

Pikli, Natália

Institutional heritage and 'that Shakespearean hazard' 1989–2019: the case of the Katona József Theatre and SzFE's Ódry Theatre

Theatralia. 2021, vol. 24, iss. Special Issue, pp. 65-82

ISBN 978-80-210-9823-7

ISSN 1803-845X (print); ISSN 2336-4548 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/TY2021-S-6>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/143674>

License: [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Access Date: 27. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

Institutional Heritage and 'that Shakespearean hazard' 1989–2019: The Case of the Katona József Theatre and SzFE's Ódry Theatre

Natália Pikli

Abstract

The present study focuses on Shakespearean productions by two institutions which played a significant role in shaping the Hungarian theatrical scene between 1989 and 2019. The Katona József Theatre, Budapest, has been a preeminent artists' theatre since 1982. Its leading director, Gábor Zsámbéki, also actively participated in training future generations of actors at the University of Theatre and Film Arts (SzFE), where Shakespeare forms an important part of the curriculum. The change of political regime after 1989 necessitated changes in theatre-making attitudes, which was reflected in Zsámbéki's innovative Shakespearean productions of the early 1990s. On the other hand, the University of Theatre and Film Arts and its own theatre, Ódry, began to present fresh and daring Shakespeare productions after the 2000s, in part occasioned by the influence of Sándor Zsótér. This article provides a brief overview of all Shakespeare productions at these venues between 1989 and 2019, discussing two in more detail: Zsámbéki's *Julius Caesar* (1993) at Katona and Zsótér's *The Merchant of Venice* (2018) at Ódry. Special attention is devoted to fresh takes on 'traditional' Hungarian Shakespeare, and how professional theatrical criticism of the period proved largely unable to recognise and appreciate 'that Shakespearean hazard'.

Key words

politics and culture, change of the regime in Hungary (1989), innovation in theatre, theatre criticism, Katona József Theatre (Budapest), Ódry Theatre, The University of Theatre and Film Arts (Budapest, SzFE), Gábor Zsámbéki, Sándor Zsótér, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, *The Merchant of Venice*

What uses were made of Shakespeare by the leading paradigm-setting theatrical venues between 1989 and 2019? How hazardous were their Shakespearean productions in terms of theatrical innovation and politics in the thirty years after the fall of the Iron Curtain? This paper examines the changes these three decades brought to two such institutions: the Katona József Theatre (majorly known as Katona), Budapest, which, according to many, has been the most successful 'artists' theatre'¹ and the 'leader of quality theatre' in Hungary since 1982; and the University of Theatre and Film Arts (Színház- és Filmművészeti Egyetem, SzFE), since 1865 the definitive (and till 2003 the only) higher education venue for training theatre-makers in Hungary.² It is instructive to see how daring was the take on Shakespeare by these venues after the change of the regime in 1989 in terms of unusual and innovative methods in staging and the use of non-canonical, new translations. This can be seen in opposition to the Hungarian theatrical tradition of staging classical, 19th and early 20th century translations by major poets. This study also ponders how acutely these production companies have responded to social and political issues in their Shakespearean performances after 1989, a time when the world was opening up to people formerly living behind the Iron Curtain, changing not only ways of theatre-making but also the audience's horizon of expectations regarding both Shakespeare and the theatre.

Shakespeare's plays have always been a regular staple in Katona's repertory and in the curriculum of the University, partly thanks to the 19th century Hungarian romantic cult of Shakespeare, which connected emerging national identity with Hungarian translations and theatrical productions of his works, a process which continued into the 20th century (DÁVIDHÁZI 1989). Nevertheless, these three decades after 1989 show a varied and remarkable ebb and flow in 'hazarding' non-traditional productions of Shakespeare. Since Katona has also been part of an international and, most importantly, a Central European network of theatre-makers, the following analysis may also shed more light on the common heritage and identity concerning Central European Shakespeare productions among nations in this region.

1 In Hungary, professional repertory theatres with a permanent company and a special emphasis on artistic excellence over commercial concerns are called 'artists' theatres'. Other Budapest theatres have also been labelled as such in these decades, however, it is only since 2005 that two other repertory theatres have come to be named this way based on a similarly wide social consensus that only Katona had enjoyed before: the Örkény István Theatre and the Radnóti Miklós Theatre.

2 At the time of writing this article, SzFE faces serious threats concerning its academic and artistic freedom due to a politically motivated and largely anti-constitutional takeover. Since September 2020, a government-appointed private foundation has enjoyed total control over the university, depriving it of academic, artistic, and financial autonomy. Students and professors have been protesting against this change with a blockade of the buildings, creative marches and other peaceful performative events as well as through the legal system. At present, the situation remains undecided, and it is a distinct possibility that after 155 years, SzFE will cease to exist as an institution of Hungarian higher education.

Laying the scene: the Katona József Theatre and SzFE

The Katona József Theatre has been at the forefront of theatrical eminence and innovation among permanent theatres since 1982, when its semi-independent existence started with a company of directors and actors sharing similar perspectives. Being semi-independent meant that it still received a state subsidy that covered 60% of all expenses and the theatre remained under the political and economic control of Socialist power structures (Budapest councils, ministries, etc.). Katona was, however, allowed a bit more artistic freedom as a tolerated 'safety valve'. The leaders of Communist Hungary allowed for a number of outlets for social and political unrest in the 1980s through some forms of entertainment, including radio cabaret and comedy theatre (e.g., Géza Hofi). More daring theatrical productions were able to voice a degree of political opposition, albeit in a coded or controlled way.³ During this period, Katona became the one and only state-subsidised permanent theatre which simultaneously signified anti-establishment paradigms. The intellectual and theatrical profile of the Katona József Theatre was defined in 1982 by its founding directors: Gábor Székely, Gábor Zsámbéki, and Tamás Ascher, who wanted to do away with the Socialist National Theatre's actor/star-centred and highly traditional theatrical thinking (MÉSZÁROS 1997: 9–39). Leading actors joined the Katona József Theatre, and the (more or less) permanent company was indeed able to re-vitalise Hungarian theatre with their fresh takes on the classics (with a special focus on Chekhov and Shakespeare), as well as through their performances of contemporary Hungarian as well as foreign plays (ORBÁN 2004: 97–103).

