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PHD THESIS

Kornélia Góli:

THEATRE IN A MULTIETHNIC SPACE

The history of the Kosztolányi Dezső Theatre and the Work of the Director Urbán András

MENTOR:

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1. RESEARCH QUESTION AND THESIS GOALS

The topic of my doctoral thesis is the history of the Kosztolányi Dezső Theatre (KDSZ) and the work of Urbán András as a director, who is currently the head of this cultural institution in Subotica. The Kosztolányi Theatre was founded in 1994, in a very complex historical period both regarding the institution and the political-cultural surroundings at the time. This is the time period during which Ljubiša Ristić was the director of the National Theatre in Subotica (Népszínház-Narodno pozorište), and among his first steps as an acting director, he merged the Serbo-Croatian and the Hungarian ensembles, which perviously functioned separately. In order to keep up and save an autonomous Hungarian theatre, ethnic Hungarian politicians and actors in Vojvodina created a new theatre, the Kosztolanyi Dezső Theatre, which has been functioning since 27 years and has become the most progressive workshop of its kind in the whole region. The aim of this thesis is to analyze and analyze processes, which have influenced the making of the current image of the institution.

A specific characteristic of the examined region is a multiethnic surrounding, variety in languages and nationalities, where art and theatre (may) mediate. The thesis draws attention to the changes induced by the Yugoslav war, which affected the history of theatre in the multinational city of Subotica, as well as the history of theatre of the Hungarian minority in the province of Vojvodina.

One may approach history of theatre from two different angles: one is aesthetic and effective analysis of theatre shows, the other is mapping operational strategies of the institution. However, with both approaches, one cannot avoid the analysis of the context in which the performed show was created, in which the given theatre exists. One of the key elements of this contexts is the audience. Matters of taste, theatre visiting habits influence the repertoire politics, the artistic image of a theatre. Contemporary theatre has to face these horizons of expectation on a day-to-day basis, for this reason the thesis reflects on the expectations of the audience, feedback and stereotypes, which has been formed throughout recent decades.

The history of the KDSZ is a scarcely discussed part of the history of theatre in Vojvodina, just like the so-called Ristić-era in the history of theatre in Subotica. The latter is still subject to a hot debate, splitting the audience into two groups: some people think it was the most glorious period of the cultural life of the city, some people, on the contrary, think that it was the most shameful era of culture in Subotica. Both sides have their own arguments, thus the thesis does not want to take sides, it rather analyzes processes in the background of these events (attacks in the press, political and social changes), we would like to discover the

„missing” part of the culture of theatre in Subotica, this way contributing to the overall history of Hungarian theater in Vojvodina.

2. THESIS STRUCTURE AND METHODOLOGY

I divided the examined period into three parts. Before getting into deeper analysis in the mentioned three chapters, in the introduction I gave a short insight into the most important parts in the history of theater in Vojvodina, the history of the foundation of the National Theatre in Subotica and the Novi Sad Theatre. In this part it is already obvious that as soon as the theatre scene in Vojvodina split in two centres, the first and most important question was the relationship between the two institutions. To what degree do they influence the repertoire of each other? Which tasks should they address as minority institutions of theater?

The first part of my research is dealing with changes in the period between 1985 and 1995 (2. *Experiment for Establishing a European Theatre Aesthetics - 2. Egy Európéer színházi esztétika megvalósításának kísérlete*). The most important question of the Ljubiša Ristić era in the National Theatre in Subotica was the formal dissolution of the Hungarian ensemble, i.e. the destruction of the theatre that was a means of language cultivation – what affected the Hungarian minority as a whole in the former Yugoslavia. Here my sources were mainly press in Hungarian language, dailies and weeklies (*Magyar Szó, 7 Nap*, later: *Szabad Hét Nap, Új Hét Nap, Napló*), articles, reports, interviews, etc. about the institution and its functioning. I deliberately avoided critical reviews on shows, except for one subchapter: 2.7. *Vunderkind – The Debut of Urbán András as a Director in a Classical Theatre* (2.7. *Vunderkind – Urbán András első kőszínházi rendezése*). In that subchapter I gave an oversight of Hungarian language critical reflection related to the plays *Wozzeck* and *Hamlet* directed by Urbán.

The chapter goes in details about outside factors affecting the functioning of the National Theatre in Subotica as an institution: changes on the political map of the region, public opinion, establishment of the first political organization representing the Hungarian minority, changes in the central budget and financial support. It also sums up theatre initiatives, which aimed at preserving continuity of Hungarian acting, like the Ethno-Theatre in Backa Topola (Tájszínház), the H-Group, the Saint Genesis International Troop (Szent Genéziusz Nemzetközi Színtársulat), or the attempt to revive Hungarian acting in Sombor. In this chapter I analyze circumstances, the process of organizing and administrative work before the very first

first night show of the Kosztolányi Dezső Theatre (KDSZ), as well as remarks on the choice of the first play to perform posed by professionals and the audience.

