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*Theatralia*. 2024, vol. 27, iss. 1, pp. 145-166

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

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/TY2024-1-7>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.80029>

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Access Date: 11. 07. 2024

Version: 20240626

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# The Theatrical Fate of Shakespeare's Great Tragedies in Hungary: Metadata and Their Value

Zsolt Almási

## Abstract

The article explores the theatrical fate of Shakespeare's Great Tragedies on Hungarian stages by comparing two periods: the final 32 years of the socialist regime (1958–1989) and the first 32 years of the period that followed (1990–2021). The approach is innovative in that it investigates what production metadata of the plays in question disclose. First, I briefly review the analysis's methodological concerns. I then examine the differences in terms of the number of productions, the ages of the actors, the gender, and the translations. I intend to demonstrate the value of metadata analysis for theatre historians in identifying cultural trends.

## Key words

metadata, theatre history, Shakespeare, tragedies, cultural trends

The Data Science Code of Professional conduct states that a “Data Scientist” means a professional who uses scientific methods to liberate and create meaning from raw data’ (Data Science Association, s.a.). This identification of a data scientist has been widely quoted and interpreted by data scientists recently (see DONOHO 2017: 746; DESAI et al. 2022: 4), and yet its full potential remains unexplored. What is done to data, in the sense of the Data Science Association’s process, is a simultaneously two-fold activity. The definition employs a powerful metaphor of ‘liberating’ data, implying that data forms patterns that need to be identified and brought to the surface, be freed from the ‘prison of chaos’. However, the addition of the verb ‘create’ in the definition above acknowledges that meaning is not only extracted from data, but it also requires creativity, as well as research questions to reveal patterns in the dataset and also to select data that is relevant.

This article aims to contribute to the study of Hungarian theatre history by utilising data analysis to liberate and create meaning from data. This activity is not without precedence and context though. Data analysis<sup>1</sup> has become a widely used tool in various fields, including news agencies, advertising, and electoral research. Since Franco Moretti’s and Lev Manovich’s seminal works (MORETTI 2013; MANOVICH 2020), data analysis in historiography, literary history, and cultural studies – network analysis of characters and authors, data visualisation and the analysis of metadata, for example, titles of works – has become part of the toolkit of the cultural historian to understand the changes of culture, of taste, of genres. The analysis of data, metadata has also been used in theatre studies and theatre historiography in the last decade. Tompkins opens her editorial introduction to the thematic (December 2016) issue of the *Theatre Journal* by claiming that ‘investigations of theatre that use digital tools are likely to produce quite significantly new outcomes, conclusions, and avenues for research, [...] something that was not possible or apparent before’ (TOMPKINS 2016: xi). Bollen’s argument focuses on a variety of topics, such as ecology of the types of metadata and their use in delineating networks of productions (see BOLLEN 2016), while Robinson (2020: 261) maps out ‘the digital landscapes of theatre history’. More recently Hungarian theatre historians have also published articles and even books using databases (e.g.: GAJDÓ 2009; SZABÓ 2019; P. MÜLLER 2021).<sup>2</sup>

Following in the footsteps of the already present use of metadata in cultural and theatre history, I am going to explore the history of the theatrical reception of Shakespeare’s Great Tragedies, i.e., *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth* in Hungary. In the first part of the paper, I shall briefly sum up the scope and the limitations of this approach. Then I shall explore the differences of their theatrical reception between the periods before and after 1989, i.e., the periods before and after the political changes from socialism to democracy. By analysing metadata such as the number of

1 For an overview on the theoretical foundations of data analysis and on literature see (DESAI et al. 2022).

2 P. Müller (2021) gauges Shakespeare’s reception in Hungary in general, but he does not reflect on the database *per se*; Szabó (2019) explores the reception of *Hamlet* in a sociological perspective, while the book edited by Gajdó (2009) explores the opportunities the database offers in theatre historiography.

productions, locations, ages of actors, gender, and translations, I shall prove that this type of analysis provides valuable insights for theatre historians by augmenting a more traditional canon-based approach, and thus, by delineating tendencies that otherwise would escape attention.

## Scope of investigation

When pursuing quantitative approaches to the description of historical change, one has to stop first and show in what respect the idea of 'raw data' from the quotation is a myth. The phrase 'raw data' implies that data can be found out there, that data are given, independent of everything, that one can stumble into them. This is far from the truth. As Vareschi and Burkert convincingly argue: 'The choices involved in data collection and preparation are not objective; they are shaped by the always subjective, often tacit, and sometimes shared presuppositions of the domain-specialist researcher' (VARESCHI and BURKERT 2016: 597; see also ALMÁSI 2020). This is so much so that before liberating and creating meaning one must provide an explanation of what kind of data has been gathered, and what principles have been deployed when the data were curated and selected. In other words, the preconditions must be clarified in order to make the analysis possible at all.