The theatrical building was first the site of the Modern Theatre. This became the Belvárosi [City] Theatre, and after the nationalisation of theatres in 1949 the company retained the same name. Later, the space functioned as the studio of the National Theatre between 1951 and 1975. After a six-year reconstruction, the theatre opened again as the National Studio in 1981 (it seats 350 spectators today). The National Studio was launched as an independent theatre in the autumn of 1982, in a move resulting from complicated political 'backdoor' fighting between prominent Communist leaders György Aczél and Imre Pozsgai (SÁNDOR 2014: 1–21, 132–176).⁴ Over the course of the 1980s, the National Studio gained the reputation of being the best artists' theatre in Hungary, with innovative productions directed by the founders Székely, Zsámbéki, and Ascher, winning international acclaim and touring all around Europe. Katona was a founding member of the Union of the Theatres of Europe in 1990,⁵ with artistic director Gábor Zsámbéki leading the organisation between 1998–2004. Although Katona

3 For a full treatment of theatre and politics under the Communist regime, see (SCHANDL 2009; IMRE 2010).

4 See also Tamás Mészáros's interviews with Zsámbéki, Székely, Ascher and Gábor Máté in (MÉSZÁROS 1997: 9–88).

5 As of 2019, this professional organisation (original French name: *Union des Théâtres de l'Europe*) includes two Hungarian-speaking theatres: Vígszínház (Comedy Theatre, Budapest), and the Hungarian theatre at Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

left the Union in 2008, Tamás Ascher, another of Katona's paradigm-setting directors, is still an active member there.

Besides the common heritage of Communism and the similar experiences of liberation after the fall of the Iron Curtain, a form of regional cooperation and shared concerns have always been a part of theatrical thinking in both these institutions. The Katona József Theatre and Gábor Zsámbéki had already become internationally active by the 1980s, forming lasting contacts with theatres in Central Europe. A form of regional identity may be detected in the fact that as an artists' theatre, Katona regularly performed plays by Central European authors (Milan Kundera, 1993; Witold Gombrowicz, 1997; Tadeusz Różewicz, 1997).⁶ Katona artists worked with Czech, Slovakian, and Romanian colleagues both in their own productions and as guest directors in these countries, as will be mentioned later. Katona's first signature production, Chekhov's *A manó* ['The Elf', an earlier version of *Uncle Vanya*] directed by Tamás Ascher was performed in Prague and Bratislava in 1985, with Katona's productions later brought to Prague and Pilsen several times, as well as to Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Toruń, Olsztyn, Brno, Warsaw, Bochum, Łódź, and Timișoara. Interestingly, with the only exception of a 2006 Bucharest performance of *Troilus and Cressida* directed by the famous Romanian director Silviu Purcărete, no Shakespearean production by Katona has been taken to international or Central European venues since 1989.⁷

The Katona József Theatre has been an institution with a recognisable and unique theatrical profile, focusing on quality acting and a coherent directorial take on both classics and contemporary plays by its leading artists, and never shying away from tackling present social-political concerns of the time as filtered through the artistic production itself.⁸ Although the theatre is medium-sized, it is centrally positioned both geographically and socially in the heart of Budapest, the capital and major theatrical centre of Hungary. Katona has played a significant role in fashioning the ideas of the progressive intelligentsia since 1982. On the other hand, it has often been accused of creating an 'elitist-snobbish bubble', a club-like attitude by producing content exclusively for Budapest intellectuals. Undeniably, the mission statement of Katona⁹ and its close ties to contemporary Hungarian literature (regularly housing contemporary writers' talks after 1989, commissioning new plays, working together with emerging new talents, etc.) creates an intellectual feel to all its theatrical productions. There always

6 Since a comprehensive account of the history of Katona has not yet been written, data were collected from varying sources: for data between 1982–2002, see (ZÖLDI and SOÓKY 2002: 97–106); for later data see Katona's webpages, which, unfortunately, also do not contain a comprehensive record. 'Katona József Színház', <http://www.katonajozsefszinhaz.hu>, last accessed 16.01.2021.

7 Data checked until 2014.

8 Zsámbéki: 'being directly political has always seemed repellent for us, this is "cheap" theatricality; we'd rather elaborate the more complex drama inherent in the situation. Political keys open only very simple locks' (MÉSZÁROS 1997: 13).

9 In Tamás Ascher's words, in Katona 'strong actors perform according to a strong directorial concept, transmitting a coherent idea in a coherent context'. Géza Fodor, one of the founders and Zsámbéki's permanent dramaturg, phrased their manifesto in the following way: 'lyrical realism, rooted in the audience's reality' (Ascher and Fodor quoted in GUELMINO and VERES 1997: 5).

has been a solid base audience of this type of theatre-goer at Katona (see ZÖLDI and SOÓKY 2002: 5–7), with all the concomitant advantages and potential pitfalls of the theatre seeking to please a putatively coterie audience.

The Hungarian University of Theatre and Film Arts, SzFE, is another venue where Shakespeare is essential in the education of future actors, directors, and dramaturgs both in theory and practice. Numerous examination pieces are based on Shakespearean plays, with many of them reaching a wider audience at the Ódry Theatre, which is the university's own theatrical venue. Strong connections with Katona have enabled the older signature institution to exert a major influence on the official training of future actors, directors, and dramaturgs at the Hungarian University of Theatre and Film Arts, with some of the best graduates often landing with a permanent contract at the Katona József Theatre. For example, Gábor Zsámbéki is one of its most established professors, leading classes for actors and directors since 1979. SzFE was the only higher education venue for teaching theatre, film and TV professionals till 2003, when László Babarczy launched an actor's training BA programme in Kaposvár, with the first students graduating in 2006.

SzFE is *per definitionem* a venue for experimentation and learning, and the best exam pieces are performed for a larger public at its own theatrical venues, including small rehearsal rooms, mini studio spaces and the Ódry Theatre (established in 1959, with an auditorium of cca. 300). Professionals at the Ódry Theatre often emphasise that it is not a traditional space, but a 'lab theatre,' ('színpad' or 'small stage' in Hungarian). Ódry should be considered a place for experimentation and education rather than a typical commercial theatre.¹⁰ Nevertheless, already by the 1980s, a number of exam pieces became so successful that they were transferred to established theatrical venues, as was for instance the case in the early 1980s with a production of Shakespeare-Dürrenmatt's *King John*. Since the change of the regime, there has been a growing tendency to position Ódry among other Budapest theatres as a self-sustained theatrical venue, although with a varying degree of success.

