



Az Esterházy-kastély Marionettszínháza régen és most, Fertőd. Fotó: Dobos Tamás, Batár Zsolt



Géza Balogh

HUNGARIAN PUPPETRY: PAST AND PRESENT

Chronicles are a delicate matter. Although, the patina of the past vanishing in the haze can, more or less, hold out against objectivity, but, as we approach the day before yesterday and yesterday, we start to lose our ability to see things insightfully. Personal memories are captivating, and, like it or not, we become increasingly biased towards our subject.

Curiously, unlike in many European countries, the first puppet theatre, which had success on the territory of Hungary, was not a fairground attraction but an early example of art puppetry, i.e. the marionette performances during the festivities in the Esterházy castle. Joseph Haydn was 29 when he was admitted to Prince Antal Pál Esterházy's orchestra in Kismarton (Eisenstadt) in 1761. After a year, when the Prince died, the fortune was inherited and taken over by his elder brother, Miklós „Glorious” Esterházy. In 1769, the family moved to the Esterházy castle near Lake Fertőd. Based on recent researches, it is likely, that the building of the marionette theatre, completed in 1772–73, had started five years earlier.

The puppet theatre was in the French-style park of the castle, on the eastern side of the garden, opposite to the opera house. Haydn's marionette opera, the *Philemon and Baucis, or Jupiter's Journey to the Earth* was performed on the ceremonial opening. Maria Theresia also participated on that event and was accompanied by her daughters and sons. The performance had had such a great influence on the Empress, that, when she heard about the opening night of another large-scale marionette opera, she demanded the company to visit her in Schönbrunn, where, for the sake of a single performance, a small theatre building was built. Haydn's opera, the *Dido* was performed before Her Majesty. In the same year, the exceptionally productive composer wrote another work for the marionette theatre, and it was *Genoveva*. The accounts

of the event report on the beauty of the setting and fine changings.

The Gotha Almanac, in 1776, writes about nine puppet performances for which the director of the marionette theatre, Karl Michael von Pauersbach wrote the librettos. Besides the *Philemon*, the only marionette opera whose manuscript has been fully preserved is *The Burning House*, in which, the protagonist was – aside the marionettes of the *commedia dell'arte*, – the Austro-German puppet hero, Hanswurst. In the second act of the opera, a lord's castle burnt down on the open stage. A comic opera staged between 1776 and 1778 “brought the devil out of his den”: the Esterházy opera house was destroyed by fire in 1779 and the “homeless” opera company was moved to the marionette theatre. In fact, that meant the end of the history of marionette performances. The scheduled performances were gradually cancelled, and the new heir, Antal Esterházy, sold the marionette theatre's full equipment.

No material artefacts whatsoever remained about the first Hungarian art puppet theatre. Few gravings, a scrip, scores for two operas and decriptive essays from the period help us to imagine the culture life of the Esterházy castle.

In the development of the Hungarian puppetry a key role is played by theatrical folk traditions, the masked plays of South Slavs (Sokác) living in the Mohács regions, which were/are performed during the carnival season, called *busójárás*, plays related to Christmas (“betlehemezés”) and the most well-known type of the “burial of winter” called “*kiszéjárás*” which preserved pagan symbols.

The first, Austrian, German, Italian and Czech-Moravian travelling comedians appeared on the territory of the historical Hungary in the second half of the 18th century. They were not “specialized”: their show included tamed, dancing bears, picture stories, panorama plays, presenting pictures, tight-rope dancing, tamed animals and puppet plays.

There are much more reliable data about the puppeteers of the first half of the 19th century. In the theatre poster collection of the Veszprém-based Bakonyi Museum there is a theatre poster from 1824 about the performance of Christoph Benatti from Tirol, who held a “mechanical”, i.e. marionette play. That is the earliest theatre poster preserved about Hungarian puppet plays.

During the late 1830s, József Tschugmall Keresztély és György Wierer and Gaetano Pecci's *Theatrum Mundi* held performances in Pest, likewise the puppet theatre of the Pratte brothers from Bohemia. One of the most prominent families performing with their travelling puppet theatre was the Hincz family, who were Germans by origin. The first entry in their log, which has been preserved, is from 1841. They are the representatives of the Hungarian travelling puppet theatres who were active the longest. The first puppeteer of the dynasty, Adolf Hincz fought in the 1848/49 revolution and toured the whole country with his wife and son. They visited such places where, without fluent Hungarian, they couldn't manage neither as picture story tellers, nor as singers or puppeteers. Presumably, after the compromise in 1867, they were already playing in Hungarian. Their German accent made their productions funnier. Hincz's son, Gustav, worked as travelling showman until 1885 and he frequently had performances in the capital as well. In 1899, he was issued a building permit to build a stone theatre in Városliget in Pest, where the family staged their performances for five decades. The theatre was taken over by the state in 1950 and it meant the end of their activities.

