

UNIVERSITY OF SZEGED
FACULTY OF ARTS
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
CLASSICAL HUNGARIAN LITERATURE PROGRAM

PROPOSALS FOR DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

LILLA SZALISZNYÓ

The Spiritus Rector of Actor Training
Gábor Egressy and the Professional Turn of Acting in Hungary

Consultant

Dr Maria Zentai

Szeged
2014

Topic and Objectives

Gábor Egressy (1808–1866) was a leading actor of Pesti Magyar Színház from its opening in 1837; he urged the Nemzeti Színház (National Theatre) to play Shakespeare and he became an excellent Shakespeare actor; he played a lot as guest-actor in the country at the request of even amateur companies between 1838 and 1865. He was the editor of the first Hungarian specialised theatre journal; he was one of the first actor-teachers in the first Hungarian school of acting, the Színészeti Tanoda (opened in 1865); he wrote the first textbook of acting in Hungarian. From 1837 onwards he regularly published articles and studies on theatre and on acting, his rich publishing activity is unique among actors in the mid-19th century. He took part in several public debates on literature and on theatre, he regularly helped fellow playwrights with consulting.

Considering his importance it is surprising how scanty is the literature dealing with him. His manuscripts and his published legacy are equally neglected, no critical (or any reliable) edition has been prepared of any of them. The first and last monography about Egressy was published in 1911 by Pál Rakodczay,¹ and we do not have a big number of independent studies or articles either. Egressy's image in culture history is rather one-sided, it is phocused on his acting and his repertoire. It is a common problem in the reception that from Rakodczay's book onwards no one deals with those various activities of him which were of long-range importance for actors and theatrical life in Hungary. Another problem is that the sources used are usually „outer” sources, newspapers, reviews etc. about him, and Egressy's own „voice” is not made audible, his manuscripts (letters and other) are almost completely neglected. Ferenc Kerényi was the only one who tried to give a new direction to the research but he was interested in the period 1837–1848, so the whole career still waits for being re-interpreted and redefined.²

The dissertation deals with Egressy's career between 1837 and 1865 and relies heavily on the actor's manuscripts and publications. I will write about his acting, editing, teaching and writing activities in the context of the professional turn of acting in Hungary. The institutionalising process of acting and theatre were the framework of his career, a process changing deeply even the intimate relationship between literature and theatre, a process in which acting strived to become an independent discipline. Egressy became a member of Pesti

¹ RAKODCZAY Pál, *Egressy Gábor és kora*, Bp., Singer és Wolfner, 1911, I–II.

² *Egressy Gábor válogatott cikkei /1838–1848/*, vál., jegyz., tan. KERÉNYI Ferenc, Bp., Magyar Színházi Intézet, 1980 (Színháztörténeti Könyvtár, 11), 1980.

Magyar (later Nemzeti) Színház in 1837 and (with a few breaks) he worked there until his death in 1865. These two dates give the framework of my dissertation. But I am not going to write a biography, I will not deal with his family background and his years as wayfaring actor. I will not deal with all the events of the given period either: neither with his role in the 1848–1849 revolution and war for independence, nor with his friends or with his drama translating activities.

Egressy's very rich and wide-ranging legacy has not been catalogued yet so my first task was to clear up its history: how it was preserved, handed on and how it got to public collections. After the death of the actor his eldest son, Ákos Egressy began to deal with the written sources and he made attempts to supervise and manipulate the first period of the reception, too. Pál Rakodczay was permanently in connection with him, their 1904–1913 correspondence reveals a lot of how the monography was taking shape.

Egressy himself regarded his commitment to the Pesti Magyar Színház as the true beginning of his career. Apart from the professional angle, the institutionalisation of acting had another great advantage for him: the regular salary made him able to establish a decent middle class living for his family. I will analyse his expenditure notes and some related writings, too. I could not overlook those four years when Egressy was not working as actor: his emigration in Turkey and the four successive years when he was banned from the stage because of his activities in the war for independence. This exigency situation shows clearly some characteristics and consequences of his choice of profession, drawbacks and advantages as well. His fame, the memory of his former success set into motion a non-visible but existing „capital” he could rely on in need: the interest and curiosity of the public. When he published his book „Gábor Egressy's Diary from Turkey 1849–1850”³ it became a successful venture according to the subscription lists. In this chapter I had to deal with the unclarified and problematic question whether in the emigration the actor was a paid informer of the Austrian government.

