

## The Hungarian Connection: Hungarians and the Theatre in Canada

### Abstract

*The paper argues that the relatively recent term “multicultural theatre” has not only been ambiguous but also mixed up with the concept of “intercultural” and “ethnic” theatre in Canadian theatre criticism. Ever since it became a declared national policy, multiculturalism has basically referred to a pluralistic society and culture made up by a number of ethnic groups. In terms of the theatre, it means that Canadian theatre may be regarded multicultural primarily because, in addition to the dominating English- and French-language component, it is further enriched by a number of ethnic theatre companies which have traditionally performed plays in their own language for their own communities. To support his argument, the author offers a case study of the contributions of Hungarian ethnic theatres and individuals to the development of modern Canadian theatre.*

### Résumé

*L'article soutient que le terme relativement récent du « théâtre multiculturel » a non seulement été ambigu mais également confondu avec le concept critique du théâtre « interculturel » et « ethnique ». Dès qu'il a été déclaré politique nationale, le multiculturalisme s'est référé en principe à la société pluraliste et la culture constituée de plusieurs groupes ethniques. Parlant du théâtre, cela veut dire que le théâtre canadien peut être considéré comme multiculturel parce que, en plus de sa dominante anglophone ou francophone, il s'enrichit de nombreuses troupes ethniques qui, traditionnellement, ont joué des pièces dans leur langue pour leur propre communauté. L'auteur offre une étude de cas sur la contribution des théâtres ethniques hongrois au théâtre canadien.*

### 1. Introduction

“The Hungarians may be said to constitute an invisible, and to a certain extent inaudible, minority in the Canadian society,” claimed Paul Kellner in a government report in 1965 (1). It seems that this statement needs no modification even at the beginning of the twenty-first century since it is still true that “the lack of a major impact [of Hungarian culture] upon Canadian society is clear” (2). Although Kellner acknowledged the outstanding achievements of some prominent Hungarian immigrants in the area of arts and letters, he argued that “both the biological attributes and the present socio-economic condition of the Hungarians in Canada, motivate the continuation of the already evident trend to submerge in the host-society” (70). Exploring Canadian theatre life in this context, however, he seems to have come to some contradictory conclusions.

While he remarked that “Hungarian participation in this field is insignificant” (46), later on in the report he declared that “Hungarian cultural activities in the larger centers, but especially in Toronto and Montreal, are surprisingly strong” (62). To support his argument, he mentioned the Kodály Choir, “an outstanding choir of professional standards,” which became part of the Canadian Opera Company and the two repertory theatres — Sándor Kertész’s “Művész Színház” [sic] (Art Theatre) and the “(Hungarian) Chamber Theatre” — operating in Toronto (62). Referring to Hungarian-born John Hirsch, who “created perhaps the only ‘spectacularly’ successful professional theatre in the country,” Kellner suggested that leaving Hungary at the age of 17, “Hirsch was much too young to have been influenced by ‘Hungarian’ experience” (46). Despite this seemingly acceptable judgement, in the *International Dictionary of Theatre* published in 1996, Martin Hunter, author of the entry on John Hirsch (the only Canadian director to be included in the volume!), calls him “the outsider ... [who] ... seemed to have an intuitive grasp of what was unique in the Canadian personality” (355).

Kellner was primarily interested in the cultural impact of the Hungarian immigrants *as a group* and not as individual artists because “these people are now in the mainstream of Canadian life; as such, they are mere names and have little to do with the group itself” (47). In 1965, however, the concept and policy of multiculturalism had not yet been on the agenda, and Kellner cannot have foreseen the quick and sudden emergence in 1967 of the modern Canadian theatre which was soon to be further enriched and diversified by the theatrical activities of a whole range of ethnic communities and by the contributions of theatre artists of a strong and clear ethnic background.

As a result of the growing interest in postcolonial, intercultural and cross-cultural theatre performances in the last decades of the twentieth century, more recent theatre research has tended to focus on a long neglected and mostly unrecognised aspect of the modern theatre, especially in traditionally multicultural societies such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and a number of African countries. This aspect concerns the phenomenon which Patrice Pavis has called “intercultural exchange” in the theatre (7), referring to the conscious or unconscious, direct or indirect mingling of theatrical practices deriving from different cultural traditions. Although it has not been explicitly stated by any researcher, for me, this “intercultural exchange” also includes the ethnic contributions to what is generally considered multicultural theatre whether on the institutional or the individual level.

The present study will, therefore, offer a case study of the contribution of one particular ethnic component of a multicultural society in the field of the theatre. More concretely, various aspects of Hungarian contributions to the Canadian theatre will be explored. After reviewing some recent theoretical approaches to the interrelationships between the concept of multiculturalism and the theatre, I will examine the 20th-century emergence and development of the Hungarian ethnic theatres within the frame of the formation of the modern Canadian theatre, and then, I will point out some individual contributions by Hungarian-Canadians who helped the evolution of (primarily English) Canadian theatre in several different ways.