The other outstanding fairground puppeteer-family of the Hungarian puppetry, the Korngut-Kemény family, settled in Népliget, in the poorer district of the capital. It was Hofer Rajmund, a German by origin from Silesia, who staged a puppet performance there, most likely, in the last years of the 19th century. About the activities of his son-in-law, Henrik Glasenapp, we hardly know more than the fact, that, sometime at the turn of the century, he performed *Faust* in Hungarian. The founder of the Korngut-Kemény family, Salamon Korngut toured

the country from spring till autumn as a showman and worked as a boot maker during winters. He settled in the other park of the capital, in Népliget in 1912. That was the venue where the Columbia Hungarian Mechanical Theatre worked, which, despite its impressive title, was none other than a marionette theatre. However, this institution, established after the American experience, went bankrupt after a couple of months. They attempted to set up a theatre elsewhere in the city, but returned to Népliget in 1927 and built their boot, where Henrik Kemény Jr. had his first puppet performance as a 6-year old boy.

During nationalization there were efforts to dissolve his theatre as well. They failed. The “show-ground” in Népliget disappeared, though, but Henrik Kemény Jr. stepped into his father's shoes and further developed the tradition, so exceptionally mastered by Henrik Kemény, senior. Henrik Kemény's fairground boot, reconstructed in 1989, was destroyed by fire on the night of 2 October 2011 under unclarified circumstances. It was at that year, when Heni (those younger than me called him “Uncle Heni”) had begun to die. He lived only a month and a half after his boot burnt down.

I suspect, the notion of “art puppetry” was coined out of pride. This is how profession makes a distinction between the puppetry-efforts of writers, artists, musicians, that is *professionals* and the folk and fairground puppeteers.

After the closing of the Esterházy marionette theatre, a pause of 120 years followed in the history of Hungarian artistic puppetry. The decline of rococo ended the social fashion of puppet plays for a long time. Although fairground puppet play impressed many Europe-wide in the 19th century, only the 20th century could create the circumstances for the birth of art puppetry in Hungary. Lóránd Orbók was the first who committedly and with full awareness explored the opportunities hidden in puppetry. Influenced by Városliget and visits abroad, he opened the László Vitéz Puppet Theatre in 191. It worked for four years, especially for invited guests, mostly prominent personalities of the literary world. Orbók liked glove puppetry the most. His theatre

was destroyed during the world war. Orbók got a scholarship and travelled to Paris in the spring of 1914. He was in Paris when the war broke out and was sent to internment as a citizen of a hostile country. After his release, he fled to Spain, where, in the beginning, he made his living by holding puppet performances in streets. But very soon, he was awarded a prize in a drama competition and became a renowned Spanish drama writer. He died in 1924, at the age of 40, from a disease he got during his internment.

While the four-year-long story of the László Vitéz Puppet Theatre was ongoing, Géza Blattner, the most important Hungarian puppeteer of period between two world wars, was a student of painting in Munich. He was drafted to the army in 1914, so he came home. Together of two other painters, he was deployed to the army's 2nd artistic division and from there all three were sent home in 1917 to participate in the organisation of the military exhibition on the isle of Margitsziget.

Blattner had been interested in all puppetry techniques from the very beginning. He visited Károly Hincz, the fairground puppeteer, in 1918, who accepted to put strings on Blattner's first marionette. Only nine years after Orbók debuted, on 19 March 1919, Blattner held his puppet performance premiere, *The Wayang Plays*, which included shadow play, hand puppets, marionettes and scenes with flat puppets. Though *The Wayang Play* was performed only three times, he staged a new show in the nationalized Vidám Park during the Hungarian Soviet Republic times, which was few hundred meters away from Hincz's puppet theatre in Városliget.

Blattner's last but one Hungarian premiere was in 1921. His programme, *Artistic Puppet Plays* includes fairground comedy played by hand puppets, shadow play, stick puppets. In 1924, he was playing a *Faust* puppet play for two months within an art exhibition. He used there, for the first time, the so called "key" marionette technique of moving the marionettes from underneath. A year later, he left Hungary and after a brief detour, he arrived to Paris on 15 September 1925. After numerous disappointments in Hungary he painted a lot, made new

acquaintances and participated on joint exhibitions. He set up a financially successful business, which enabled him to return to his beloved puppetry, so he founded the Arc-en-Ciel (Rainbow) Theatre.