After heightened interest in Ódry in the 1980s, the 1990s saw a decline. However, in the 2010s a definite rise in popularity could be felt, with numerous Ódry productions reaching larger audiences and attracting more professional and academic attention than ever before. These presentations included many Shakespearean productions directed either by teachers of SzFE or by students. Nevertheless, a precise evaluation of the Ódry's Shakespearean productions in 1989–2019 is harder to undertake, since their archival methods are quite haphazard, with digitalised cataloguing only starting a couple of years ago. The same can be said regarding video recordings of productions: videos from Katona are generally available at the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute or at the theatre itself, whereas not all Ódry productions have been preserved in recordings. Fortunately, a couple of recent productions are available (*Lír*, 2009; *Hamlet*, 2014; *Timon of Athens*, 2015) for researchers.

10 Personal interview with Klára Spilák, artistic manager of SzFE-Ódry.

The Ódry Theatre productions of Shakespeare in 1989–2019¹¹ included:

Twelfth Night, or What You Will, 1989, dir. Tamás Szirtes
Pericles, 1995, dir. Péter Valló
Much Ado About Nothing, 1998, dir. Gábor Máté
 (LACUNA: no data of performances 1998–2007, more research to follow)
Empty the Jordan! [an adaptation of *Henry IV*, Part 1], 2007, dir. Gábor Zsámbéki
Lír [King Lear], 2008, dir. Sándor Zsótér
Hamlet, 2013, dir. Sándor Zsótér (changing venues: Ódry-basement-corridor)
Timon of Athens, 2015, dir. Attila Vidnyánszky Jr.
Macbeth, 2015, dir. Iván Hargitai (Attic)
SZFEntivánéji álmom [an adaptation of *MNDream*], 2016, dir. András Dömötör (Attic)
Shakespeare's Sonnets, 2017, dir. Géza D. Hegedüs (staged in a rehearsal room)
Variations on A Midsummer Night's Dream, 2017, dir. László Marton
The Merchant of Venice, 2018, dir. Sándor Zsótér (staged in university canteen)
As You Like It, 2018, dir. Attila Vidnyánszky Jr.

As mentioned, at the beginning of the 1980s, productions at the Ódry Theatre often achieved great artistic and box-office success (BÓKA 2001: 2–14). This had changed by the 1990s. The role of Shakespeare at Ódry in the 1990s is tellingly illustrated by a harsh review published in 1999 in *Színház* [Theatre], one of the (only) two major Hungarian theatre journals. Sándor Lajos's biting criticism of the exam pieces of the six young directors who had studied under Gábor Székely claims that the Ódry's place remains undecided: is it only a venue for showcasing graduates' pieces, a sort of public 'rehearsal room', or is it a small independent theatre that is becoming a significant part of the Budapest theatrical landscape? Lajos concludes that Ódry fails to achieve the latter, and these 'exam pieces' also fall short of expectations; the young directors are 'afraid of boredom', so they tend to engage in 'scenic hocus-pocus' (LAJOS 1999: 26).¹² The six short productions featured classics, but not Shakespeare; however, it is interesting to note that one of the young directors so heavily criticised was Árpád Schilling, who since then has become famous in and outside Hungary for his daring theatrical approaches. Lajos's standpoint signals the attitude of most 1990s critics, who could not recognise and thus appreciate new and innovative techniques and approaches, and who often sneered at revolutionary metatheatrical productions, as for instance that of *Much Ado About Nothing* at Ódry directed with his actors' class by Gábor Máté, a member of the Katona József Theatre since 1987.

SzFE has frequently been criticised for its monopoly and conservatism in training new generations of theatre artists, often by the students themselves. The 1990 student 'rebellion' in the light of the political and cultural changes at SzFE broke out in

11 Data retrieved from the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute's database, completed by research in the Library of SzFE and internet webpages. Unless indicated otherwise, the venue is the main stage of Ódry.

12 All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

a hopeful context. In the wake of the liberalisation and freedom of theatres, the students were asking for a new curriculum and for revised teaching methods in the spirit of this new age. Finally, the previous rector Károly Kazimir stepped down, and this uprising was able to achieve some changes and foster new approaches to theatre (including approaches to Shakespeare). But these changes did not become all-pervasive and innovative, with Shakespeare remaining the exception rather than the rule regarding innovative performances open to the public at the Ódry Theatre up to the late 2000s. Official, institutionalised theatre criticism, supported by critics teaching at SzFE and working at the leading journal *Színház* [Theatre] also remained surprisingly conservative, as we will see in the criticism of productions between 1989–1994. In 2000–2001 another student rebellion broke out (with Árpád Schilling and Viktor Bodó as the major voices among the students) articulating complaints about a still domineering conservatism in both education and in approaches to theatre (BÓKA 2001: 2–14). As will become clear, things only changed after 2010, when innovative and radical Shakespeare productions became popular at SzFE. Although some rather traditional productions still appeared (*Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 2017; *Variations on A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2017), the 2010s saw the rise of 'upstart crows' at SzFE and Ódry: Shakespearean productions with emerging new student-directors became both popular and critically acclaimed (e.g., by Attila Vidnyánszky Jr. or András Dömötör). These productions were supported by established middle-aged theatre artists directing their own classes at SzFE in equally innovative productions (e.g., by Sándor Zsótér). Most of these performances transgressed the limitations of an 'exam piece', achieving the status of full-blown productions. Multiple techniques were tried in the spirit of free experimentation: cross-gender casting, other forms of cross-casting and doubling, moving the audience from auditorium to stage to basement during a performance, performing in unusual places, like *The Merchant of Venice* in the university canteen, etc. My contention is that these performances contributed to revitalising the theatrical methods of permanent theatres in the 2010s, as can be seen in the Shakespearean performances of the Örkény Theatre (see REUSS 2018 and FÖLDVÁRY's article in this collection), as well as in a recent (and highly popular) Shakespeare production at Katona by a young guest director Dániel D. Kovács (*As You Like It*) in 2016.