## 2. Multiculturalism and theatre

Canada is rightly considered to have what might be called a multicultural theatre, even if the term itself “means different things to different people” (Berger 216). The fact of multiculturalism, however, would be difficult to deny in any section of Canadian society, especially since 1971 when Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau officially declared the recognition of the right of every ethnic group “to preserve and develop its own culture and values within the Canadian context” (216). Nevertheless, the concept of multicultural theatre has been at best ambiguous. Based on the writings of Maria Shevtsova, Nathalie Rewa and others, Patrice Pavis maintains that

The cross-influences between various ethnic or linguistic groups in multicultural societies (e.g. Australia, Canada) have been the source of performances utilizing several languages and performing for a bi- or multicultural public. (8)

Such an approach implies that there *are* cross-influences which result in or produce *multicultural performances* and, in this sense, they should be regarded as one specific form of intercultural theatre as Pavis suggests. In her introductory editorial to the Fall Issue of the *Canadian Theatre Review* on “Theatre and Ethnicity” in 1988, Natalie Rewa also emphasized this intercultural aspect of multicultural theatre by claiming that

The question of ethnicity cannot be simply one of heritage preservation and presentation. Playwrights and actors may have more in common with the “mainstream” culture than with their communities: it is too limiting to be a Black actor in a Black play with a Black community theatre playing to a Black audience. (3)

From an all-Canadian perspective and based on performance praxis, these statements seem certainly valid and important but cannot be applied exclusively in describing or defining multicultural theatre which appears to be a much wider category, or to be more precise, a collective term, particularly when it is understood as a *cultural institution* of a whole country or nation. Ever since it became a declared national policy, multiculturalism has basically referred to a pluralistic society and culture made up by a number of larger or smaller (but officially recognised) ethnic groups. In terms of the theatre, it means that Canadian theatre may be regarded multicultural primarily because, in addition to the dominating English- and French-language component, it is further enriched by a number of ethnic theatre companies which have traditionally performed plays — primarily but not exclusively — in their own language for their own communities. As cultural pluralism has evolved, the multicultural theatre movement has produced more and more varieties of the original structure. Ethnic groups began to perform their repertory in English or French or, more recently, produce Canadian and foreign plays in their native tongue (e.g. in 1999, Michel Tremblay’s *Les Belles-Soeurs* was very successfully performed in Hungarian to the Hungarian community in Montreal by an amateur group), playwrights of different ethnic background started to write in English or French, and various theatre companies have experimented with non-traditional casting. In this sense, multicultural theatre in practice means much more than an intercultural theatre

grown out of the “cross-influences between various ethnic or linguistic groups in multicultural societies”.

The problem of the scope and understanding of multicultural theatre is further complicated by looking at concrete examples of theatre companies and repertoires. The ambiguity of the term “multicultural theatre” is clearly illustrated by the fact that in one and the same article critics and authors seem to use the words ‘multicultural’ and ‘ethnic’ (or even ‘minority’) alternatively. In the first monographic summary of the history and development of English-Canadian theatre, Eugene Benson and Leonard W. Conolly speak about “multicultural companies” which are very clearly “ethnic groups” such as the Deutsches Theater and Yiddish Theatre in Montreal or Winnipeg’s Ukrainian Dramatic Ensemble (110). *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Theatre* (edited by the same authors) has an entry on multicultural theatre which begins with the following statement:

Several common traits—particularly the wish to preserve the culture and language of the mother country and to instil a sense of community ties—link early twentieth-century ethnic theatre groups (or ‘multicultural’ groups, as they are termed today) formed by new immigrants with later ones formed after the Second World War. (353)

In a recent article, Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert use “cross-cultural theatre” as a collective term and distinguish three major types: multicultural, postcolonial and intercultural theatre. For them, the terms “‘multicultural’ and ‘multiculturalism’ carry site-specific meanings” (33) and they divide multicultural theatre into two different types: big “M” and small “m” multicultural theatre. While the latter “refers to theatre works featuring a racially mixed cast that do not actively draw attention to cultural differences among performers or to the tensions between the text and the production content” (33), big “M” multicultural theatre “is generally a counterdiscursive practice that aims to promote cultural diversity, access to cultural expression, and participation in the symbolic space of the national narrative” (34). This latter type includes what the authors call “ghetto theatre, migrant theatre, and community theatre” (34). In terms of the argument of the present paper, the most relevant of the three types of multicultural theatre seems to be “ghetto theatre” which “tends to be monocultural; it is staged for and by a specific ethnic community and is usually communicated in the language/s of that community” (34). Further characteristics include the following:

The political efficacy of this type of multicultural intervention is arguably limited since the performances are largely “in-house” and tend to focus on narratives about origins and loss. Much ghetto theatre is infused with a nostalgic privileging of the homeland (real or imagined) as seen from a diasporic perspective, with the result that more radical cross-cultural negotiations are muted. (34)

Besides the fact that the name of this type of theatre is at best distasteful (especially for the European ear), some of the features within this definition seem to be either limiting or else too vague. For instance, the implication concerning “narratives about origins and loss” does not really make sense in the case of the

Hungarian theatres in Canada whose repertory traditionally drew on Hungarian and Viennese operettas as well as on farce and cabaret pieces. As for “the political efficacy” of the ethnic theatres in Canada, it is enough to mention that the establishment of multicultural festivals and theatre organisations all across Canada in the 1970s and 1980s were undoubtedly inspired by the various ethnic/ghetto theatres. The statement that ghetto theatre “tends to be monocultural” seems to contradict the classification of the authors according to which multicultural theatre — including the various forms of ethnic theatre — is one branch of *cross-cultural theatre*. A word like “monolingual” may have been a better choice to avoid this slight confusion.