By analysing metadata in cultural history, I am going to explore the history of the productions of Shakespeare's Great Tragedies in Hungary with the aim of detecting trends in their reception. By 'metadata' I mean data describing the given plays. As far as the definition of 'productions' goes, I agree with Bollen who claims, 'What characterizes a production across a series of performances is that the creative configuration of companies and artists is sustained over time and space. A production transfers from one venue to another without becoming a different production' (BOLLEN 2016: 625). 'Hungary' means productions that were originally or secondarily designed for a stage located within the borders of present-day Hungary, and not for Hungarian theatres located beyond the borders, such as Hungarian theatres in Ukraine or Romania. The scope of selection of the productions is not only limited by location but also by time, i.e., I have limited the period to the last 32 years of the socialist period (1958–1989) and the following 32 years (1990–2021). The analysis uses the metadata that can be found in the database of the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute.<sup>3</sup>

I exclude from the exploration alternative/art/fringe theatrical productions, generic transpositions, and rewritings. Although I trust the dataset of the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute, it is clear that references to amateur productions before 1989, which according to the contemporary standards equal with fringe productions nowadays, are incomplete in the database. A strange exception to this rule is a production of *King Lear* in 1976. This production is exceptional as the tragedy was staged by the Huszonötödik Színház [Twenty-fifth Theatre] whose specification as an

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of the database see (SZABÓ and SIMON 2019).

alternative theatre was a paradox in itself seeing as the very definition of the alternative theatre is that it is not financed and thus controlled by the authorities, and yet this theatre/company was officially approved and state-funded during the socialist regime. Their *Lear*, however, is a strange exception, which means I have not included similar (art, or fringe, or alternative theatre) productions after 1990 either; thus, the focus is exclusively on theatres with a standing company (repertoire theatres, stone theatres). Furthermore, I have also excluded from the analysis productions that translated the plays to other performative genres, such as dance theatres, ballets, puppet theatres, and operas. Moreover, I have excluded from the analysis productions that are rewritings, and I have to admit that the dividing line between a theatrical adaptation and a rewriting is not absolutely clear in every particular case, as the text is always a translation, or the same text may well have more than one translations, and in the theatre even this text is treated sometimes with heavy hands. Thus, what remains are prose adaptations premiering in repertoire theatres.

The aim of the analysis is to find patterns in the data so that trends could be found. The analysis, thus, disregards the consideration of the canonical place of a production, as well as what kind of influence the given play exercised on later productions. This exclusion of considerations of canonisation and influence may well be questionable because trends are created by deploying, including ideas of model-like productions into future ones. No matter how intriguing this approach would be, in this article I am not going to refer to quality not because it cannot be expressed in digits, e.g., number of performances, reviews, etc., but because the latter data are not present in the database I have used. Instead of, therefore, dealing with the most famous, influential, and canonical productions I will focus on the data present in the database. I believe that this analysis can yield results that escape our attention when focusing on the theatrical canon. This methodology, however, does not replace the traditional, canon focused approach but rather augments it.

Before presenting the results of the analysis, I also must clarify the limitations of the method concerning periodisation and statistical methodology. By periodisation I mean that I am going to compare two periods, i.e., the one before and the other after 1989, which may seem an arbitrary choice. The statistical methodology, i.e., a methodology that relies on numbers, may also be difficult to digest. I am going to situate my explorations in the crossroads of the problematics concerning periodisation and statistical methodology.

The exploration of the problematics, however, is not only deployed as a rhetorical strategy to defend the position I would like to present, but rather serves to provide a theoretical framework of what Daddario calls 'Critical historiography' (DADDARIO 2015). The present article, thus, does not pretend to unearth the past as it was within a seeming positivist framework, an impression created by the analysis of metadata and their quantification. What I would like to present instead is how the database as a map of cultural memory both determines and liberates our access to what is not with us anymore. In this sense, my position is close to that of the practice advocated by Daddario:

A critical historiographical practice seeking to move beyond the limits of logical positivism does not concern itself primarily with what happened, but with how we produce an understanding of the historical event and how we think through the materiality of the encounter with that event. (DADDARIO 2015: 178)

## Periodisation and statistics

Periodisation in historical research is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, periodisation is a useful tool to organise the chaotic flow of events, including political or cultural acts and creations into coherent units and narratives. On the other hand, however, periodisation when fashioning an intelligible structure, also imposes a greater order on the narrative than there exists in reality, and this imposition may well lead to distortions or misrepresentations.

Periodisation as a tool is beneficial, because it helps forge a coherent, self-contained whole from the unstructured flow of acts and events. For example, in my analysis, it seems useful, as many circumstances of theatrical life in Hungary changed radically after the fall of socialism<sup>4</sup> in 1989: the state control over what could and could not be performed on the stages of repertoire theatres disappeared, new theatres especially art or fringe theatres could be opened, experimental theatrical formations and companies could come into being without ties to theatres. Directors and dramaturgs could shape the play text with more freedom than before. All these changes thus boil down to one inspiring word: liberation.

This periodisation, this model of historical exploration, however, cannot account for even important factors shaping Hungarian theatrical life, and this is going to be the second edge of this tool. Periodisation is a rather strong-handed intervention into the unstructured flow of events and acts, an intervention that is always carried out from the present moment, present assumptions and present purposes. Periodisation, especially as defined and criticised by de Grazia (2021: 2, 5–6) as ‘self-contained totalities, enframed like pictures’ thus, cannot but distort, select, or narrate in a way that some aspects of the past will be ignored, veiled by oblivion. The features identified that make the past intelligible and structured will always overshadow some elements that the structure finds light or irrelevant. This is especially true when the history of theatre is at stake. Carriers of directors, actors, and other theatre-makers or, for that matter, life spans of audiences did not pay attention to the before and after of the dividing line of periodisation. Although circumstances may have changed radically, human beings creating and consuming cultural artefacts may not have, which entails continuity during cultural change. To utilise periodisation as a tool and at the same time attempt to avoid the pitfalls, I am going to use periodisation as a heuristic device,

4 For understanding the functioning of the theatre during the socialist period see (SCHANDL 2008; KOVÁCS 2011; DERES 2022). Schandl (2008) provides a canon driven exploration of Shakespeare's theatrical reception in Hungary, Deres (2022) defines the theoretical foundation of the exploration of the theatre in this period, while Kovács (2011) focuses on six years of the given period from the perspective of the actor.

a point of reference for the discussion of Shakespeare's works in the Hungarian theatre from 1958–2021.