Performing Shakespeare with an edge: The ebb and flow of Shakespearean productions at the Katona József Theatre

As mentioned in Péter P. Müller's article in the present collection, provided only numbers are considered, the Katona József Theatre and Gábor Zsámbéki's role in staging Shakespeare after 1989 occupies the middle position in Hungary. However, these performances had a more lasting effect on theatrical thinking in Hungary due to Katona's central role as the major artists' theatre, as well as to its position in terms of educating future generations of actors, directors, and dramaturgs. Katona's political role serving as the only 'safety-valve' and space for experimentation changed after

1989, and even more after 1995, at a time when numerous other emergent venues began to experiment with their newly gained political and artistic freedom (BÁRKA 1996; KRÉTAKÖR 1995; see also MÜLLER's article in this collection). Katona was no longer the one exception to the rule, creating a situation which necessarily led to a dis- and re-orientation of the theatre's institutional heritage. Some critics noted a definite change in the performances, claiming that instead of politicised productions, a more aesthetic attitude became the rule. Undeniably, in these three decades after 1989, Katona seemed to be gradually losing its pre-eminence as well as its risk-taking vitality, especially when it came to the Shakespearean productions directed by Zsámbéki (six productions of five dramas between 1989–2019). Zsámbéki's rather brave takes on Shakespeare between 1991 and 2000 met with uneven and often hostile criticism by other professionals, which seems to have discouraged him, and might have resulted in his intelligent but theatrically less daring Shakespeare productions in the 2000s and 2010s. Interestingly, the other five Shakespearean productions at Katona in these later decades by other (guest or 'favoured') directors, often seemed to be braver, taking more theatrical or political risks. The following table shows not only the Shakespeare productions between 1989 and 2019, but also highlights in bold when directors chose to undertake the 'translation challenge' as well, using fresh and non-canonical translations of Shakespeare (see Fig. 1).

Zsámbéki's five 'wonder years' of Shakespeare (1989–1994)

Zsámbéki's early Shakespeare productions at Katona illustrate dominant trends in the attitudes of actors, directors, and critics around the time of the change of the regime. Given the limitations of this volume, this study cannot provide fully developed evaluations of these theatre productions, only highlight some important points as well as track how the pre-1989 theatrical language of political 'double coding', typical of Central European progressive theatres (see MIŠTEROVÁ's article in this collection) had to be redefined after the change of the regime.

The Shakespearean production that saw the 'winds of change' and became the first Shakespeare production by Zsámbéki at Katona was *Twelfth Night* in 1989. According to a still-lingering tradition of 'educating the people', a major slogan of Communist cultural politics, it was also recorded for television and broadcast on the national channel in November 1990 as part of the series 'Theatre Evenings', watched by roughly a million viewers, one-tenth of Hungary's population (WISINGER 1990: 52–54). What made this production unique was the fact that Zsámbéki chose some of his own actor-students to perform in major roles (Viola, Feste, Sebastian), which, on one hand, showed brave and conscious support of, and, simultaneously, a test of these young actors. However, the situation also resulted in a kind of imbalance regarding the drama's original casting. All the young actors (including a youthful and lively Maria performed by Ági Szirtes) gave very energetic and emotional performances which stood in contrast to the more measured portrayals of Katona's established and older actors. Miklós Benedek

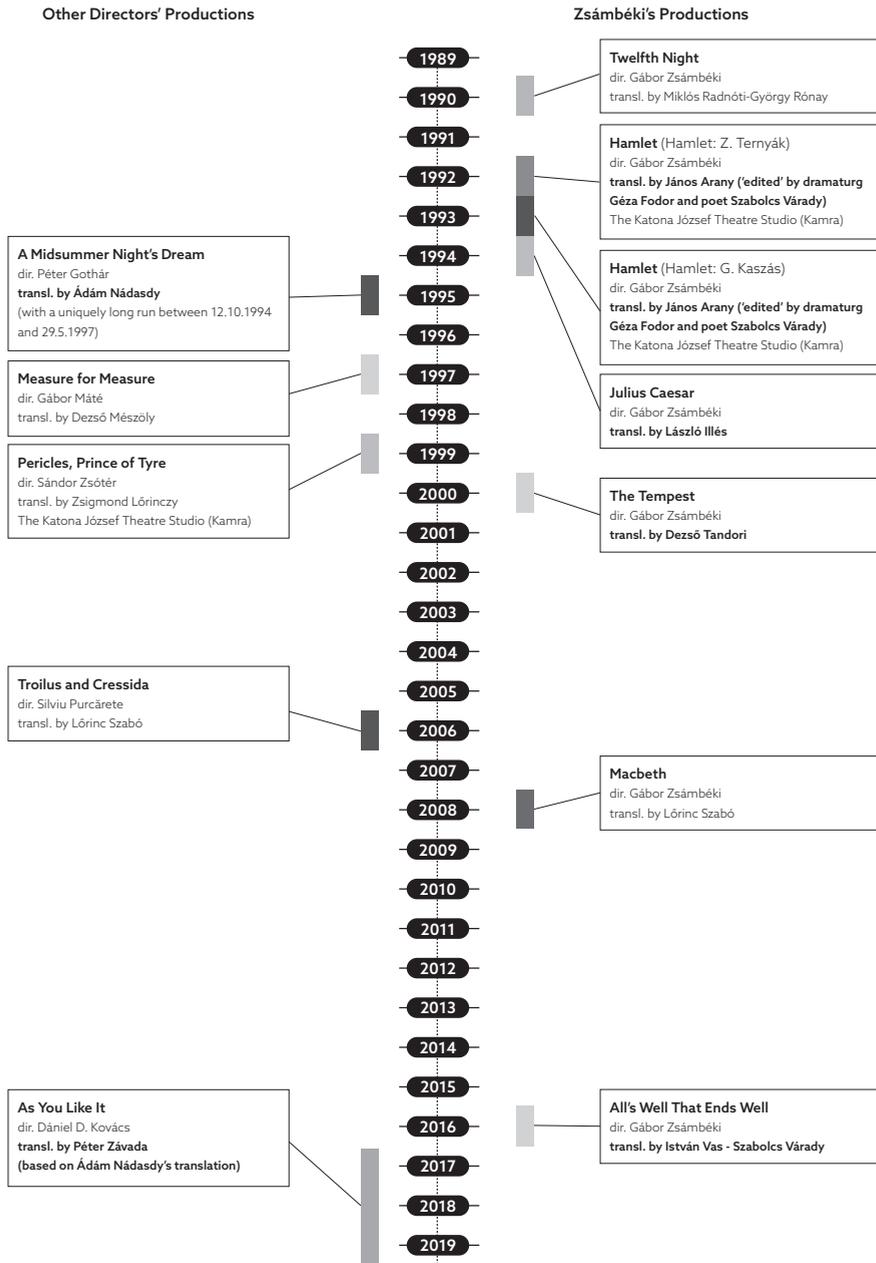


Fig. 1: A detailed list of Shakespeare productions at the Katona József Theatre, 1989–2019