Concerning the aims and purposes of ethnic theatres, it may be worth quoting an interesting finding of a statistical survey conducted on the multicultural performing arts groups in Canada in the early 1980s. Terry Cheney, author of the report of the survey, confirmed that “the predominant reasons indicated for performing are to keep the group’s culture and heritage alive, and to present the heritage to others” but also added that “about one quarter of the groups cited each of creative and professional arts accomplishment as an important goal” (29).

Enumerating further examples of theoretical approaches would lead to the conclusion that the term “multicultural theatre” still carries multiple meanings and is applied rather vaguely. This fact needs to be emphasised especially in relation to the theatre world of such countries as Canada, the United States, Australia or the United Kingdom which have been more and more frequently identified as “multicultural.” This terminological problem is most evident in the study of the history and development of the ethnic theatres, particularly when trying to describe and assess their contribution to the overall theatre scene of the given culture.

The main goal of the study of Hungarian theatres in Canada and individual achievements of Hungarian-Canadian theatre artists is to offer a new approach to a more complex and less fragmented description of the nature and characteristics of the Canadian theatre which cannot be properly understood and evaluated without the research of the generally neglected aspect of the web of relationships between “mainstream” theatre and all the other levels and forms of theatrical activities. The following sections of the present paper will make an attempt to illustrate this new approach.

### **3. A brief history of Hungarian theatres in Canada**

#### **3.1 Margaret Breckner’s theatre in Montreal and Toronto**

The earliest ethnic theatres were formed in the 1930s, with the essential purpose of creating a forum of nostalgic as well as artistic forms of entertainment basically for their own communities. As is the case with the Ukrainian, Finnish, Latvian and Yiddish-language theatres, the beginnings of the Hungarian ethnic theatre go back to this decade when Margaret and Samuel Breckner moved to Canada to settle down there. Margaret Breckner<sup>1</sup> was born as Margit Kádár in 1896 in Belényes, Hungary, (now, Beius, Romania). After losing her father and brother, Margaret became a dressmaker to make ends meet, but her true passion

lay in the theatre. Being talented in singing, acting, directing and producing, she had a strong urge to work on the stage but she also realised that it was not a career that would produce a great deal of money as all proceeds from local performances went to local charities. In 1920, living under dire financial and political circumstances as a member of a tolerated minority in postwar Romania, she married Samuel Breckner, a rich American coal miner who eventually managed to bring his wife and daughter to Montreal in 1931.

Refusing to learn English or French, Margaret started to get involved in various activities within the Hungarian community with the clear intention of establishing forums for the preservation of Hungarian culture. Within six months of her arrival she had managed to launch a regular programme of Hungarian-language theatre performances mostly within the framework of the *Székely Kultur Egyesület* (Szekler Cultural Association), an organization dedicated to charitable institutions as well as the performing arts, of which she was a founding member and life-time supporter. Since the Hungarian community including the churches and social clubs would sponsor plays and performances providing a secure financial background, she completely dedicated herself to the amateur theatre. She had made a name for herself in the Hungarian community in Montreal as an actress, director and board member. However, her most influential achievements would not occur until her family made their last move to Toronto.

Eventually the Breckner family felt at home in Toronto and their lives became intertwined with the community aspects of the Toronto-Hungarian culture. Margaret continued to nurture the Hungarian language among the young people as well as keeping the arts blooming and aiding artists of all mediums reach their potential. She became an instrumental member of the team who would purchase the St. Elizabeth Church of Hungary and she was also one of the founders, the only woman, of the Hungarian Canadian Cultural Centre still serving the Toronto community of Hungarians.

