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**The centenary of professional Hungarian acting  
in Transylvania in 1892**

Doctoral dissertation

theses

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## I. Brief summary of the research topic and objectives

The focus of my thesis is the centenary of professional Hungarian acting, organized between 10 and 11 November 1890 in the theatre (and on the streets) of Kolozsvár. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was the century of centenaries. The centenary fever swept through Europe, took people out on the streets, and into the theatres, mixing not only social classes, but also fireworks, dress up parades and feasts with eloquent speeches and theatre performances. Comparative studies have shown how the structure and different moments of a centenary celebration or jubilee (for example how the day of the celebration is structured, what kind of elements are repeated – lunch, performance at the theatre, inaugurations, soirées) become a transnational pattern that are locally adapted and filled with content by each and every celebration.

The research of the theatre of Kolozsvár in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is a fundamental research. Although it has a uniquely vast number of archival sources, the theatre found itself on the periphery of the grand narrative of Hungarian theatre history. The paradigm shift of postmodern history and the linguistic turn questions the one great narrative, emancipating the relevance of the multiplicity of regional, local narratives. Thus, the past is constructed by sometimes parallel, sometimes rival discourses.

Following the Compromise of 1867, Transylvania found itself in a new position, the changes affecting both the political and cultural life, and raising questions of identity. As a reaction to the cultural life that had been centering in Budapest, the protectionist discourses intensified, attempting to keep the previous state of independence from Hungary, at least on a cultural level. Kolozsvár kept on exercising its function of a cultural capital, and this effort implied an interplay of local and regional identities, while relating itself to the national identity as well. The theatre, one of the most important cultural institutions, was sensitive to these changes and its consequences. At the same time, it may be seen as an institution that represented and staged an entire micro-society, being an important field to study the social changes.

In my analysis I followed three main methodological considerations. First, my aim was to offer a micro-level analysis of the three days of celebrations in Kolozsvár. Secondly, the viewpoint of the analysis is a regional one: clashing national and regional identities, rivaling cities and institutions, and how the theatre of Kolozsvár defined its own status in this cultural and political context. Due to methodological nationalism, it may often seem that Hungarian cultural space in 19<sup>th</sup> century was a homogenous one, as the peripheral histories that often fall in the blind spot and

become invisible next to the grand narratives. The regional perspective and the micro-level analysis can reveal the existence of multiple cultural centers and a heterogenous cultural life. Finally, I wished to contextualize the centenary of Kolozsvár and find its place among the Hungarian centenaries of the time: first of all the centenary celebrations of professional Hungarian acting held two years earlier, in 1890 in Budapest, but also the patterns of the great Kazinczy celebration or previous jubilees of the theatre itself were the most important elements of a comparative approach.

## **II. Sources**

The archival documents of the centenary are at the core of the dissertation. These can be found divided in three parts – documents of the centenary, documents of the memorial plaque, documents of the centenary album – at the National Archives of Cluj. The second most important source was the press, most importantly two local newspapers, the *Kolozsvár* and the *Ellenzék*, completed by journals from Budapest. I used other sources closely related to the celebrations, namely the centenary album and two texts by Zoltán Ferenczi: a dramatic prologue about the first Transylvanian actor that was part of the festive theatre program, and a scientific work on the history of acting and the theatre of Kolozsvár. Both texts work with the same sources but are written in different genres and for different purposes, their comparison is a fruitful one, revealing different types of possible narrations of theatre history.

The great variety of the types of archival sources related to the centenary – official documents, personal letters, financial papers, celebratory speeches, inventories, centenary albums, poems and toast – show us how different types of narratives have been constructed. There is not one story of the centenary, but many narratives that are sometimes parallel and sometimes they intersect. In my interpretation of the three-day celebration I tried to uncover the variety of the existing narratives: rivaling identities, regional and national thought, political agendas and local commemorative traditions finding their place in the structure of the transnational celebratory trend. The visual sources (portraits of the organizers, photos of the tableaux vivantes) are just as important, however outnumbered by textual ones.

All the mentioned sources make possible a detailed micro-level analysis of the centenary, but many aspects of the celebrations could not be understood without offering a larger context of

theater administration and financing. In order to do this, I also included archival source from the 1870s and 1880s, completed by the press. Another way of contextualizing the celebrations was to analyze them together with other centenaries from Hungary, for this I used mostly the press.