Data retrieved from the Hungarian Institute of Theatre's database and Katona's webpage, see earlier. Between 1982–1989 there were two Shakespeare productions (*As You Like It*, 1982–1983; *Coriolanus*, 1985–1986) directed by Gábor Székely, who left the company in 1989. Not included, but possibly of interest, are Katona's performances of Shakespearean adaptations: Leskov's *Small-town Lady Macbeth*, dir. Csaba Kiss, 1998; Csaba Kiss's contemporary rewriting of *Hamlet*, *Hazatérés Dániába* [Return to Denmark], Studio (Kamra), 2003–2004.

(Orsino), then in his forties, and Juli Básti (Olivia), in her thirties, might have been seen at odds with the much younger Viola and Sebastian performed by actors in their early twenties. This way, the emphasis of the Shakespearean drama on educating young people in matters of self-love and romantic desire was somewhat lost, resulting in an emotionally lopsided comedy within a cleverly conceived *mise-en-scène* (a sandy beach with fishermen's nets and a sloping stage with blue skies in the background).

Even journalists noticed that Zsámbéki was intent on educating young actors using a workshop method in rehearsal (BALÓ 1989), with many of them calling attention to the power of the young actors, but also many reviews highlighted the older actors' performances (e.g., WISINGER 1990). Koltai, one of the most significant critics since the 1980s, also pointed out how the direction resembled Peter Brook's productions in the 1970s, with its almost empty stage and de-politicised attitude: according to Koltai (1989: 13), both Brook and Zsámbéki 'were trying to get rid of the vulgar theatrical clichés of an over-political social life' by going into self-exile to Illyria. Koltai also called attention to what became Zsámbéki's major motivation in all his later Shakespeare productions as well, his 'attempt to discover and bring to light the dramatic character from the actor's hidden character', dispensing with mere 'illustration', forcing older actors to rid themselves of received techniques, thus the comic bits and exuberant humour of the play was downplayed (KOLTAI 1989: 13). Interestingly, some reviews connected the performance to current political concerns, which, seeing the recorded performance now, seems a bit far-fetched: they mentioned how Malvolio exhibited the perfect 'caretaker [házmaster]' attitude, spying on others, being the perfect subject of the reigning power and a mini-tyrant in his own little circle (BARABÁS 1989; SZÁNTÓ 1989 even mentioning the Communist secret police with regard to Malvolio), and how 'the leading theatrical company of our country' is holding up a mirror to us by talking about problems with lies and liars (ERDEI 1989). This critical reception is intriguing, since it betrays a longing for a more political theatre in Katona's Shakespeare, which would happen only later with Zsámbéki's *Julius Caesar* in 1994. In conclusion, it can be said that Zsámbéki's Shakespearean debut in Katona had already signalled his major directorial intentions, focusing on 'living the drama' instead of only enacting, or 'resolving' it (KOLTAI 1989: 13), featuring an acting style that internalised a thorough understanding of the character.

Zsámbéki's subsequent productions coincided with the opening of the studio of Katona, where his *Hamlets* achieved both critical acclaim and tabloid status as both young actor-protagonists Zoltán TERNYÁK (Hamlet in 1991–1992) and Gergő KASZÁS (Hamlet in 1992–1993) left the company after successful runs of the performance. The actors left for personal reasons, suffering from burnout and a general disillusionment in the theatre. Aesthetically, these studio 'chamber *Hamlets*' were innovative and progressive, with many doublings, performed in an intimate space with the audience surrounding the actors, who moved to Ivica Boban and Mladen Vasary's fight choreography. The modern, present-day costumes (Claudius in a white bathrobe, Hamlet as a tortured young man, playing with razor blades) all suggested doubts of the new generations regarding the changing world around them, with a political echo only

lingering in the background. Ternyák's (Hamlet) quite cryptic answer in an interview seemed to counter the label of 'political theatre': 'All we want to put on stage is the play itself. We do not want to highlight potential allusions to the day. We trust the audience to make their own interpretation, God save us from making a political message of *Hamlet*. For us, it is relevant now because WE play it and we play it NOW' (TERNYÁK 1991). However, some of the decisions regarding staging seemed to contradict this claim: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appeared with briefcases, suggesting – at least to some – 'a cross between financial brokers and III/III division people [secret informers during Communism]' (ALMÁSI 1992: 42–43).

Reviews praised the 'raw nakedness' of acting without any bathos, but not all critics appreciated the innovative features of the production (see DERES's article in this collection), so much so, that the gravedigger scene had to be altered during the run. For instance, András Forgách (1992: 8–13) scorned these Beckettian 'radically hyper-realistic clowns' as well as the sexualised presentation of Gertrude, mentioning that the 'performance condensed as much interpretation of *Hamlet* as would suit three performances'. According to Forgách's review, Zsámbéki 'sometimes over-directed, sometimes under-directed' Shakespeare's play, and he generally disparaged the idea that a performance should leave the audience in doubt (FORGÁCH 1992: 10). Others praised the liveliness and psychological relevance of the production, the 'life' of the play instead of 'enactment' (BARABÁS 1992; BOGÁCSI 1991; TAKÁCS 1991), calling out to the audience successfully with its hysterical teenager Hamlet in this present time 'out of joint'. After almost 30 years, we may agree with Almási (1992), who concluded that these productions signalled a move away from psychologically realistic acting towards a more ironic and less emotional, terser style (approaching Noh theatre), without the completely successful harmonising of the two. Naturally, as Ternyák, the first Hamlet, left Katona and Kaszás took over the role, minor changes in the character were introduced, with Ternyák's Prince being more instinct-driven, and Kaszás's more intent on empirical learning, as reviews emphasised (see BUDAI 1993). The production with Kaszás was performed at the second festival of the European Theatre Union in 1993, after which the production closed.