Another limitation follows from the data explored. As noted earlier I have used the database of the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute, which means that if a production is not there, the data have not ended up in my analysis. A further problem follows from the number of productions, i.e., for establishing trends there is a need for a large dataset, but in this case, it is rather small – all together 135 productions of four tragedies – meaning that the small amount of data may yield highly distorted results. Furthermore, a memory institution is interested in a specific, rather basic type of information about the productions, which means that the analysis will and can only consider these. I also must add that the data in the database are reliable and of a high quality to 98%, but there is a roughly 2% of error margin, which also has to be made clear: sometimes the name of the translator is not provided, sometimes the link pointing to the actor points at a different person.

Once, however, the lines of exclusion and inclusion have been drawn with a steady hand, the data chosen and explored present a further problem which may be labelled as the problem of the interpretation of the data. Data, thus, are not only made, but also do not speak for themselves; patterns are to be found and these patterns are to be interpreted. As Geoffrey Rockwell and Stéfan Sinclair in their 'Hermeneutica: Computer-Assisted Interpretation in the Humanities' put it: 'With enough data one can get spurious correlations, as there is always something that has the same statistical profile as the phenomenon you are studying. This is the machine equivalent to apophenia, the human tendency to see patterns everywhere' (ROCKWELL and SINCLAIR 2016: 132). I would like to keep this cautionary remark in mind, especially because if the dataset is relatively small for a statistical analysis, it will yield patterns that are either arbitrary or open to a variety of interpretations.

Knowing this, the analysis of metadata when looking for patterns is a double-edged sword. Similarly to memory, memory institutions present memories of the past that they find relevant and it is this dataset that I am going to use. Furthermore, the analysis of these metadata is only used as a heuristic device that may corroborate patterns that we have known or at least suspected, and may reveal new patterns that may or may not be true and relevant as far as the past is concerned but follow from the dataset explored.

## Metadata and productions

### *Premieres and their locations (Budapest vs non-Budapest)*

In this section I am going to consider the number of premieres in the given periods, i.e., the 32-year, socialist period (1958–1989) and the 32-year period after the fall of socialism (1990–2021) with a focus on the venues of the premieres. To further qualify the understanding of changes in reception, I am also going to show how the premieres were distributed between Budapest and non-Budapest theatres. When working on the

dataset, it became apparent that this distribution is beneficial to show the accelerated growth of theatrical life in Budapest even without accounting for the alternative/fringe theatres. First, I am going to explore the statistics according to the individual plays, and second, I am going to compare the changes across the plays.

### *Hamlet*

*Hamlet* had 47 premieres during the period under discussion. 19 before the fall of the Berlin Wall and 28 between 1990 and 2021, which entails an increase of 47.4%. The distribution of premieres between Budapest and non-Budapest theatres involves 4 premieres in Budapest, and 15 in non-Budapest theatres 1–3 in each town before 1989. After 1989, *Hamlet* premiered 11 times in Budapest and 17 times in non-Budapest theatres, which means that even though the premieres almost tripled in Budapest with an 175% increase, still non-Budapest theatres could boast of holding 60.7% of the performances, while Budapest only 39.3%.

### *King Lear*

*King Lear* premiered 34 times during the given period. There is a 62% growth in the number of premieres (13 until 1989 and 21 after 1989). During the socialist regime the distribution between Budapest and non-Budapest performances was 30.76% and 69.23%, while after 1989 38.10% and 61.90%, which means the number of premieres in Budapest doubled (100% increase).

### *Othello*

*Othello* had a strange fate compared to the other tragedies. Since 1958 there were 28 premieres all over Hungary, out of which 12 took place before 1989, and 16 since then. This means that there is a mild, 33%, increase in the number of performances. What is conspicuous, however, is the distribution of premieres between Budapest and non-Budapest theatres. Between 1958 and 1989, 25% of the productions were staged in Budapest and 75% in non-Budapest theatres. After 1989 there took place a small increase in the number of performances in favour of theatres in Budapest, as 43.8% (7) of the 16 productions were in Budapest resulting in a 133.3% increase.

### *Macbeth*

*Macbeth* had the smallest number of premieres during the period explored with its 26 productions. Between 1958 and 1989 there were 12 premieres, while between 1990 and 2020 there were 14, resulting in a small 16.7% increase. There seems to be a rather equal distribution of productions of *Macbeth* before 1989, with Pécs housing 25% of all the premieres while Budapest had the second most with 8.3%. There seems to have been a radical change in percentages after 1989 when Budapest overtook Pécs with 28.6%. This change may be more dramatic if we look at the distribution of premieres between non-Budapest theatres and Budapest theatres. Before 1989, 91.7% of the productions were located outside of Budapest, while after 1989 the percentage for non-Budapest theatres decreased to 71.4%. Furthermore, compared to pre-1989

premieres, the number of productions in Budapest after 1989 increased by 300%. Even with this increase, Budapest still housed only a small percentage of the productions in Hungary.