In Paris, Blattner created his own 20th century, avant-garde puppet theatre, where he implemented his own rules of the genre.

The date of 17 March 1941 is an important date in the History of Hungarian puppetry: the first Hungarian, standing, professional puppetry, the Nemzeti Bábszínjáték, was opened on that day. It would have been difficult to find a worse moment than that: it was only three weeks before Yugoslavia was attacked without proclamation of war and Hungary's entering the war. Still, it seemed, that the fears of war would stay, for a while at least, outside the walls of the elegant, familiar theatre with 13 seats, decorated with tulip motives and radiating the atmosphere of peaceful times. The first three years of its operation were, indeed, a triumph and the audience ratings of its productions for children and adults alike outdid even the most daring expectations.

Rév was a lonely fighter. He did everything by himself in the theatre: wrote, revised, drew posters, designed and made puppets, scenography, directed and taught his young company the trade of puppetry. He could reconcile his artistic objectives with meeting audience needs. He decided not to follow the steps of his ancestors and for various reasons his work was not continued either. Unlike Orbók and Blattner, he was not impressed by fairground puppetry. He believed in meticulously elaborated art works. He had an aversion to the stringent improvisation of fairground puppeteers. In a tragic era, together with his mistakes and contradictions, he made an epochal work: he created a high quality, successful, professional puppet theatre.

In the aftermath of World War II, nationalization following the "year of changes" was something convenient in the history of East-European puppet theatres: after the Soviet model, a considerable puppet theatre network was created, which have defined the position of puppet theatres in these countries until today.

The course of events took another turn in Hungary. Our forefathers did not prove to be sufficiently loyal followers of the Soviet model. The Hungarian one-party state found that creating a single puppet theatre would be enough. The first managers of the nationalized-promoted institution, transformed from "Mesebarlang" (Cave of Tales), established in 1947, learned more from the results of the "model", then their leading ideologists: they simply copied the most successful productions of Obrazcov. Yet, they caused another developmental anomaly by doing so: the one and only professional, Hungarian puppet theatre, after its first stumbling steps, started to turn to adult audience as well. The floor show titled *The Parade of Stars (Sztárparádé)* using numerous ideas from the *Strange Concert (Különleges concert)* show was a smashing hit. People queued in long lines to get tickets for this show. In the pitch-black 1950s, Hungarians were eager to have fun and to laugh. Easy, happy entertainment and fun were absent both from the repertoire of the capital's theatres and from the overall political system. And from all the dictatorships of the world alike. The Puppet Theatre met the need and offered cabaret, parodies and Vienna operettes to the audience. However, that unexpected series of success shifted the focus to adult needs.

It was only in the 1960s when the equilibrium was restored, when, instead of the imitation (adaptation in better cases) of foreign styles, the image of an independent theatre started to set out. In this period, the company of the State Puppet Theatre also appeared on the international scene. If there are no competitors, it would search one outside the state borders. International fame was brought by performances for adults, first and foremost, by the adaptations of Bartók's and Stravinsky's works for puppet theatre. However, the first run of *The Wooden Prince* and *Petrushka* in 1965, then *The Miraculous Mandarin* in 1969 and Kodály's *János Háry* in 1972, lastingly directed the attention of the Hungarian public on puppetry, while the specific, Hungarian and 20th century form, shaped in musical productions, had a beneficial influence on productions for children as well. In its style and

tone, Hungarian puppetry turned back to the rich tradition of fairground puppetry that the cultural policy of the 1950s attempted to destroy.

But, the negative effects of the theatre's monopoly came to light more intensively by the beginning of the 1980s. The "State" Puppet Theatre, swelled into a nationwide institution, but managed by the capital city, held 1400-1500 performances a year in its seat and elsewhere in the cities and settlements of the 19 county. It seemed, that the theatre's absolute rule could end only some three decades later, when -relying on significant amateur workshops - professional puppet theatres were formed, for the time being, as part of the theatre structure believed to be unbreakable and unique and as sections of the city theatres. The first theatre to step on professional paths was the *Bóbita Puppet Company* founded in the seat of the South Danube county, in Pécs, the home of 170 000 citizens. In January 1981, on its 20th anniversary, the company became part of the Pécs National Theatre. Four years later, they were followed by the *Harlekin Puppet Theatre*, which already had two decades of amateur experience behind, and which was founded in a rather smaller town in northern Hungary, in Eger having 60 thousand inhabitants. The story of the *Ciróka Puppet Theatre*, which turned professional in 1987 as the last one before the change of regime, leads us to the present time events of the Hungarian puppetry. That was the first puppet theatre in Hungary, which rebelled against the "section of a theatre" concept: the company couldn't and didn't want to meet cultural policy requirements at the price of appeasements. The company could not and did not want to create performances by the dozen, left to the tender mercies of the theatre director, who looked at the whole genre without understanding it. It left the József Katona Theatre in Kecskemét on 31 July 1990 and continued to work as a foundation theatre.