His guest-acting in the country, his editing the journal Magyar Színházi Lap, his teaching and his textbook *The Book of Acting* all show how Egressy was striving for introducing and developing professionalism in Hungarian acting, what measures he saw necessary and how he himself participated. When he was acting as guest he wrote a good

³ *Egressy Gábor törökországi naplója 1849–1850*, Pest, Kozma Vazul, 1851.

number of letters to his wife, Zsuzsanna Szentpétery, and we can see his opinions about the acting companies in the country, his worries about amateur actors, and also we can see what awful experiences made him to start writing about the necessity of improving and advancing the practice of actors and companies in the country.

In his journal *Magyar Színházi Lap* Egressy published good poetry fit for declaiming and articles and studies (mostly by himself) about theatre and acting. In this way he wanted to urge his fellow-actors to self-development. He left out theatre programs and reviews (these could find place in literary magazines) and introduced a genre new in Hungary: the specialised theatre magazine. Nevertheless, he overestimated the professional interest in the magazine: the bulk of subscribers came from the audience of his tours in the country.

When the Színészeti Tanoda started Egressy was offered a teacher's job and he was asked to write a textbook on acting, too. His lecture notes reveal much of his teaching methodology. If we compare his 1846 article *Színház és nemzet* and the statute of the Tanoda, it is clear that the statute was formed on Egressy's principles which he wrote down twenty years before the school started.

According to Egressy the contents of *The Book of Acting* „went through the ordeal of fire of forty years of fieldwork”.⁴ The literary substance of the book contains mostly Shakespeare's plays so we can assume that the 'fieldwork' refers to his Shakespeare acting. The book can be interpreted as the recorded version of his approach to his roles, too.

Sources and methodology

The dissertation relies on Gábor Egressy's manuscripts and on his printed work as well. I refer to his articles published in various papers between 1838 and 1865, to his diary from Turkey, to his writings in *Magyar Színházi Lap* and to his textbook *A színészet könyve*. As for manuscripts, the most important bands are 1) his correspondence 2) volumised manuscripts: the incomplete manuscript of the diary from Turkey, lecture notes, and the manuscripts of *A színészet könyve* 3) documents about the subscriptions 4) miscellanea: contracts, bills, certification for old age pension 5) bands outside the Egressy legacy: the correspondence of Pál Rakodczay and Ákos Egressy, the letters of Jenő Vértesy to Ákos Egressy, and the letters of Ákos Egressy to Zsuzsanna Szentpétery.⁵

⁴ EGRESSY Gábor, *A színészet könyve*, Pest, Emich Gusztáv, 1866, 24.

⁵ Országos Széchényi Könyvtár Kézirattára és Színháztörténeti Tára, Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet, Magyar Országos Levéltár, Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum Kézirattára, a Dunamelléki Református Egyházkerület Ráday Levéltára és a Magyar Tudomány Akadémia Könyvtárának Kézirattára.

My dissertation is an attempt to join the research direction which examines the process towards professionalism in the world of intellectuals and artists. In his book about the forming of modern acting Mark Evans mentions three conditions: the profession is able to give social welfare, actors organise associations, and actors are trained in institutions of higher learning.⁶ In his work about Henry Irving, the great Shakespeare actor, Jeffrey Richards also emphasises the importance of vocational associations, but instead of training institutions he speaks about professional examinations, and his third condition is the legal endorsement of the profession.⁷ In the mid-19th century in England first vocational associations are brought to life, then private and state-run actor training schools appear, too.⁸

In Hungary until Egressy's death in 1866 this process was only beginning and not until the end of the 19th century do we find all the elements of the model. But Egressy's activities especially in the later years of his career show that he was working on these conditions, he knew how important they were. In his case the turn towards professionalism was an aim he was striving for, his writings show how purposefully he worked. The analysis of his career calls for a context of the professional turn but it is not all that simple to apply it. There is no synthesising work on the social history of Hungarian theater and acting, and there is no profound work on Egressy's teaching, writing and editing activities. Also, the theoretical works on professionalism collect the decisive factors but do not offer models of interpretation. So I regard this literature as a framework to help me to create a narrative in which I examine Egressy's career from the angle of the process of professionalism. I cannot make general statements about 19th century Hungarian acting, I examine the questions within a featured career.