The second part of the thesis (*3. The Kosztolányi Dezső Theatre Going on – First Chapter of the History of an Unnecessary Theatre - 3. A Kosztolányi Dezső további működésének alakulása – egy feleslegessé vált színház történetének első fejezete*) deals with three directorial mandates following the foundation. Main source of this part is also press in Hungarian: dramatic criticism about productions as well as interviews with the leaders of the institutions. The central question is, how a newly established institution positioned itself in a city which had two theatres, as after 1995, the two-ensemble organization of the National Theatre has been restored. A political twist in the country, the dissolution of Yugoslavia, inflation, embargo, all these affected theatres and their functioning, as well. A whole generation of actors (middle age professionals) have disappeared. There were no material means for the restoration of the building of National Theatre in Subotica, or for the modernization of technical infrastructure. Under such circumstances the existence of the KDSZ was put under question, being that in terms of numbers (audience, space for performances, budget) Subotica was not able to finance two theatres parallelly.

While studying this period that lasted for about a decade, reading and collecting articles and reports from the press, I was looking at how the repertoire of the KDSZ was formed as influenced by the audience and dramatic criticism; is the experimental theatre characteristic for the first twelve years of the institution and its leaders, and if yes, to what degree; what were the day-to-day difficulties for a theatre without a real ensemble, without a building of its own, without technicians and administrative staff. The first subchapter (3.1.) is about shows during the period when Gabriella Jónás was the director, when KDSZ existed only on paper, and its shows were put on the list of the National Theatre's repertoire. The next subchapter (3.2.) is about the mandate of Ferenc Péter, when struggles for an independent ensemble appeared, together with the demand for a building and for actors. Ferenc Péter wanted to make shows which will reach the highest standards of artistic performance, this way opening the way to the most important festivals of theatre. Jr. Tibor Szloboda defined KDSZ as the theatre of those *who think differently* (3.3). Based on press clippings from Hungarian newspapers of that time, the thesis analyzes, if the directors were successful in accomplishing their plans and ideas about the KDSZ.

The third part (*4. The Beginning of a Success Story – András Urbán Becomes the Director - 4. A KDSZ sikertörténetének kezdete – Urbán András igazgatói kinevezése*) focuses on the life and work of András Urbán, as during his directorship problems that were present

before have disappeared, the theatre got a permanent home and an ensemble. In this chapter I am not dealing with institutional matters, I analyze theatre shows instead. By applying techniques of Patrice Pavis and Hans-Thies Lehmann in critical analysis as well as the Philther-method, I approach the selected shows from one specific angle, pointing out their central element, emphasizing on-the-scene signs and solutions (identity, faithful to the text, historical trauma, etc.). It is important to note that during the selection process I opted for shows directed by András Urbán, which I was able to watch in person. (I also used recordings of performances and stageplays, in order to do detailed analysis. I have received recordings and stageplays from the authors.)

Based on these aspects of his work, one may recollect the artistic signature of András Urbán as a director, which is most often defined as alternative, political, engaged and experimental. However, these attributes – even if they make the discourse about the plays easier – categorize these performances, putting them into frames. On the other hand, Urbán's work is aiming at breaking down these categories and barriers. For him, the only acceptable and valid form and content is pointing at contemporary problems, which makes the audience think. The means of a theatre like this is provocation, which drags out the audience from their comfort zone and makes them face reality.

An equally important part of my selection is that in this chapter I analyze shows, which were not only on the show in the Kosztolányi Theatre, but also in theatres all around the region: like the show *Neoplanta* in the Novi Sad Theatre (Újvidéki Színház), the *Bánk bán*, as well as the performance *Rodoljupci* in the Serbian National Theatre in Belgrade (in Serbian).

I approach three periods using three different methods, that way creating a complex picture, which aims to follow operational processes, mechanisms, effects and reflections going on starting from the foundation of a theatre – as an institution – until the creation of the show. In order to avoid one-sided or biased approach, taking into account the specific nature of the geographical region and its bilingual nature, I used both Serbian and Hungarian bibliographical references.

The repertoire of the Kosztolányi Dezső Theatre starting from its foundation until nowadays (2021) is also part of the thesis.

3. RESULTS; CONCLUSION

The thesis reveals a *neglected* period in the history of Hungarian theatre in Subotica (1985–1995). This topic is of great importance, as the audience in Subotica has met with modern dramatic thought crossing over boundaries of classical national theatre thanks to this period and to artists and their work within the framework of the KDSZ. As a consequence of that, a specific audience has been created, which later on supported the Kosztolányi Dezső Theatre with their presence, with their affection.