Thereby, the company entered the group of those, who transformed the history of puppetry in Hungary: at the dawn of transition, they founded the second independent Hungarian puppet theatre. For a year, they lived the heroic and bitter life of mavericks.

Obviously, uncertainty made the company a strong community, instead of dishevelling it. They were holding premiers, selling tickets for multiple shows. They acted like "real" theatres. At last, they could do what they liked in a manner as they liked it. In April 1991, the city council of Kecskemét made a decision to declare *Ciróka* an independent institution. From the season of 1991/92, the *Ciróka* Puppet Theatre was the accidental rule-setter of a new era.

The beginnings of the company's new life overlap with the change of the political system. They rebelled against the one-party state structure in a time when it had already been falling apart. Likewise the free scholars of the renaissance art, they selected their own master. They invited Ildikó Kovács, the outstanding personality of the Romanian puppetry, who shared the same views, but her 30 years of experience made her wiser than the company. She had the knowledge to company wanted to acquire.

The first private puppet companies of the new period in Hungary were formed from the workshop of the *Bóbita* Theatre from Pécs: the *Figurina Animation Small Theatre* in 1983, the *MárkusZínház* established in 1990 and the *Levendula Theatre* in 1996.

Ten years later, in the *Ciróka* – unnoticed and secretly, at the outset and according to the law, fully against the rules – a generation of directors and designers were educated, who would significantly define Hungarian puppetry at the turn of the new millennium. They had no entitlements, but had something to say. They were committed, serious and determined. They learned on their failures all those things, they couldn't acquire within the Hungarian art colleges. When the walls of their building prove to be too narrow, they go out to streets. If they feel their bodies are too small to convey a thought, they put on wooden legs. Street-theatre, movement-theatre formations are the "children" of the Kecskemét school, likewise those stone theatre productions, which are staged by the members of this generation in the *Vojtina* Theatre in Debrecen, the *Vaskakas* Theatre in Győr, in the *Mesebolt Puppet Theatre* in Szombathely, or any other puppet theatre in the country.

The first steps of Hungarian puppet theatres established in the 1980s were significantly influenced by the State Puppet Theatre. It created a school both literally and figuratively. There is hardly any puppeteer who was not under the influence of this institution or was not educated, taught by it. Experiences gained there, were later used and developed by personal talents, taste, fantasy, and artistic belief. There were those who accepted tradition, while others refused it. There were those who imitated it, while others rebelled against it. But nobody could leave it out of consideration.

The State Puppet Theatre was closed in 1992. The company was divided into two parts. Established within the walls of the chamber theatre, the *Kolibri Theatre* set up to find its new ways partly by applying puppets, partly by reviving the tradition of the formerly closed children's theatre. In the central building, completed in 1975, a new institution started to operate under the name of Budapest Puppet Theatre, which attempted to preserve the lasting values of its ancestor and to keep pace with all things happening to puppet theatres in the world, in the new millennium.

Peter Brook in his book *The Empty Space* indicates four types of theatres: deadly, holy rough and immediate. He says about the "rough" theatre the following: The Rough Theatre is close to the people: it may be a puppet theatre, it may – as in Greek village to this day – be a shadow show: it is usually distinguished by the absence of what is called style. Style needs leisure: putting over something in rough conditions is like revolution, for anything that comes to hand can be turned into a weapon. The Rough Theatre doesn't pick and choose: in the audience is restive, then it is obviously more important in the luxury of the high-class theatre, everything can be all of a piece: in a rough theatre a bucket will be banged for a battle, flour used to show faces white with fear." On the last, 12th meeting of Hungarian puppet theatres, we had a wide offer from all four types of theatres. We could meet more values than in the earlier years. If a theatre does not strive to create its own image, then it

invites a successful director, to distract the attention from the lack of their own ideas. These companies strive to make “generally” good productions. Real workshops seek cooperation in creating their image.

With a few exceptions, Hungarian puppet theatres successfully caught up with professional companies operating for a half a century in the neighbouring countries. Namely, the members of the new gen-

eration(s) have learned the tricks of the trade. In the school or during their daily practice. They joined those ahead of them. Yet, if they decided to go their own way, they can do so.

I do envy them a bit. They are young, talented and they do not have to fight with the elderly.

(Presented in Subotica in May 2015 as the opening lecture of a review on Hungarian puppetry.)