Between 1932 and 1935 besides offering several nights of cabaret and literature, Margaret Breckner's amateur company in Montreal produced 2-3 contemporary operettas a year such as Pongrác Kacsóh's *János vitéz* [John the Valiant] based on the narrative poem of Sándor Petőfi, the famous Hungarian romantic poet or Ede Tóth's *A falu rossza* [The Evil of the Village], the most popular folk musical which even had a film version in 1915. After moving to Toronto Margaret Breckner continued the same practice of producing well-known Hungarian operettas and offering nights of cabaret and occasional celebrations with Hungarian music, dance and poetry well into the 1940s. The activities of ethnic theatres in Canada in those days usually went unnoticed by the national or local English-or French-language newspapers despite the fact that the more or less regularly published ethnic journals found it important not only to inform the members of their communities but also to reflect upon the artistic quality of the individual productions. This phenomenon might lead one to the conclusion that Canadian mainstream or official culture fully neglected the theatrical achievements and endeavours of its immigrant communities but it must be noted that theatre life in Canada before the 1950s was restricted to the events of the Dominion Drama Festival. It is worth quoting two brief remarks from the 1951 report of the *Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and*

*Sciences*, which throw light on the current status of Canadian theatre. The commission came to the conclusion that “in Canada there is nothing comparable, whether in play-production or in writing for the theatre, to what is going on in other countries with which we should like to claim intellectual kinship and cultural equality,” and that “Canada is not deficient in theatrical talent, whether in writing for the stage, in producing or in acting; but this talent at present finds little encouragement and no outlet” (*Canada* 194). No wonder that the amateur productions of immigrants in non-official languages did not mean a great challenge for Canadian critics or reviewers.

### 3.2 Sándor Kertész’s Hungarian Art Theatre in Toronto

The best-known and most successful Hungarian-Canadian theatre venture to date is certainly the Hungarian Art Theatre in Toronto established in 1958 by Sándor Kertész who was born in 1911 in Debrecen, Hungary where he started his acting career in 1929. After returning from the war, he worked as an actor and director in Debrecen, Miskolc and Pécs, then in 1952 he moved to Budapest. He left Hungary in 1956 and arrived in Canada in 1958. A man of great talent both in acting and directing, Kertész could not live without a stage, and it did not take long for him to establish his own theatre despite the fact that “the outlook was anything but promising” (Kertész 646). As he put it in his recollections of the 23-year history of the Hungarian Art Theatre:

“If you start a new venture you can expect some difficulties.” The establishment of a Hungarian theatre in the most Anglo-Saxon city in North America really brought home the full meaning of this convenient phrase. (649)

As a result of his life-long love of the theatre as well as of his outstanding qualities as actor, director and organiser, the Hungarian Art Theatre in Toronto, which operated for more than three decades, became the only professional Hungarian theatre in North America with a repertory of Hungarian operettas, comedies and some contemporary foreign plays translated into Hungarian. Kertész’s company had been awarded a number of prizes at the regular Multicultural Theatre Festival in Toronto including the Best Male Actor for Kertész in 1977 for his leading role in *The Rape of the Sabine Women* and the Best Director and Best Leading Actor also for him in Ferenc Molnár’s *The Guardsman* which was nominated as Best Production of the 8th Festival in 1979. In 1984 Sándor Kertész was presented with the Award of Merit which was established by the Toronto Council in 1956 “in the form of a suitably inscribed medallion, to persons who have attained distinction and renown in various fields of endeavour” (Eggleton). These awards and contemporary reviews attest to the high quality of work in the Hungarian Theatre. But for the researcher there are more challenging aspects than the simple fact of recording the outstanding achievement of an ethnic theatre. There are at least two points which deserve more attention.

In his bilingual book entitled *Déryné voltam Kanadában/Curtain at Eight*, Kertész gives a very detailed history of the Hungarian Art Theatre of Toronto although it is not a systematic study and the work painfully lacks proper scholarly

documentation. In the chapter on the first Multicultural Theatre Festival in Toronto, the author recalls what a surprise he and his friends felt about the official recognition of the right of the ethnic groups to preserve their native tongue and cultural heritage and then makes the following remark:

Just for curiosity's sake, I'd like to mention that it was I—along with our dramaturge, Dr. Andrew Achim—who suggested that every year, a multicultural theatre festival should be held in Toronto. To my surprise, there was no red tape, no delay, no piling up of papers. They said it was a good idea and that we should go ahead and do it. The recently established Multicultural Theatre Association then took the matter over. (771)

Although no written document to prove this story is available, the very fact of Kertész's company being a constant participant (and frequent award-winner) of the festivals seems to support the argument. Even if it is only partially true, it appears highly important that the idea of the multicultural theatre festival may have derived from a Hungarian or any other ethnic artist who may have felt the need to go beyond his/her own ethnic community and show their achievement in a healthy and competitive environment made up by similar ethnic companies working towards the very same goal: to provide a culturally significant alternative to the mainstream theatre in Canada.

Although the Festival has often been regarded as a kind of continuation of the Dominion Drama Festival, to me, it is much more than that. The fact that the jury of the festival after the first few years consisted of English-speaking members and that reviews of the productions were written by Canadian critics may have created a cross-cultural bridge between the ethnic and mainstream theatres. This is the second point which is worth considering. One of the critics who often published reviews of the Hungarian Art Theatre productions in the short-lived theatrical journal, *Onion*, was John Herbert, author of the now classic *Fortune and Men's Eyes*. As a critic, he seems to have tried to place the productions he had seen on the colourful palette of the contemporary Canadian theatre. His understanding of the role of the Hungarian Art Theatre in the Canadian theatre is more than clear in his review on *Baroness Lilly* performed in December 1976:

We are rarely reminded of missing elements in our lives until, often by chance, something happens to point out a hole in our cultural fabric. In Canada we can find elegance and pomposity, opulence and pretension at our Stratford Festival; there is academic neatness, average intelligence and middle-of-the-road taste exhibited by Toronto Arts Productions at the St. Lawrence Centre Theatre, we may receive some bit of pleasure through the demonstrations of directing techniques and comfortable sentimentality shown at Tarragon Theatre; but what we rarely find anywhere in our theatre is CHARM.