In 1994, Zsámbéki turned again to Shakespeare: the social-political context, the end of the first period of the freely elected Parliament, and the ensuing disillusionment fostered a more radically political approach in *Julius Caesar*, even if this strategy remained more general, appearing rather as filtered through artistic means. The characteristic reluctance of Zsámbéki and other Katona artists to be labelled as political theatre had reached its apex. *Julius Caesar* is by definition a political play. This stance was further reinforced by the choice of a translation by László Illés as a form of 'regressive patronage'. Illés had fled the country after the revolution of 1956 and became a voice of Radio Free Europe during the Communist regime. Illés translated Shakespeare's play between 1956 and 1961 after he had left Hungary (ILLÉS 1994), but the translation had remained unpublished and largely unknown till the performance in 1994 in an event signalling Illés's re-entry into the Hungarian cultural space. The play's potential political resonances were further reinforced by a grey concrete brick wall running diagonally

through the stage which crumbled after Caesar's death. While this set piece could be seen as representing a general symbol of tyranny, it was an obvious reference to the Berlin Wall. The costumes recalled Roman togas, with their different colours aiding the audience in identifying the rival parties (grey for republicans, yellow for the party of the future empire, Caesar in red). The use of rather cumbersome, huge white sheets alienated critics, with most of them concluding that this visual device 'sterilised and neutralised the intimacy of acting' (MÉSZÁROS 1994). Nevertheless, the performance became neither didactic nor too direct thanks to Zsámbéki's thorough understanding of the play and the capable portrayals of the actors, many of them guest performers at Katona. Even if Zsámbéki himself acknowledged relevance but denied being directly political in a television interview (ZSÁMBÉKI 1994), the reviews and the audience could not escape feeling targeted. Györfly claimed that 'Zsámbéki is again talking about the illusionists of the political arena, of sweet-sounding slogans, of acts to "save the nation from peril" and of all the destruction that follows' (GYÖRFFY 1994: 15).

The main characters were presented as both convincingly individualised characters and political types: Caesar (guest Tamás Jordán) remained petty enough to be surprised when the senators turned against him, being so used to having all the power and glory, while Brutus (Gábor Máté) exuded weakness rather than a tragic hero's strength. Cassius (Miklós Benedek) struggled with the empty shell of his character: his inner hollowness forced him into frantic action, while Mark Antony (Pál Mácsai, guest) was the typical amoral politician, a magician skilled in shifting people's sympathies (KOLTAI 1994). László Zappe highlighted the beginning of the production, with Mark Antony's initial entrance as a clown galloping through the stage as Caesar's horse (ZAPPE 1994), creating an image foreshadowing the exuberant energy which would later turn into manipulation. As Miklós Györfly concludes, 'Zsámbéki's *Julius Caesar* is mostly about how this story would go in our age. Ideals and principles are secondary, easily replaceable, but without ideals heroes and great men do not exist', what we see is merely 'the eternal script of coups and assassinations' (GYÖRFFY 1994). Tamás Mészáros also claimed that the production resonated with 'all the uncertainties of the change of the regime' in 1989 (MÉSZÁROS 1994). Zsámbéki's direction, however, remained blissfully free of any easy associations and direct allusions to Hungarian politicians. The acting and directing maintained an intricate balance of dialectics: neither the tyrant nor the assassins were relieved of their sins. Even in the light of his petty vanity, Caesar's greatness was undeniable in opposition to all his killers, who only 'wanted to come up to their own expectations of greatness through the death of Caesar' (MÉSZÁROS 1994). His assassination was performed with intricate but brutal choreography which combined an aura of ritualistic killing with a barbarous and clumsy mass stabbing, finally creating an image of all the parties being besmeared with blood. Brutus was the intellectual caught up in politics, the 'loser' of history who drove himself into believing in his own greatness and capability to 'save the nation' while remaining as unsure of his own worth and power as before, escaping into heavy drinking at the eve of the battle.

Producing *Julius Caesar* became a difficult enterprise: the rehearsal process was interrupted by another Katona performance, and it also coincided with the sudden death of

Hungary's first freely elected prime minister József Antall in December 1993. During this season five major actors left the company and ten young graduates joined them. Zsámbéki had to adapt to these changes in casting, and grapple with the tension between Katona's repertory performers and guests, as described in the published diary of Gábor Máté (MÁTÉ 2018: 11–79). Zsámbéki seemed to be vacillating between being 'too political' and 'not political enough' in the eyes of Katona's audience, i.e., in interviews given during this period Zsámbéki oscillates between these two perspectives. In addition, financial difficulties abounded: the Studio (Kamra) was nearly closed, with only a precipitous financial contribution saving it. All this was taking place as Kamra remained a highly popular venue, consistently running with full houses, often at over 100% capacity at standing room only. The Studio housed talks with contemporary authors as well as amateur productions by Péter Halász along with regular productions by Katona.

My argument is that *Julius Caesar* became a signature production of the first phase of Katona's post-1989 period for several reasons. As usual, established critics like Zappe remained unsatisfied with the performance, claiming that it was too intellectual, 'over-interpreted', therefore, cold (ZAPPE 1994). This attitude highlights how mainstream critics often seemed to misunderstand new and innovative theatrical approaches in the 1990s that later became standardised (see DERES and MIŠTEROVÁ in this collection). On the other hand, these five years between 1989 and 1994 signalled the start of a new era of political theatre combined with all the unease of switching to a new theatrical language. After 1989 Zsámbéki began to experiment with new acting and theatrical styles in the context of Shakespearean theatre; nevertheless, now this was less tolerated by critics, and, unfortunately, he refrained from turning to Shakespeare so frequently after these five crowded years. His production of *The Tempest* at the end of the decade suffered the same fate: it was theatrically innovative and daring in terms of acting styles and *mise-en-scène*, but little favoured by critics and the audience. Zsámbéki's *Macbeth* in 2008 and *All's Well That Ends Well* in 2015 again would not achieve lasting resonance, even if they were valuable and interesting performances in themselves.