The thesis points out the fact that except for shows, repertoires and the actors' activity, the researcher has to look at social correlations of the examined period. Within the chain of all these factors, there is a cyclic character, which cannot be spotted merely analyzing the creation of institutions by themselves or theatre shows by themselves. The Kosztolányi Dezső Theatre was established with the support of the political elite of the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina, as a reaction to the theatre aesthetics marked by Ristić, as a theatre in Hungarian language, which takes over the role of the Hungarian ensemble of the National Theatre in Subotica. Later, under the leadership of András Urbán, this function has disappeared, and the KDSZ has become the artistic theatre of the town, following contemporary theatre aesthetics which characterized the so-called Ristić-era, as well. The institution lost its local character and became regional, and today it functions as a cultural link between former republics of Yugoslavia. The theatre is doing shows in Hungarian, exists as a minority theatre, but at the same time uses potentials of the multicultural region, and employs most significant artists and authors of the ex-Yugoslav region.

It was an exciting discovery during research to spot the forming of the borderline of a multiethnic space in terms of geography, (too). History of theatre in Subotica after the WWII is not only regional, it is all over Yugoslavia. This is even more true for the Ristić-era. After the Yugoslav war this space gets smaller, the Hungarian ensemble and the Kosztolányi theatre both remain within the framework of Vojvodina, then later, starting with the Urbán-era, the KDSZ gets a distinctive role in the cultural dialogue between former Yugoslav republics, this way erasing geographic borders in dramatic arts and theatre.

The common language of the multicultural space analyzed in my thesis is theatre, first of all contemporary theatre, which relies on contemporary issues, people of today's world, while the images it conveys to the audience crosses over language boundaries. By analyzing theatre shows I tried to present a method of creative work, which – based on a literary text or a contemporary problem – creates an audiovisual entity, evokes emotions and thoughts. The

theatre aesthetics of Urbán is mostly criticized by those who claim that it is highly problematic to understand and decode a play which is built upon symbols, fragmented structure and avoids linear storytelling. The thesis offers an analytical method, putting the theatre shows into dialogues with each other, and with the help of recurring motifs interpreting the given scenes and segments.

4. PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THE TOPIC:

Chapter in a book:

1. *A vajdasági magyar színházaink történetéből = Vajdaság IV.: Kultúrtörténet*, szerk. ÖRDÖGH Tibor, Szabadka, Vajdasági Magyar Doktoranduszok és Kutatók Szervezete. - megjelenés előtt

Journals:

1. *Gogoland, Híd*, 2016/8, 114-117.
2. „*A KDSZ egyelőre történik velem*”: Góli Kornélia interjúja Urbán Andrással, a szabadkai Kosztolányi Dezső Színház igazgatójával az intézmény fennállásának huszonötödik évfordulója kapcsán, *Híd*, 2020/1-2, 117-124.
3. „*Én tényleg meg akartam váltani a világot*”: Góli Kornélia interjúja Kovács Frigyessel, *Híd*, 2020/1-2, 103-110
4. „*Őrült pörgés volt*”: Góli Kornélia interjúja Döbrenyi Dénessel a nyolcvanas évek szabadkai színházi életéről, *Híd*, 2020/1-2, 111-116
5. *Az identitás kérdése Urbán András előadásaiban*, *Philos, Újvidék – megjelenés előtt*

Philther:

6. *A DÉMONOK VÁROSA - PASS-PORT Subotica/Szabadka: a multikulturális paradicsom (utolsó leheletek)*, Philther, A magyar színháztörténet elmúlt évtizedeinek kánonja, <http://theatron.hu/ph/> (A *Vajdasági magyar színháztörténet II.* kutatás az MTA Domus csoportos ösztöndíjprogramja keretében valósult meg.) - megjelenés előtt
7. *MAGA AZ ÖRDÖG: PASS-PORT Szeged/Segedin*, Philther, A magyar színháztörténet elmúlt évtizedeinek kánonja, <http://theatron.hu/ph/> (A *Vajdasági magyar színháztörténet II.* kutatás az MTA Domus csoportos ösztöndíjprogramja keretében valósult meg.) - megjelenés előtt
8. *PASS-PORT Europe: „Kedves Európa”*, Philther, A magyar színháztörténet elmúlt évtizedeinek kánonja, <http://theatron.hu/ph/> (A *Vajdasági magyar színháztörténet II.*

kutatás az MTA Domus csoportos ösztöndíjprogramja keretében valósult meg.) - megjelenés előtt

Conference presentations:

1. *(Ön)életrajz és fikció Lovas Ildikó Spanyol menyasszony című regényében* – 13. Vajdasági Magyar Tudományos Diákköri Konferencia, Újvidék, 2014. november 21-23.
2. *Nemzeti, nemzetiségi, etnikai identitásjegyek és sztereotípiák Urbán András PASS-PORT trilógiájában - PHILTHER – HATÁROKON TÚL 2.0* – international online conference (a Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Színház- és Filmtudományi Állandó Bizottsága és a Theatron Műhely Alapítvány szervezésében), 2021. november 5.