The Hungarian Art Theatre of Toronto glows with this lovely old-world virtue and it is a delight to watch the players in the operetta *Baroness Lilly* tease and flirt their ways through an evening of romantic songs and mistaken identities. (qtd in Kertész 499)



Can it be supposed that theatre reviews do have a role in shaping public or professional opinion? Whether the answer is in the affirmative or in the negative, at least the critic him/herself will be influenced by the various experiences which provide the raw material and sometimes motivation for his/her writing. The following example may serve as a support of this argument. In 1978 Linda Manning wrote a rather lengthy article on the 20th anniversary of Kertész's Theatre in *Scene Changes*, Ontario's Theatre Magazine, in which she remarked that

It is interesting to note that while German and Italian opera are traditions in Canada, the Hungarian operetta, which compares most favourably with traditional opera in quality and performance, is unknown and largely unappreciated by Canadian audiences. (qtd in Kertész 557)

When seven years later the Toronto Operetta Theatre was established, the first performance was *The Count of Luxembourg* by Ferenc Lehár and during the past 18 years their repertory has included 9 Hungarian operettas! This is not to say that the establishment of the Toronto Operetta Theatre was directly motivated or even influenced by the generally acclaimed musical productions of Kertész's company but perhaps it is not accidental that the founder and present general director of TOT, Guillermo Silva-Marin, is from Puerto Rico, yet another Canadian artist of a clearly distinguished ethnic background. These facts warn the researcher of multicultural or ethnic theatre in Canada that the critical reception and possible impact of the productions of any ethnic theatre should be explored more thoroughly.

Sándor Kertész died in 1990 and his theatre was taken over by Vilmos Kosaras, who decided to continue the work of his predecessor. He graduated from the Faculty of Theatre Arts in Budapest, and after working at various theatres in Győr and Budapest, he became assistant director and then producer in the Hungarian Television. He left Hungary in 1973 and moved to Toronto in 1975 where he got involved with Kertész's theatre and became producer director of the Multicultural TV Hungarian magazine. Financial difficulties and the fact that the number of Hungarian-Canadians interested in maintaining their theatrical tradition seemed to decrease made him try new ways. He renamed the theatre Kertész Sándor Hungarian Theatre in memory of its founder and continued to mount great Hungarian and Austrian operettas. In an attempt to make the theatre more attractive to younger audiences, he also produced *The Fiddler on the Roof*, one of the greatest successes in the 1990s, and some English-language performances such as Imre Kálmán's *Countess Maritza* translated by Gábor Zsigovics and himself. During the past few years, however, the theatre stopped its regular operation and the fate of the 40-year old venture remains to be seen in the near future.

### 3.3 The Hungarian Drama Club of Vancouver

There is no doubt that Toronto, the cultural capital of English-Canada, has attracted the greatest number of cultural and theatrical activities related to the ethnic groups with a European background but there have been other larger urban centres following this trend. In terms of Hungarian culture, during the past three

decades the Hungarian Drama Club in Vancouver has proved to be a successful venture even though their recognition outside Vancouver cannot be compared to that of the Hungarian Art Theatre in Toronto.

The Hungarian Drama Club was founded after the arrival in Canada of Györgyi Hegedős (Mrs. Mustonen) as “one of the departments of the Hungarian Cultural Society of Greater Vancouver” in 1972 (*Rivaldafényben* 334). Györgyi Hegedős<sup>2</sup> was born in Budapest where she studied dancing and acting and became an actress and winner of the prestigious Jászai Award for her excellent performances in operetta and musical productions. She left Hungary in 1972 and settled down in Vancouver where she immediately got involved with Hungarian cultural life. Unlike Margaret Breckner or Sándor Kertész, Györgyi Hegedős has performed both in English and Hungarian, appeared on TV and in films. In 1983 she was nominated for the Genie Award as Best Actress in the film *The Great Meat Eater*. Although the Vancouver Drama Club was managed by Miklós Tamási until his death in 1994, Györgyi Hegedős has always played a decisive role in the company both as actress and director. The fact that she and a few other members of the company (e.g. Tibor Kalmár) regularly performed both in English and Hungarian made the story of the Vancouver Hungarian theatre different from Kertész’s theatre in Toronto.

