győr] his work titled *The Ethics of the Theatre*.
- 1935 On 22 November, Bálint Hóman appointed him to the manager of the Opera House.
- 1936 On 7 February, his play *The Tragedy of Ágis* was performed in the National Theatre under his own direction and design.
On the initiation of the Art College of Szeged Youth, the Hungarian Theatre Research and Dramatic Arts Society was founded on 10 May 1936. The president of the society was László Márkus, its secretaries were Ferenc Hont and Géza Staud.
- 1937 On 2 March, he was admitted among the ordinary members of Petőfi Society.
- 1942 At the beginning of April, he was awarded the Medium Cross of Hungarian Merit Order. On 4 July, the governor appointed him to the professor in pay category 5 of the Music Academy.
- 1944 He resigned his post of managing the Opera House in July.
- 1945 His writings were published in the daily Kossuth Népe.
- 1945/46 From the second half of the year, he was a part-time then an ordinary professor of the Academy of Dramatic Arts then the College of Dramatic Arts. He taught students specialized in stage directing.
- 1946 His writings were published in the weekly Haladás, the daily Hírlap and the weekly Színház from the year on.
- 1947 From May on, he edited the column Rádiólevél of Színház. In August, Tamás Major employed him as a stage director of the National Theatre.
- 1948 On 14 March, *Bánk bán* was performed in the National Theatre, in his direction. This was his last theatre production.
- 1948 On 25 April, he died of cardiac failure in his flat in Rökk Szilárd Street.

In case of a stop-gap work, it often occurs that instead of examining one part we deal with the whole. This is what happened with this study. The dissertation refers to every important stage of the career.

One of the most important parts of Márkus' career is his critical work. His writings, which were published in *A Hét*, *Művészet* and *Magyar Szemle*, show us a temperamental character and an intransigent critical behaviour. In his critiques on fine arts he represents a radical critical attitude when contrasting conservative art and progressive one: he sharply criticizes academic arts. Following the modern aesthetic achievements of his age, he finds the essence of fine arts in a special artistic content instead of a subject matter. He is against historicism and the kind of painting preferring literary trends. In his interpretation, the relationship between an artist and his work of art is one, in which an artist focuses on fine inner reflections, on the pain following the feeling after the impression of a passing moment, the rest of an experience and tries to express it in a stylized way as opposed to either the classical or the naturalistic way of creative method searching the objective reality of things.

What he considers standard is the work of Nagybánya painters, and he also welcomes the art groups named MIÉNK (OURS) and Nyolcak (The Eights). He discovers early Lajos Gulácsy's particular art and recognizes the values of the small sculptures and statues of Ede Telcs and Ede Kallós. While analysing László Mednyánszky's, János Vaszary's, József Rippl-Rónai's and Károly Ferenczy's paintings, his theatrical way of seeing was getting matured. Ferenczy's painterly principle, the so-called „colouristic naturalism” was the method that he tried to adapt to the stage as well.

One of the principles of his aesthetic attitude is that art itself is moral. Whether he deals with the relation of an individual and a nation or that of an artist and Christianity he points to the fact that with the development of individual styles the responsibility of an individual increases.

The starting point of his critical attitude is that an artist's work is inseparable from his/her personality.

He regards the greatest defect of our drama criticism that there are no general critical points of view on the basis of which we could understand this differentiated kind of art in itself.

While he welcomes Thália Society, which represents the modern style of acting, he regularly criticizes the barnstorming speech and the old-fashioned educational methods of the academy of dramatic art based on 19th century trends. He points to the relations between the style of playwriting and that of acting and considers that acting should be adjusted to the style of a drama. Recognising the importance of the stage as a framework of a drama, he urges the involvement of painters and architects in theatre work.

In his photo criticism he emphasizes the necessity of passing over photography in a painterly manner. He wrote studies on films as well, and at the end of his life, he searched the particular means of expression of radio.

In two or three years' time Márkus became a significant critic. For the scientific and art periodical *Szerda*, which started in 1906 – among whose contributors there were several publicists of the later periodical *Nyugat* – he worked as the dramatic critic. In the end, it was Ignóty, who occupied this post.

László Márkus was one of the persons who formulated and represented the theatre as an independent art.

As a member of Thália Society, he translated *Maria Magdalene* by Hebbel then *The Dead Town* by D'Annunzio, the scenes of which were designed by Ödön Márffy though Márkus

had a great part in the realization of them. In December 1907, he got engagement to Magyar Theatre, where his greatest hit was staging *The Soldiers of the Emperor* by Imre Földes (1908) while the most important professional success was his direction of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in 1909. It was owing to Márkus' work that the company of Magyar Theatre got accustomed to playing together. Being the main scenist, the fine art concept of the theatre was also his work. When the character of the work allowed, he changed naturalistic scenery for stylised one.

The Hun legend of *Attila* with its idiomatic language and poetic quality is high above the ordinary works of the time.

As the managing director of the National Theatre, he would have liked to show the works of as many young authors as possible.

In 1934, Márkus, having a progressive way of thinking on drama, took the lead of New Thália, which was established in order to experiment with new ways of pure art. The company aimed at realizing the dramatic completeness of dance, music, chorus, miming and fine arts on stage.

The important artistic achievement of the Opera House period of Márkus was that he discovered Zoltán Kodály's music world and he staged *János Hány* and *Székely Spinnery*. His original interpretation of Wagner's dramas meant a real sensation. When being the manager of the Opera House, he created a unified company and his programme policy preserved the main character based on the balance of presenting both classical and contemporary works.

One of the important values of the opera directions of László Márkus is that the parts without singing were not for filling the gap of songs but served the coherence of the performance through emphasizing the dramatic side of the opera. His efforts to strengthen the constructed and choreographic character of the works were ahead of his time. He was one of those who introduced the ensemble-play and founded Hungarian ballet art.

His particular effort is to emphasize the visual world of a performance according to the character of the play. On Márkus' stage, modern scenery expresses the spirit of the play with the help of the devices of fine arts. He designed expressive and poetic-symbolistic scenes though his scene and costume designs bear especially the traces of secession and impressionism.

The second part of the essay deals with László Márkus' ideas on the theatre. Márkus thought that the theatre should return to itself, that is, should return to its cultic essence and revive its original function, the cult of ideals, ideas and principles. Only on that condition could the restitution of the art of the theatre in crisis happen. What Márkus considered the ideal of the ancient cultic theatre was „Gesamtkunst”, which could come into being through different kinds of art aiming for one purpose.

For four decades László Márkus represented consequently and on a European level the literary-based theatre ideal that regarded the pictorial and musical qualities of the performance as main organizing principles. His particular way of thinking on the theatre is especially important. His activity is unparalleled in the history of the Hungarian history of the theatre.

Publications:

- In Memory of László Márkus Operaélet, 1998. September-October pp. 28-29
What will happen to you, guy? Zsöllye, 2002. November, pp. 32-33
Színház, 2002. December, pp. 43-45