### *Comparison and contrast*

The tendency in terms of the number of productions boils down to a few interesting changes. If we look at the numbers before and after 1989, we may witness a 41% increase in premieres; however, if we look at the changes in terms of the Budapest and non-Budapest division, the increase becomes more polarised, as for non-Budapest premieres there is only a mild increase (11%), while the increase in Budapest located premieres is more radical (150%). This dramatic difference in increase may well point towards the opening of a few new theatres in Budapest, and also that Budapest during the socialist era was more under the control of cultural politics and repression than the rest of Hungary.<sup>5</sup> As Bérczes (1996: 43) puts it 'what was tolerated in the countryside may not have been in the capital'. Thus, with political liberation, i.e., with the disappearance of direct political control, Budapest gained an (unhealthy) domination in the number of productions of Shakespeare's tragedies.

If the numbers per tragedy are compared, one may well find changes worth interpreting. *Hamlet* has noticeably high numbers on a variety of grounds, such as the total amount of premieres all together with 47 productions in the two periods, the most productions before and after 1989, and the most Budapest and non-Budapest stagings before and after 1989. This popularity may be due to two factors, namely public education and translations. As far as public education is concerned during the socialist era, *Hamlet* was the required work to be taught, while after the political changes in 1989 *Hamlet* with *Romeo and Juliet* remained in the focus of attention (GOMBÁR 2008; CSEPREGHY 2009; PIKLI 2021). When it comes to translations, out of the four tragedies János Arany's translation of *Hamlet* prior to and during the socialist era was the only translation that became part of the literary canon, a status it held well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Hamlet*'s dominating of the Hungarian stage is as interesting as the relatively small impact that the *Macbeth* digits show. First and foremost, this is the play with the smallest number of productions altogether, before and after 1989. In line with this, it is also remarkable that *Macbeth* shows the smallest growth, only 17% compared to the others (*Othello*: 33%, *King Lear*: 62%, *Hamlet*: 47.4%). *Macbeth* is furthermore exceptional with its 10% decrease in the number of non-Budapest productions between the pre- (11 premieres) and post-1989 (10 premieres) eras, as *Othello* had the same number in this block, while *Hamlet* showed a 13.3% increase and *King Lear* a remarkable 44% growth. Despite these data points, *Macbeth* does have a notably large increase in the number of Budapest productions, a 300% rise. This immense growth should not be overemphasised, since the majority of productions, i.e., 71.45%, remained in

<sup>5</sup> Peterdi Nagy writes for example that '[a]ctors who became embarrassing in Pest were sent to Debrecen at that time [in the 1950's. – Zs.A.] (PETERDI NAGY 2005: 20). (Unless indicated otherwise, all translations of the sources are mine.)

non-Budapest theatres. The domination of non-Budapest premieres before 1989 of *Macbeth* may well show that out of the four Great Tragedies, *Macbeth* may have been the one that could be performed far from Budapest, far from the political control of the socialist state, and the overwhelming growth of the percentage of premieres in Budapest after 1989 may indicate the change of the political climate. It is also remarkable with *Macbeth* that there are years when a play about a tyrant was performed more than once. Before 1989, 1960 and 1979 could boast of two-two productions, while after 1989 it is 2018 that witnessed three productions, maybe gauging and reflecting the public opinion about the then present political actors.

## Age of actors

### *Hamlet*

The average age of actors before 1989 was 34.3 years, and 34.1 years after 1989, which means that the difference is -0.2 years; that is if anything there is a very slight decrease in the second period. It is also interesting that the eldest and youngest actors belong to the second period and to Budapest, i.e., the eldest is Sándor Szakácsi<sup>6</sup> (age 52, 1994, National Theatre, Budapest),<sup>7</sup> whose counterpart before 1989 is Miklós Gábor (age 48, 1972, Szeged National Theatre, Szeged), and the youngest is Attila Vidnyánszky Jr. (age 24, 2017, Vígszínház [Comedy Theatre], Budapest), whose counterpart from the socialist period is János Kulka (age 25, 1983, National Theatre, Pécs).<sup>8</sup> What is conspicuous about the latter production is that the director, Menyhért Szegvári for the first time on the Hungarian stage moved the emphasis from Hamlet to Claudius, which may well explain why he cast the extremely talented but very young Kulka for Hamlet's role. Critics not unexpectedly wrote about the political layer of the production – from military government (Old Hamlet) through peaceful consolidation (Claudius) to military government (Fortinbras), and the frame scenes featuring the gravediggers, where the tomb is the gate where all the characters exit (BOGÁCSI 1984: 7; GYÖRGY 1984: 8–10; KOLTAI 1984: 11; P. MÜLLER 1984: 247–250). It also must be mentioned that this production was overshadowed by another *Hamlet* (dir. Tamás Ascher) in Kaposvár.

### *King Lear*

In contrast with Hamlet, Lear became somewhat older in the period after 1989: the average being 54.46 for the period before 1989 and 58.38 for the period from 1990 to

6 Two articles refer to the rather mature actor (VESZPRÉMI 1994; SZAKÁCSI 1994). The first one notes that 'he is way beyond gathering stage experience' (VESZPR.MI 1994: 6), in the latter Szakácsi (1994: 6) claims that he 'needed the experience of losing both father and mother to go so deep in the role'.

7 Here and elsewhere between round brackets I provide information about the premiere of the given production.

8 It is worth mentioning that Pécs was an iconic theatrical site as many revolutionary Russian directors were invited to work there (see PETERDI NAGY 2005: 17).