After a long preparation period, the first public performance of the Vancouver Drama Club, a night of cabaret, was offered to the Hungarian community in 1974. Their first full-length theatrical production, the well-known operetta, Jenő Huszka’s *Gül Baba*, premiered in May 1977 and, in the same year, the company participated with this show at the Second Annual Multicultural Theatre Festival in Vancouver. The Hungarian Drama Club, later renamed Dajka Theatre, has offered two new productions, some of them running every night for two weeks, and a number of nights of cabaret and poetry on various occasions. As opposed to Kertész’s theatre in Toronto, the Dajka Theatre produced not only Hungarian operettas but also prose plays including such Hungarian works as Ferenc Molnár’s *Olympia*, *The Lawyer*, and *Liliom* (in English), István Örkény’s *Catsplay*, Zsigmond Móricz’s *Sári bíró* (Judge Sári) as well as Bernard Slade’s *Same Time, Next Year* (in English) and John Murrell’s *Sarah*.

The following short paragraph from the scrapbook of the Dajka Theatre celebrating the 25th anniversary of their existence properly sums up the role of the company in the cultural life of Vancouver:

The originators of the Dajka Theatre aimed at preserving the Hungarian spirit and becoming part of the multicultural mosaic of Canada. They have achieved these goals. In twenty-five years, their work has become part of the Western Canadian culture. These artists, too, created history. (334)

## 4. Hungarians and the Canadian theatre

### 4.1 John Hirsch

In an article on European directors László Marton and Tadeusz Bródecki working as guests in Canadian theatres in 2001, Urjo Karela had the following to say: “There have been important European influences on our theatre before this; the late director John Hirsch, who was born in Hungary, is the prime example” (55). This statement coming from somebody who was one of the makers of the modern Canadian theatre seems to defy Kellner’s above quoted dismissal of John Hirsch as a Hungarian-Canadian director. In her obituary in *Macleans* magazine, Diane Turbide recalls the opinion of actress Martha Henry, who worked with Hirsch several times at Stratford: “[Hirsch] brought with him from Hungary all of that European ancestry, his sense of humor, and he showed things we could never have known otherwise. ... It was an acerbic, raw, vital piece of theatre — and it was John at his best” (qtd. in Turbide 54). The importance of John Hirsch, co-founder and first artistic director of the Manitoba Theatre Centre, head of television drama at the CBC and artistic director of the Canadian Stratford Festival, in the development of Canadian theatre can hardly be questioned but his work has not yet been researched or even documented properly. An analytical study of his life, concept of theatre as well as his directorial aesthetics may be able to answer the question: to what extent did his Hungarian/Central European background determine his way of thinking and artistic goals in the Canadian theatre. What is even more important in his case is that Hirsch, who was forced to leave Hungary because of his Jewish background in the Second World War, became a determined Canadian citizen who turned his love of theatre that he had brought with himself from Hungary to the benefit of his second home, Winnipeg. As he wrote in 1978:

When I say “Canadian”, I’m not speaking out of narrow nationalism; I’m talking about a sense of self-awareness—a joy of being oneself, a celebration of one’s uniqueness in a homogenized world. It is only through being at times even arrogantly oneself that we can contribute to the world. (47)

As a Hungarian immigrant, John Hirsch’s career is also unique in that, despite some highly critical reviews of his work (see e.g. Garebian), he became a celebrated member of the English-Canadian theatre world. The fact that he is the only Canadian director in the *International Dictionary of Theatre* published in 1991 can also be regarded as an international recognition of his work in the theatre.

### 4.2 Peter Hay

Theatre is a complex form of art not only in the sense that it needs the cooperation of various different artists — actors, directors, designers, playwrights, etc. — but also in that it is still closely related to literature and the writing and publication of stageable dramatic texts. The story of Canadian drama can be traced back to at least the nineteenth century but Canadian plays in print had been rarely available before the two most important drama publishers,

Talonbooks and Playwrights Canada Press began to publish contemporary Canadian plays on a regular basis. While the predecessor of Playwrights Canada Press was established in 1972, Talonbooks started to publish books of poetry in 1963, and then in 1969, it “diversified into drama with the publication of Beverly Simon’s *Crabdance*, James Reaney’s *Colours in the Dark*, and George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, all of which have become international classics of the Canadian stage” (“A Brief History”). This “diversification” was motivated basically by Peter Hay, a Hungarian-born dramaturge, literary agent, drama critic, editor and author of some ten books<sup>3</sup>. Born as Péter Majoros in 1944 in Budapest, through a second marriage of his mother, Peter Hay was adopted by Gyula Hay, the well-known Hungarian playwright, in 1945. For political reasons, in 1957 Peter was sent to England to his maternal grandparents where he continued his schools and graduated at Oxford. In 1966 he apprenticed with Margaret Ramsay, England’s top play agent at the time, and then founded The Oxford Literary Agency with Elizabeth Sweeting, administrator of the Oxford Playhouse. Hay’s main “discovery” at the time was Christopher Hampton who was his college mate at Oxford. He was also on the committee that selected and produced Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* at the Edinburgh Festival. In 1967 Peter Hay received an invitation from Michael Bawtree, an English-born protege of Michael Langham, then director of the Stratford Festival to direct plays and teach at the recently founded Simon Fraser University, outside Vancouver. Soon after his arrival in Canada, he met John Juliani, with whom he worked closely the following five years. For a while Hay worked as a theatre critic for *The Vancouver Province* and other publications, wrote short scripts, started publishing plays, the first of which was his father’s play *Have*, followed by *Crabdance*. This latter play was published for the Seattle production at ACT in 1969. As Peter Hay put it in his letter written to the author of this essay:

I took the idea of publishing plays in conjunction with a production from Jean Vilar’s TNP in Paris and Avignon, which had staged my father’s *God, Emperor and Peasant* a few years earlier, and had sold tens of thousands of copies of the script to a captive audience. It seemed logical that the best marketing of plays is through the theatre, and I went down to Seattle to sell *Crabdance* in the lobby. (Hay, “Letter” 1)

The opportunity to put his idea into wider practice came when in the same year he got a job as the dramaturge/literary manager of The Vancouver Playhouse, under its new artistic director, David Gardner. Up to that point the word dramaturg(e) was practically unknown in the American or Canadian theatre — only Stratford and Minneapolis (both because of Michael Langham) had employed even a literary manager. Later on Hay wrote several articles on the role and importance of the dramaturge (“Dramaturgy”). Gardner liked the idea of employing the first dramaturge at a regional theatre, and he also endorsed the idea of publishing scripts, though not at the Playhouse’s expense. That is why Hay approached Talonbooks, then a small letterpress that had published a few books of poetry, with the idea of launching a series of original Canadian plays — the first one being James Reaney’s *Colours in the Dark*. Although not without problems and conflicts with the management, Peter Hay was editor of the drama series of Talonbooks for ten years during which time he acquired and edited more than 60

plays the majority of which were written by the most important Canadian playwrights of the time including Michael Cook, David Fennario, David Freeman, David French, Ken Mitchell, Sharon Pollock, James Reaney, George Ryga and Michel Tremblay. In the early 1970s Hay got involved in local politics, the Ryga controversy, and a number of bureaucratic fights which finally led to his moving to California where he lives today. Since it is particularly relevant in the context of the present paper, it is worth quoting his own words reflecting upon the situation which forced him to leave Canada:

I felt that there were not enough jobs in my field in Canada, and most of them were sponsored by the government, and controlled by a handful of people — most of whom I had managed to alienate. Most of my close friends in B.C. — Ryga, Juliani, Herschel Hardin and others — were in the same position and were withdrawing into their shells. I saw no long-term prospects and growth for myself or them. Nationally, I was getting tired of fighting the same old battles where the chief obstacles to developing a Canadian culture were born Canadians, while immigrants like Don Rubin and myself (I became Canadian citizen in 1972) provided the enthusiasm. And even though Talon was gaining a reputation, it survived entirely on subsidies which were never enough and always had a few strings attached. The most I was ever paid as editor was \$200 a month when there was money left over; more often, I had to mortgage my house to pay off Talon's debts and printing bills until the next grant came along. ("Letter" 3)

Unlike John Hirsch, with whom he had a very good relationship, Peter Hay has not been nationally or even locally acknowledged for his contribution to the cause of the Canadian theatre. Yet, a just history of the Canadian theatre and drama cannot be written without a proper recognition of Peter Hay's efforts and inputs to develop this aspect of Canadian culture.

### 4.3 George Hencz et al.

The first journal at least partly devoted to the theatre in Canada was *Performing Arts in Canada* (later called *Performing Arts & Entertainment Canada*) which was launched in 1961. After the first 3 years of its publication, the journal had serious financial difficulties but it was saved by the Hungarian-born George Hencz, who had been involved with the magazine as treasurer. In 1964 George Hencz took over *Performing Arts* as a publisher and the new editor became Rolf Kalman, another Hungarian-Canadian who later published a four-volume collection of Canadian plays. Editors and regular contributors on the magazine included a number of Hungarians such as John Hirsch as drama consultant, Stephen Mezei, an author, scriptwriter and instructor in the arts at several institutions, who was the third editor of *Performing Arts* and later edited *Onion, the Toronto Paper on the Arts*, Peter Hay, Zsuzsanna Horváth and others. Although the first exclusively theatre journal, *The Stage in Canada* was founded in 1965 and the most influential professional theatre magazine, the *Canadian Theatre Review* started to be published in 1974, *Performing Arts in Canada* is still published by George Hencz with a relatively large circulation. The historical

significance of the journal is easy to see, especially retrospectively. It is also worth quoting a passage from the Oxford University Press newsletter in December 1999, which emphasises the importance of the magazine from an unusual but interesting point of view:

*Performing Arts & Entertainment Canada* was one of the Canadian publications used to provide the words that make up the recently published Canadian Oxford Dictionary. “Without publications like *Performing Arts & Entertainment Canada*, we would never have been able to present an accurate portrait of contemporary Canadian English,” says Katherine Barber, head of Oxford’s Canadian Dictionary Department. (“News”)

Though not a purely Hungarian contribution, *Performing Arts & Entertainment* remains the oldest existing Canadian journal in the field and survived a number of financial crises and strong competition due to the enthusiastic commitment and professional management of its Hungarian publisher, George Hencz.