Other Shakespeare productions favoured better with both critics and audiences: especially *Measure for Measure* directed by Gábor Máté in 1996 with its socially radical questioning and challenging visuality, an almost 'in-yer-face' representation of prostitution and immorality in present-day Budapest. Silviu Purcărete's *Troilus and Cressida* in 2006 signified an important collaboration between Central European theatre artists. In 2016, Dániel D. Kovács's *As You Like It* became the most popular Shakespearean production ever at the Katona József Theatre, one which combined a new theatricality with slam poetry and Katona's actors' impeccable performances. Nevertheless, in my view, none of these theatrical events could have been possible without Zsámbéki's and Katona's earlier answers to 'that Shakespearean hazard': they dared to hazard new and innovative approaches and going against the grain of theatrical tradition both in education and performances.

Conclusion

The reception of Zsámbéki's Shakespearean productions between 1989 and 2019 signals the unease and biases of a slowly changing critical attitude as well as the evaporating enthusiasm for Shakespeare at Katona. Surprisingly, in 2020 two Shakespeare productions were scheduled to premiere in the theatre, with the October premiere of the *Othello* of Kriszta Székely, a young and experimental director, meeting with little professional and commercial acclaim, and Zsámbéki's *King Lear*, originally scheduled for December, indefinitely postponed due to the pandemic situation and the closing of the theatres. This likely last 'benefit production' of Shakespeare by Zsámbéki thus remains to be seen. On the other hand, the stagings by Sándor Zsótér and SzFE seem to represent a complementary though opposing line regarding innovative Shakespeare productions. The early professional success of actor and director Zsótér came with a production of *Pericles* in the Studio (Kamra) of the Katona Theatre in 1999. This production featured both an old and a young Pericles as well as employed untraditional scenery (including a bathtub) and acting methods. Conservative but established critics like Zappe were appalled, and the production was also not very popular with audiences, although it was granted the Critics' Prize for the 1999/2000 season. Zsótér staged Shakespearean plays several times in various theatres between 1999 and 2019, although space limitations prevent discussions of these stagings. Zsótér's last production with his graduating SzFE actor-students in September 2018 does deserve to be mentioned in more detail, since it illustrates major tendencies that had reached professional theatre Shakespeare productions such as that of *Henry IV*, Parts 1–2 at the Örkény Theatre directed by Pál Mácsai (see FÖLDVÁRY's article in this collection).

Zsótér had directed *The Merchant of Venice* in 2008 in Eger, and some elements of this production returned in the 2018 version, e.g., the multimedial 'trial scene' in which the video of an open chest cardiac surgery was projected onto the actors' bodies. Still, the 2018 student production was freshly re-conceived and showed how SzFE's innovative and experimental techniques can be combined with Shakespeare's well-known play in a condensed form. The production revisited, rewrote, and re-positioned *The Merchant* in a fresh and effective manner that spoke to the audience directly. The space and props were 'as found', i.e., the performance started in the street in front of the university's (rather run-down) canteen, significantly on a warm, early autumn evening, after the 'usual' theatre time. The audience became voyeurs to the spectacle, first watching a young and energetic Shylock (László Hevesi) climb onto a parking meter as he pontificated on profit and money, his Jewishness only indicated by two white strips of tape as sideburns, with a praying shawl, and, later, a lamp cover found in the canteen functioning as his yarmulke. The theatrical space comprised of 'ins and outs', alternating between the actors' performance in and in front of the canteen, their bodies or body parts seen clearly or partly obscured through the large windows. The heavily cut, 80-minute play text (featuring the more classical mid-20th-century translation of István Vas) with repositioned speeches was combined with multifunctional doublings and cross-gender casting. Portia and Nerissa were played by Katica Nagy and Krisztián

Kollár, sometimes alternatively, sometimes simultaneously, emphasising that desires and feelings are not gender-specific. Interestingly, Shylock and his otherness were major but not overwhelming issues, since the production revolved around a general feeling of melancholy inherent in human relationships, from Antonio's to Lorenzo and Jessica's. This concept was supported by the frequent singing of the actors performing pieces from Schumann's *Dichterliebe*. The acting styles varied from Stanislavskian to physical and caricature-like representations, and the audience was entertained and touched by tragedy and comedy in equal measure. The production and its performers took to heart the Shakespearean line 'To give and hazard all', the motto of the winning casket, symbolising unconditional love: for these young actors, love, emotions, and theatre-making were clearly worth taking 'that Shakespearean hazard'. Unfortunately, the performance was not widely reviewed (mostly in blogs) and was generally ignored by established critics and journals.

Tracing the course of Shakespearean productions in the thirty years after the fall of the Iron Curtain in these two signature institutions offers us the following conclusion: theatre and (cultural) politics often became intertwined, with varying results. Professional theatrical criticism frequently lagged behind in recognising and appreciating new and innovative methods, sometimes even exerting a negative effect on the risk-taking verve of established directors. On the other hand, experimentation and innovation in Shakespearean productions at SzFE was allowed more scope after 2000, and by the late 2010s Ódry Theatre was able to reinvigorate the Budapest theatrical scene. Along with other tendencies shared with other Central European nations, meeting 'that Shakespearean hazard' of re-considering his plays for the contemporary theatre without being inhibited by tradition, cult, and canon, played a major role in changing Hungarian theatre after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Further research both in the Hungarian and more generally in the Central and Eastern European contexts should be revealing.

Bibliography

- ALMÁSI, Miklós. 1992. Shakespeare: Hamlet. *Kritika* 2 (1992): 42–43.
- BALÓ, Júlia. 1989. Próbán a Katona József Színházban. Mit tudjon a csokros térdszalag? [At a Rehearsal in the Katona József Theatre. What Shall a Cross-gartered Stocking Do?]. *Film, Színház, Muzsika* (25. 03. 1989): 2.
- BARABÁS, Tamás. 1989. Vízkereszt. Shakespeare a Katona József Színházban [Twelfth Night. Shakespeare in the Katona József Theatre]. *Esti Hírlap* (11. 05. 1989).
- BARABÁS, Tamás. 1992. Hamlet a Kamrában [Hamlet in the Studio]. *Esti Hírlap* (6. 01. 1992).
- BOGÁCSI, Erzsébet. 1991. A legmerészebb tétovaság. Hamlet-előadás a Kamrában [The Bravest Uncertainty. Hamlet in the Studio of Katona]. *Népszabadság* (27. 01. 1991): 9.
- BÓKA, László B. 2001. Zacc a kávéban. Helyzetkép a Színművészeti [Coffee Dregs. Situation Report on the University of Theatre and Film Arts]. *Színház* 34 (2001): 5: 2–14.