2021, signalling a slight shift towards more advanced age (a 3.92-year increase) for the actors cast for the role. It is also remarkable that there were two productions in each era where the actors were rather young compared to the average: György Bánffy was 38 (1965, National Theatre of Pécs)<sup>9</sup> and László Attila Horváth aged 47 (2010, Móricz Zsigmond Theatre, Nyíregyháza). The extremes at the other end of the scale were Tamás Major aged 71 (1981, National Theatre, Miskolc)<sup>10</sup> and Ferenc Bessenyei aged 75 (1994, National Theatre of Budapest).

### *Macbeth*

The age distribution among actors portraying Macbeth underwent a notable transformation post-1989. During the socialist era, the average age of these actors stood at 39.9 years. However, a marked shift occurred in the subsequent years, witnessing a decrease of 6 years, resulting in an average age of 33.9. Particularly noteworthy is the year 1979, marked by a radical decline in the age of the actors playing Macbeth in productions directed by György Pethes at Veszprémi Petőfi Színház, featuring János Papp at the age of 31, and Imre Csiszár at Szigligeti Theatre, Szolnok, with Sándor Halmágyi at the age of 32. These productions garnered a spectrum of reviews, encompassing both praise and criticism. Most of the reviewers mentioned the inadequacy of János Papp, especially compared to the mature and strong Ildikó Dobos (FÁBIÁN 1979; HORVÁTH 1979; I.SZ. 1979; SZ-Y 1979). Furthermore, an aspect consistently remarked upon was the unexpected youthfulness of the actors portraying Macbeth, and the central metaphor around which the productions were organised: the huge iron crown hanging above the stage in the former one, and the mud pool occupying most of the stage in the latter. The divergence in critical reception and the unconventional staging choices underscore the noteworthy shifts in the portrayal of Macbeth and the dynamics of theatrical presentation during this year.

### *Othello*

What we find in terms of the actors' ages playing Othello is a slight, almost insignificant shift towards younger actors. Between 1958 and 1989, the actors' average age playing Othello was 42.29, while after 1989 to 2021 it was 40.25, resulting in a 2.99-year decrease in the age of the actors. The change seems to be initiated with the first *Othello* after the fall of the Iron Curtain, a production in 1991 directed by Judit Galgóczy, National Theatre, Miskolc, where Károly Gesztesi age 28 was cast as Othello.<sup>11</sup>

9 Only one reviewer refers indirectly to the age of the actor. When praising the actor, he adds that 'still he is not Lear, or at least: not yet King Lear' (DEMETER 1965: 4).

10 All the reviewers listed below note the powerful directorial concept and accompanying stage design (Imre Csiszár), references to Rákosi's despotic politics, and to Major's sarcastically rational, despotic acting style (BARTA 1981; FÖLDES 1981; FÁBIÁN 1981; GYURKÓ 1981; KOLTAI 1981; MÉSZÁROS 1981; MIHÁLYI 1981; SAS 1981; TARJÁN 1981).

11 Reviewers emphasise that Gesztesi is 'neither old nor black' (FILIP 1991: 4) and that the production focuses on 'doubt and insecurity and becoming insecure' (KISS 1991a). Gesztesi may well partake perfectly in this because he is young and was not painted black, against the theatrical tradition.

A few years later, in 1995, József Ruszt chose Iván Kamarás, 23, as his Othello in the Budapest Studio Theatre. Another rather young Othello was Héresz Menszátor, 31, in 2003, Jászai Mari Theatre, Tatabánya.

### *Comparison and contrast*

As far as the data may tell us, changes occurred in the casting policy for the title roles of the Great Tragedies. It seems that as far as the average age of the actors is concerned, Hamlet seems to be the most immune to the political changes. Close to Hamlet only a slight change can be seen in the age of Othellos with a 1.65 year-decrease also showing not much of a change. Similarly to Othellos, Lears changed only slightly with a 2.5 increase. This latter change as a trend seems to point towards choosing actors closer to the age of the character. The most dramatic change can be seen in the average age of Macbeth with its 6-year decrease, again pointing towards the possibility that in this respect *Macbeth* was the most sensitive to political and cultural changes in Hungary.

## Gender

In this section I am going to analyse the data related to gender. More precisely two aspects will be explored: the gender of the directors and the title characters.

### *Hamlet*

Directors of *Hamlet* before 1989 were exclusively men, while after 1989 there was a female director, Enikő Eszenyi (2017, Vígszínház [Comedy Theatre], Budapest). One also should mention another production, i.e., one in the Csokonai Theatre, Debrecen, directed by Franciska Éry, but this production does not fit the criteria of the analysis, as it was designed as webtheatre – in this case a transition between the traditional theatre and the filmed version – but this particular production was closer to a film version, as it was not solely a theatrical production recorded on film. So, adhering to the criteria there is only one production directed by a female director altogether, which means that there is a 100% growth in the second period, but this is still only 3.6% of the 28 productions during the second period. If we take the two periods together, only 2.12% of the productions were directed by a female director. As far as actresses cast for the role of Hamlet, the digit is zero.

### *King Lear*

There have not been any productions of *King Lear* directed by women, neither before nor after 1989. It is, however, significant that in the last period, i.e., in the 21<sup>st</sup> century there has been a female Lear: Anna Ráckevei (2019, Csokonai Theatre, Debrecen). For the sake of honesty, I should also mention that Andrea Petrik played the role of Lear in another production as well (2008, Ódry Theatre, Budapest), but the Ódry Theatre is located outside the dataset analysed, as this theatre is the theatre of the University of Theatre and Film Arts. Thus, with respect to *Lear*, we cannot refer to a single female director and only to one female Lear.