## 5. Conclusion

Many other similarly interesting players in the Canadian theatre scene could be mentioned to follow the list. For example, stage designer László Funtek was highly instrumental in the rebirth of the Banff School theatre complex in the late 1960s and early 1970s when he became director of the Theatre Crafts and Design diploma course. In honour of his contribution, two rooms of the theatre complex are named after him. He established the tradition of special master classes for theatre students and started to invite designers and other artists from Europe, and especially Central Europe. One question to be raised here is: why is it that enriching professional Canadian theatre is so frequently related to Canadians of Hungarian or other European, not to say Central-European, origin? Can it be pure coincidence that one of the founders of the alternative 25th Street Theatre in Saskatoon in 1971 was Andras Tahn, a Hungarian-Canadian university graduate? Or how much is it known that the English-language theatre in Montreal is currently run by Gábor Zsigovits, an earlier partner of Vilmos Kosaras in Toronto?

Before the reader comes to the conclusion that the present paper falsely suggests that Canadian theatre has been dominated by Hungarian artists, let me clarify my point here. The significance of the Hungarian contribution to Canadian theatre is no more and no less than that of the Ukrainian, Italian, Irish or any other ethnic communities. What I am trying to suggest is that a well-founded and correctly documented philological study of the interrelationships between the various ethnic theatre groups and “mainstream” professional theatre could provide some new insights into those questions which have been so far neglected or only vaguely answered.

That theatre and drama form a significant part of the various ethnic groups in Canada is clearly illustrated by a very strange example related to the most modern form of communication, the Internet. There is a special website and chatting forum for Hungarians living abroad ([www.tarsalgo.magyarorszag.net](http://www.tarsalgo.magyarorszag.net)) where a Hungarian-Canadian citizen under the nickname “Pufi” (in fact, Vilmos Kosaras)

uploaded the first part of his first play about Hungarians living in North America and asked the visitors of the website to express their opinion about whether they want to read such stuff. The response was immediate and enthusiastic and everybody was eagerly waiting for the rest of the play. The same website also gave a forum for anybody to comment on his theatre productions which seem to have been enormously popular. Is such a phenomenon to be recorded as part of the theatrical and/or dramatic events of Canadian culture or should it be ignored as something parochial, excentric and limited to a relatively small group of people? The more you think about varieties and elements of multicultural theatre the more challenges you face.

Students of the history of Canadian theatre are usually aware of the fact that its roots and strong links have been traditionally directed towards England and the US but there should be no doubt that the evolvement of multicultural theatre has changed the overall picture. Historically speaking, the presence and steadily growing activities of native and other ethnic theatre groups after the Second World War can be seen as a major factor in shaping indigenous Canadian theatre. The majority of scholarly research in Canadian theatre history has focused on the alternative theatre movement of the 1970s and on particular playwrights but not enough attention has been paid to individual ethnic theatres and their contributions. It is all the more striking in an era when the study of what is properly termed “marginality” such as feminist, gay, lesbian and native theatre has become critically fashionable. Multiculturalism has also been in the centre of numerous articles and critical studies but in the area of theatre it is still greatly *terra incognita*. As it has been indicated at the beginning of this paper, the term multicultural theatre has been widely used despite the fact that no one has managed to define exactly what it means. The lack of a proper definition may not be such a serious problem as neglecting the study of those aspects of Canadian theatre that may simply justify the use of the term itself.

The “Hungarian connection” in the title is a symbolic reference to the long needed research methodology in Canadian theatre historiography. In other words: the proper history of the Canadian theatre cannot be written until all the elements that have been instrumental in creating the theatre that exists today are studied in their cross-cultural context. Whether modern Canadian theatre is termed multicultural, intercultural, cross-cultural, postcolonial or anything else, it has been historically created and shaped by the people living in the country. Consequently, the contribution of the Italian, Ukrainian, Irish or Hungarian communities has to be recorded and analysed in their relations to Canadian theatre as a national institution.

## Endnotes

1. The information on Margaret Breckner’s life and activities has been made available for the author of the present study by the generous help of Mrs. Breckner’s descendants in the Wappel family living today in Toronto. The family plan to set up a website devoted to the memory of Margaret Breckner ([www.thembfoundation.org](http://www.thembfoundation.org)) which, at the time of the writing of this paper, was still under construction but the respective playbills and newspaper cuttings have

been photocopied and sent to the author who wishes to express his gratitude for this support. Most of the information provided in this study is based on this unique archival material.

2. The information on the Vancouver Hungarian Drama Club and the Dajka Theatre is mainly based on the wonderfully compiled scrapbook of the company's history which was made available for the present research by Györgyi Hegedős for which the author of this study wishes to express his gratitude.

3. The information on Peter Hay's life and career derives mostly from his correspondence with the author of the present study who wishes to express his gratitude for Mr. Hay's generous support of this research.

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