- BUDAI, Katalin. 1993. Hamlet – zsilettpenge nélkül [Hamlet – Without Razor Blades]. *Critikai Lapok* 2 (1993). (page unknown: paper clipping in the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute).
- DÁVIDHÁZI, Péter. 1989. 'Isten másodszülettte'. *A magyar Shakespeare-kultusz természetrajza* ['God's second-born'. The Anatomy of the Hungarian Cult of Shakespeare], Budapest: Gondolat, 1989.
- ERDEI, János. 1989. Vízkereszt, vagy amit akartok. A Katona József Színház előadása [*Twelfth Night or What You Will*. In the Performance of the Katona József Theatre]. *Vigília* 11 (1989): 179.
- FORGÁCH, András. 1992. Hamlet borotvaélen [Hamlet and Razor Blades]. *Színház* 25 (1992): 3: 8–13.
- GUELMINO, Sándor and Anna VERES (eds.). 1997. *Katona 1982–97. Kamra 1991–97*. Budapest: Katona József Színház Alapítvány, 1997.
- GYÖRFFY, Miklós. 1994. Puccsisták a Capitoliumon. Shakespeare Julius Caesar-ja a Katona József Színházban [Coup on the Capitolium. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* in the Katona József Theatre]. *Magyar Nemzet* (3. 03. 1994): 15.
- ILLÉS, László. 1994. *Interview*. Hungarian Television (TV2), Stúdió 94. 8. 02. 1994. (Typed transcript in the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute).
- IMRE, Zoltán. 2010. *Szigorúan bizalmas. Dokumentumok a Nemzeti Színház Kádár-kori történetéhez* [Highly Confidential. Documents on the History of the National Theatre in the Kádár-regime]. Budapest: Ráció, 2010.
- KOLTAI, Tamás. 1989. Kivonulás Illyriába. [Self-exile into Illyria]. *Élet és Irodalom* 33 (12. 05. 1989): 13.
- KOLTAI, Tamás. 1994. A Fortinbras-effektus [The Fortinbras-effect]. *Élet és Irodalom* 38 (15. 07. 1994): 14.
- LAJOS, Sándor. 1999. Számadás vagy műalkotás? [Reckoning or Work of Art?]. *Színház* 32 (1999): 7: 23–26.
- MÁTÉ, Gábor. 2018. *Színházi naplók* [Theatre diaries]. Budapest: Magvető, 2018.
- MÉSZÁROS, Tamás. 1994. Egyek a felelőtlenségben [United in irresponsibility]. *Magyar Hírlap* (26. 03. 1994). (page unknown: paper clipping in the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute).
- MÉSZÁROS, Tamás. 1997. A 'Katona'. *Egy korszak határán*. [The 'Katona'. On the Brink of a New Era]. Budapest: Pesti Szalon, 1997.
- ORBÁN, Eszter. 2004. Condemned to Renewal: The Katona József Theatre. In Péter Fábri (ed.). *A Shabby Paradise. Contemporary Hungarian Theatre*. Budapest: Hungarian Centre of the International Theatre Institute, 2004: 97–103.
- REUSS, Gabriella. 2018. The Chair Leg and the Stadium. László Bagossy's Shakespeares at the Örkény Theatre. *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 95 (2018): 1–16.
- SÁNDOR, István L. 2014. *A Katona és kora. A kezdetek*. [The 'Katona' and Its Era. The Beginnings]. Budapest: Ellenfény, 2014.
- SCHANDL, Veronika. 2009. *Socialist Shakespeare Productions in Kádár-regime Hungary*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009.
- SZÁNTÓ, Erika. 1989. Karzat [Gallery]. *Képes* 7 (27. 05. 1989).

- TAKÁCS, István. 1991. 'Kizökkent az idő...' ['The time is out of joint...']. *Pest Megyei Hírlap* (28. 01. 1991).
- TERNYÁK, Zoltán. 1991. Ma: Hamlet a Katona József Színház Kamrájában [Today: Hamlet in Katona's Studio] (interview). *Magyar Nemzet* (19. 12. 1991).
- WISINGER, István. 1990. Jöjjön velem Illyriába [Come with Me to Illyria]. *Színházi Élet* (27. 11. 1990): 52–54.
- ZAPPE, László. 1994. Szürkék és sárgák. [Greys and Yellows]. *Népszabadság* 52 (14. 02. 1994): 37: 16.
- ZÖLDI, Gergely, and Andrea SOÓKY (eds.). *Katona József Színház 1982–2002*. Budapest: Balassi-the Katona József Theatre, 2002.
- ZSÁMBÉKI, Gábor. 1994. Interview. The morning show 'Nap-kelte' MTV [Hungarian Television] by Erika Gulyás, (19. 02. 1994). (Typed transcript in the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute).

Natália Pikli

Department of English Studies,
Faculty of Humanities, Eötvös Loránd University
Rákóczi út 5., 1088 Budapest, Hungary
pikli.natalia@btk.elte.hu
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0582-9868>

Natália Pikli is an associate professor at the Department of English Studies, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. She is the author of the book *The Prism of Laughter: Shakespeare's 'very tragical mirth'* (2009) along with numerous studies on Shakespearean theatre and early modern popular culture. Her work has been published in *Shakespearean Criticism* 85 (2004), *The European Journal of English Studies* (2010), *Journal of Early Modern Studies* (2012), and *Shakespeare Survey* (2017). She has also edited and co-edited several volumes in Hungarian and English. Natália Pikli is the President of the Hungarian Shakespeare Committee and writes theatre reviews regularly. At present she is finishing a monograph for Routledge with the title *Shakespeare's Hobby-Horse and Early Modern Popular Culture*.



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as images or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.