### **III. Results and future research possibilities**

The centenary celebration offered a perfect framework for the theatre of Kolozsvár to reminiscence about the past, reflect on the present and plan the future – this was especially important. The centenary was embedded in the decades-long financial struggle of the institution and staged the historically most important patrons, the Transylvanian aristocracy, while behind the scenes the administrative board fought for the implementation of total state support. A zoom-out was needed in order to reveal the social history of the theatre of Kolozsvár at the end of the 19th century, focusing premierly on theatre administration and financing. By taking in account the administrative changes of the theatre starting from the 1870s my goal was to show how different forms of patronage coexisted even though during the celebrations only the aristocracy was highlighted by the tableaux vivantes they presented, this way reclaiming representative publicity, even for a few days.

I analyzed on a micro-level multiple components of the three-day celebration. The construction of the festive program revealed the migration of motives among the previous celebrations of the theatre, thus creating a sense of continuity. The occasions may be different, but the important moments from the history of the theatre are staged, and one can witness the creation of a tradition. The tableaux vivantes are a very good example of parallel types of theatre patronage. From a social historic point of view, it reveals the role of the aristocracy in the context of bourgeois public sphere, and how different aristocratic functions and traditions work in this changed environment. The last two chapters are connected by a financial viewpoint. One of them is a micro-level analysis of the costs of the centenary, revealing a number of latent expenses, while the other is the analysis of almost two decades of theatre administration and financing. The micro- and macro-analysis together help us understand why discourses about possible state support dominated the celebrations. Politics of culture, state support and financing are less present in theatre history, even though there are best practices in literary history and art history. I believe this is one direction in which this research can go in the future. The other possible direction would be a systematic and

comparative exploration of Hungarian centenary celebrations from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This could show the migration of motifs and best practices, while it could open new possibilities for the research of cults.

#### **IV. List of publications related to the topic of the dissertation**

SZABÓ-REZNEK Eszter, „Kettős centenárium Kolozsváron. Katona József és az erdélyi hivatásos színjátszás ünnepe 1892-ben”, *Acta Historiae Litterarum Hungaricarum: Acta Universitatis Szegediensis* 34 (2018): 55–67.

SZABÓ-REZNEK Eszter, „K. Papp Miklós és egy értelmiségi hálózat: A kulturális elit alakulása és működése a 19. század végi Erdélyben”, *Verso – irodalomtörténeti folyóirat* 1, 2. sz. (2018): 35–51.

SZABÓ-REZNEK Eszter, „Mennyibe kerül egy színházi ünnep megszervezése? Az erdélyi hivatásos színjátszás centenáriumának gazdasági vonatkozásai”, *Irodalomismeret*, 4. sz. (2018): 62–72.

SZABÓ-REZNEK Eszter, „Kolozsvár íze. Egy színházi-gasztronómiai ünnep a 19. század végén”, *Somogy* 46, 2. sz. (2018): 29–37.

SZABÓ-REZNEK Eszter, „Az arisztokrácia önreprezentációja az erdélyi hivatásos színjátszás centenáriumi ünnepségén”, *Korall* 18, 69. sz. (2017): 46–67.

SZABÓ-REZNEK Eszter, „Meltzl Hugó és a kolozsvári Petőfi-ellenkánon: Kísérlet a »nemzeti költő« regionális újraértelmezésére”, *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 120, 2. sz. (2016): 215–224.

SZABÓ-REZNEK Eszter, „»A nap, amelyen a csecsemő magyar színészetet először falai közé fogadta«: A kolozsvári hivatásos színjátszás százéves évfordulójának előkészületei”, *Acta Historiae Litterarum Hungaricarum: Acta Universitatis Szegediensis* 32 (2016): 119–134.

SZABÓ-REZNEK Eszter, „Párhuzamos támogatáspolitikák a 19. század végi kolozsvári színházban”, in *Egyediség és véletlen*, szerk. Veress Károly, 119–130, Interdiszciplináris párbeszéd 4. Kolozsvár: Egyetemi Műhely Kiadó, 2016.

SZABÓ Eszter, „Színház és társadalom a 19. század végi Erdélyben: a kolozsvári színház vezetés- és támogatáspolitikája”, in *Intelligens háló 2016 : Határon túli fiatal kutatók tanulmányai*, szerk. B. Varga Judit, 169–174. Tatabánya: Edutus Főiskola, 2016.

SZABÓ Eszter, „A nemzeti identitás árnyalatai és a kolozsvári színház vezetése az 1870-es években”, in *Nemzet és kisebbség: Társadalomtörténeti változások a XIX–XX. században / Národ a menšina. Sociálnohistorické zmeny v XIX–XX. storočí*, szerk. Bóna László és Hajdú Anikó, 95–100. Komárom: TéKa Társulás, 2014.