*Othello*

In terms of gender issues, *Othello* seems to be a more sensitive play in Hungary. As far as directors are concerned, before 1989 two female directors put *Othello* on stage: Judit Nyilassy (1964, National Theatre of Miskolc)<sup>12</sup> and Mária Angyal (1988, Katona József Theatre, Kecskemét),<sup>13</sup> which means that 16.67% of the directors were female while after the fall of the Berlin Wall, three female directors can be found, i.e., Judit Galgóczi (1991, National Theatre of Miskolc)<sup>14</sup>, Enikő Eszenyi (2009, Vígszínház, Budapest) and Kriszta Székely (2021, Katona József Theatre, Budapest), meaning that 18.75% of the directors were female. Although one might witness a small increase in the number of female directors, this does not reveal sensitivity to political changes. It is remarkable though that of all the productions of the two periods, 17.86% of the 28 productions were directed by women. In terms of female actors in the role Othello, the Hungarian stone and prose theatres did not witness a female actor.

*Macbeth*

In the case of *Macbeth*, seen from the number of productions before and after 1989 represents no significant change. There was one female director before 1989, namely Judit Nyilassy, who directed *Macbeth* in 1971 in the National Theatre, Miskolc, which means that 8.33% of the productions in this period were directed by women. After 1989, we can find one female director, namely Judit Galgóczi in 1990 in the same theatre as the former production, which tells us that 7.14% of the productions were directed by female directors. This means that *Macbeth* did have female directors; all together 7.69% of all the 26 productions were directed by women. Furthermore, it is to be mentioned that there was not an actress cast for the role of Macbeth at all.

*Comparison and contrast*

What the numbers show as far as female directors and actresses cast in the title roles are concerned can be summed up with politely claiming that women are more than underrepresented. This underrepresentation can be somewhat qualified if we look at the numbers without changing the general perception that women in these particular areas are rather marginalised.

As far as actresses are concerned out of the 135 productions only one actress played a title role. If we take this number broken down by periodisation, this one actress can be found in the period after 1989, which means a 100% increase in numbers. The

12 Puskás mentions the 'determined character of the director' and adds that the production was more interested in the tragedy of the undermining of trust than in the drama of jealousy' (PUSKÁS 1964: 5; see also PÁRKÁNY 1964).

13 Although in an interview Angyal suggests that she emphasised the psychological drama and that *Othello* is like us (ANGYAL 1988: 4), critics presented the production as something that should be forgotten without much merit. See (ANGYAL 1988: 4; BÓTA 1988; KÁROLYI 1988: 4).

14 In an interview Galgóczi claims that she chose *Othello* for its being 'a treasure house of emotions, the multifacetedness of the relationship between men and women, and because it is about otherness, i.e. minorities and the powerful who intend to integrate them [this was achieved with a young and Caucasian looking Othello. - Zs.A.]'. She also adds that it is 'a play for a studio theatre'; see (KISS 1991b).

increase, however, cannot be taken at its face value, because it is only one actress and production all together, a number which is still significantly small.

In so far as female directors are concerned the situation is somewhat better. Out of the 135 directors 5.93% were women, namely 8. Although there were more female directors than actresses in the two periods, this is still a sadly small percentage. If we take periodisation into account the image remains somewhat qualified, yet still sad. During the socialist era out of the 58 directors 5.17% were women (3), while after 1989 out of the 77 directors 6.49% were female (5). Although the numbers even in this division are disheartening, still what we can find is a 67% increase in the second period.

The explanation for the disheartening results may follow from the conservatism of repertoire theatres in Hungary. This conservatism, however, may take a variety of forms in the two areas explored. As far as the gender of the main characters is concerned, it is very likely that the characters' iconic role in Hungarian culture may discourage any director from breaking the tradition. The reason for the almost lack of female directors may be related to the male oriented societal and institutional structures of Hungarian culture in general and that of Hungarian theatrical life in particular.

The exceptions, i.e., the one female Lear and the 8 female directors may point toward some assumed social roles of women. Most of the reviews about Anna Ráckevei's Lear called attention to the emotions and family and human relations in the production (GYÜRKI 2019; SZEKERES 2019). Lear in this case was more important as a mother to her daughters than as a king/queen, or more precisely the focus of the production shifted from the universal and symbolic interpretation of the work to a more particular, human and every day one. In other words, in this production one could see the shift from the exploration of political power to that of human relationships. If we look at the data related to female directors, a similar tendency seems to emerge. The play that could boast of the greatest percentage of female directors is *Othello*, which out of the four Great Tragedies is the least political and more focused on human relations.

## Translations

### *Hamlet*

*Hamlet* is similar to the rest of the tragedies in terms of multiplication of translations in the period after the change of the political system in Hungary. Before 1989, all the productions used János Arany's canonical translation, while the changes were foreshadowed by the work of István Eörsi (1983, Csiky Gergely Theatre, Kaposvár, dir. Tamás Ascher) and Dezső Mészöly (1996, New Theatre, Budapest, dir. János Ács), who partially retranslated *Hamlet* but kept the most significant and most well-known passages from Arany, and it has to be added that both productions were utter failures both in terms of audience responses and critical reviews. A radical change appeared after 1989 when the play was retranslated by several translators, György Jánosházy (SHAKESPEARE 2002), István Eörsi (SHAKESPEARE 1993), Ádám Nadasdy (SHAKESPEARE

2012) and the productions used these translations, most of the time these were requested by directors for specific productions: István Eörsi (2003, Csiky Gergely Theatre of Temesvár, dir. Victor Ioan Frunză) and Ádám Nádasdy (1999, Csokonai Theatre, Debrecen, dir. György Lengyel). Although the decrease of Arany's translation from 100% to 53.3 % is a radical change in this period, this also demonstrates that the assumption that Arany is not that important any more is erroneous, as still he has the lion's share of productions during the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the 30-year period after the collapse of the socialist regime. It is also true, however, that from the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Nádasdy dominated the field by being responsible for 50% of the translations. So, it can safely be claimed that from exclusivity, János Arany's translation became an important but not exclusive choice for the directors. Also, it is to be noted that there seems to be a new canonisation movement in the last decade of the given period, in which Nádasdy became the most popular with half of the productions using his translation.

### *King Lear*

Translations of *King Lear* show a greater variety even before 1989, as though Mihály Vörösmarty and rewritings of Vörösmarty dominate the field, there are other important translators as well. If the years are considered as well, it seems that this domination was broken in 1986, when Dezső Mészöly's translation appeared. The scene does not change radically after 1989: Vörösmarty and his rewritings remain most popular for production, but there emerges one contender, Dezső Mészöly. If plotted according to years, the first decade shows a great variety, the second decade witnesses Vörösmarty's comeback, while the third decade witnesses again a great variety. In the third decade there is a production that is worth mentioning, that of Bertalan Bagó's in Székesfehérvár (2014), where Vörösmarty was mixed with Ádám Nádasdy's in a way that the choice reflected the age of the characters in the first half of the production, while in the second half the older generation, who spoke in Vörösmarty's translation gradually move to Nádasdy's translation. This is a creative use of the translations, which as far as I know has not been utilised in any other production.

### *Othello*

Before 1989, there is only one translation of *Othello*, i.e., that of Dezső Mészöly, that was used, while beginning in 1990 there appeared a multiplicity of translations in a relatively even distribution, László Kardos's in 5 productions, Dezső Mészöly's in 4, László Márton's in 2, Anonymous', who can be either of the translators in 2, István Eörsi's, Géza Bodolay's and Mária Ambrus' in 1. So, if there is a tendency of liberation in terms of the number of translations, *Othello* may well be an appropriate example.

### *Macbeth*

In the case of *Macbeth*, there is a radical change after 1989. During the socialist era Lőrinc Szabó dominated the scene, i.e., no other translation was used in theatres. After 1989 the scene became more colourful even though Lőrinc Szabó's domination is

visible, as 64.28% of the productions used his translation, and the rest of the translators had only 1–2 productions. This trend, if plotted according to the years, is broken in 2010, when he is overtaken by Géza Kállay as the only translator who could credit 2 productions, while the rest of the translators had only one. The data set is too small though to claim that there is a new canonisation at work and that Kállay's seems to be the new dominant translation.

### *Comparison and contrast*

When exploring the data related to translations of Shakespeare's Great Tragedies there are a few tendencies that can be delineated.

It is rather clear that during the socialist period, in line with the Government's will to centrally controlling every aspect of life and culture, accompanied with the desire to celebrate the 19<sup>th</sup>-century cultural achievements, if there was a 19<sup>th</sup>-century translation, then it monopolised the Hungarian stages, such as in the case of *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, translated by János Arany and Mihály Vörösmarty respectively. If, however, there could not be found a worthy 19<sup>th</sup>-century translation, a contemporary or somewhat earlier translation was chosen to rule the stage, i.e., Dezső Mészöly and Lőrinc Szabó in the case of *Othello* and *Macbeth*.

After 1989 the general tendency may well exemplify liberation. Each and every tragedy was translated and retranslated multiple times to varying degrees. It seems that *Othello* is the paragon of this tendency, as there was an even distribution of productions among the translators. Second in line is *King Lear* where Mihály Vörösmarty is still the dominant translator with 31.6% of the productions, while Dezső Mészöly had 21.1% and Nádasdy 15.8%. The other two tragedies show a less even distribution of translations, as in the case of *Hamlet*, the classical translation of Arany is still going very strong with its 53.3%, and with respect to *Macbeth* Lőrinc Szabó with his 68.28% domination. Hesitantly, the continuing domination of Arany and Szabó is qualified by the last decade of the period under investigation, as Nádasdy and Kállay seemed to become the newly canonised translators. Nádasdy's canonisation is more convincing though, not only because of what the percentages show, but his name is quickly becoming synonymous with Shakespearean translation, as 13 of his translations are on the Hungarian stages, while Kállay translated only *Macbeth*. It is also conspicuous that only one woman appear among the translators.

## Conclusions

The conclusions I should draw are twofold. First, that data driven historiography has its limitations in the data used. Second, that the tendencies harmonise with more general features and the tendencies of Hungarian theatrical life.

The limitations of the data fall in two groups. First, that the trends that we could see here only follow from the dataset of the Institute and Museum of the History of Theatre, meaning that the analysis is enabled and limited by the model used by the

creators of the dataset and the amount and quality of the data, and the analysis could not go beyond that. Secondly, that defining periods and concepts is a sloppy territory which could introduce distortions in the analysis. These limitations, however, do not undermine the enterprise, as the dataset is the best and most reliable that is available nowadays. Additionally, identifying the methodological problems and difficult decisions prepares the way to at least an objective view of the study, and at most it highlights the awareness and reflectivity of the study.

The tendencies that one may find at an abstract level concern some tendencies of the Hungarian reception of Shakespeare and theatrical life in general. While during the socialist era the repertoire theatres were under state control, two tendencies could be deciphered. First, policy makers required credible positive characters, some psychological realism was expected on stage which either fostered Stanislavsky's heritage, or its refinement. Second, besides psychological realism, the audience learned to distinguish between what is recited and what could be seen on the stage, and thus to understand the relevance of the then contemporary political discourse (see SCHANDL 2008: 9). This ability of the audience to understand the greater themes of a work and their relevance to their own lives organically led to a great moral load being added to the theatrical experience, as one could choose to participate or refuse the critical attitude. A twist to these tendencies came into being after 1972, when Peter Brook brought his Shakespeare adaptations to Budapest together with Jan Kott's reinterpretation of the Shakespearean *oeuvre* as our contemporary. Kott-Brook once and for all made the text-centred Shakespeare theatre questionable. It is in this context completed with Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971) that we may understand the choice of casting exceptionally young actors in the role of Macbeth in 1979, which became a trend after 1989.

On another plane one must mention is that the growth of Budapest premieres of Shakespeare may be part of a more general search for the identity of theatres, especially Budapest theatres. Hermann (2015: 11–12) argues that 'staging classics means that a theatre with its own language, the language that fosters its own aesthetic traditions, can speak about itself'. Later he adds that the 'theatre that stages classics is looking for its own precedents, for those principles that serve as the foundations of the theatre as a social institution' (HERMANN 2015: 12). The increase of the number of Shakespeare premieres may well be understood as the process which exemplifies both the identity crisis and search for the identity of repertoire theatres in Budapest.

The radical changes in translations again represent theatrical tendencies in Hungary, such as the emergence of the features of the post-dramatic theatre. A turning away from canonised translations of the socialist era towards plurality may well indicate the shift from a text-centred theatre to the more performance-centred one, where it is not the well-known poetry of the text that is provided for and expected by the audiences, but rather the totality of the aesthetic experience. At the same time, however, as seen above, the last decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century slightly moves towards new canonising tendencies. It would be, however, too early to present this as a fact, the coming decades will be decisive in this respect.

The change in the average age of actors and the plurality in the translations is in harmony with more general tendencies in the Hungarian theatre. What Kiss claims about János Mohácsi's directions that he 'destabilises the belief not only in the primacy of the text but also that of the actor' (KISS 2008: 100) seems to be true about Shakespeare productions as well. The primacy of text and the actors is slowly deconstructed, making its way to the post-dramatic theatre, and this tendency started in the 1970's in Hungary. Although the features of the post-dramatic theatre can be traced back to the 1970's, the move from the socialist dramatic theatre to the post-dramatic theatre<sup>15</sup> took place 'with radical speed from the 1990's to the present day' (RADNÓTI 2005: 259).

It is also conspicuous that in terms of gender, there does not seem to be any change occurring. Female directors and actresses in title roles remain sadly on the margins. One must mention here that this male domination is visible in the world of translators as well, since only one woman can be found among the translators of the Great Tragedies. In this respect the lack of change rather points towards a type of conservatism or rather some gravitation towards the methods of the past.

These conclusions may not be revelatory, and would not challenge the methodology of memory studies, let alone theatre history but if the analysis of metadata of theatrical productions corroborates the present knowledge it would also serve its purpose. Especially when certain aspects of our received knowledge are slightly corrected and modified, the received knowledge can be refined. The greatest asset of the analysis of metadata is that the method, if used cautiously and systematically, can bring to the horizon of attention phenomena that would remain hidden with the application of different methodologies. This can be so, as when we only pay attention to metadata, our attention is distracted from traditional features of theatre history, factors of 'mediation'<sup>16</sup> and 'authorisation'<sup>17</sup> and thus lead to the exploration of otherwise seemingly unimportant, yet revealing factors.

This way two more theoretical conclusions follow. The first conclusion is that as metadata are insensitive to the canon and influence, the analysis may well reveal patterns that would remain hidden in canon forming, canon driven historical analyses. This way, it can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the cultural processes that reached and thus influenced vast majorities of the society. In other words, this approach can reveal how repertoire theatres reach out to audiences, and thus is a way to gauge cultural tendencies that are not bereft of the material aspects of theatre making. Second, as a strategic historiographical project it may unsettle previous

15 For a comprehensive analysis of post-dramatic Hungarian Shakespeare productions see (DERES 2021).

16 Zarhy-Levo (2015: 55) defines 'mediation' as 'the workings of various individuals or organisations that act as mediators (such as theatre reviewers, journalists, funding bodies, publishers, producers, artistic directors, critics, and academics)'.

17 'Mediating figures "authorise" theatrical works (plays or productions) and theatre creators (playwrights, directors etc.) and influence where they are placed on the cultural map' (ZARHY-LEVO 2015: 55–56).

historiographical projects. This mode of thinking about cultural memory, however, cannot and should not replace more traditional methodologies, since no database can promise and support completeness and absolute comprehensiveness. It is this strategic historiographical project not its achievements but precisely its limitations, the always present kaleidoscopic perspective that unsettles the modes of contemplating the past and understanding the present in light of data.

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