Results

The most important result can be the re-interpretation of Gábor Egressy's career. The various sources I examined helped me to show that Egressy was not only a great actor who did a lot for his self-development but his activities had a much wider horizon. These activities cannot be regarded as having secondary importance, his writing, editing and teaching ambitions were organic parts of his career. He worked for forwarding the turn towards professionalism in acting in Hungary. His Book of Acting offers a new angle to Shakespeare's reception in

⁶ Mark EVANS, *Movement Training for the Modern Actor*, New York – London, Routledge, 2009, 39.

⁷ Jeffrey RICHARDS, *Sir Henry Irving: A Victorian Actor and his World*, London and New York, Hambledon and London, 2005, 66.

⁸ *Uo.*, 68.

Hungary. This dissertation is the first to unfold the formation and the history of Színházi Lap, *A színészet könyve* and *Egressy Gábor törökországi naplója 1849–1850*.

The dissertation can be a base of further studies and research in theatre history, literary history, media history and the history of professionalism in 19th century Hungary.

Publications in the topic of the dissertation

1. SZALISZNYÓ Lilla, „Koszt kifizetve”: *Kisfaludy Sándor, Erdélyi János és Egressy Gábor kiadási naplója = Rajzolatok a magyar történelemtől*, szerk. ANTOS Balázs, TAMÁS Ágnes, Szeged, 2010, 25–36.
2. SZALISZNYÓ Lilla, „Nem volna jó a Kisfaludy-Társaság kérdésére felelnünk?”: *A Shakespeare-t játszó és tanító Egressy Gábor = Médiumok, történetek, használatok: Ünnepi tanulmánykötet a 60 éves Szajbély Mihály tiszteletére*, szerk. PUSZTAI Bertalan, Szeged, Szegedi Tudományegyetem Kommunikáció- és Médiatudományi Tanszék, 2012, 107–127.
3. SZALISZNYÓ Lilla, *Ami szegény Hamlettől telnék: A hivatásos színészi identitás problematikája Egressy Gábor Magyar Színházi Lapjában*, Irodalomtörténet, 2013/1, 53–76.
4. SZALISZNYÓ Lilla, *A jámbor pesti színész és a rest korhelyek: Egressy Gábor bosszankodásai és javaslatai a vidéki színjátszók pallérozására*, Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények, 2013/5, 530–559.
5. SZALISZNYÓ Lilla, *Lassan halkuló vad őrjöngések: Egressy Gábor borús napjai*, Irodalomtörténet, 2014/1, 20–47.
6. SZALISZNYÓ Lilla, „*In the furnace of experience*”: *Shakespeare’s Plays in the Textbook of Gábor Egressy = „In double trust”: Shakespeare in Central Europe*, ed. Jana BŽOCHOVÁ-WILD, Bratislava, Vysoká škola múzických umení Bratislava Divadelná fakulta, 2014, 105–117.
7. SZALISZNYÓ Lilla, *Egressy Gábor Shakespeare-szerepértelmezéseinek narratívái = Drámák határhelyzetben*, szerk. N. TÓTH Anikó, Nyitra, 2013. (megjelenés alatt)
8. SZALISZNYÓ Lilla, „*A színészoktatás spiritusz rektora*”: *Egressy Gábor színi tanodai tanársága*, Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények (közlésre elfogadva)
9. SZALISZNYÓ Lilla, „*Eleven képmása még köztünk jár*”: *Egressy Ákos és az apai örökség*, Kortárs (közlésre elfogadva)

Conference papers in the topic of the dissertation

1. „Koszt kifizetve”: Kisfaludy Sándor, Erdélyi János és Egressy Gábor kiadási naplója = Rajzolatok a magyar történelemről, Szeged, 2010. április 30.
2. *A Shakespeare-t játszó és tanító Egressy Gábor* = Drámák határhelyzetben, Szlovákia, Nyitra, 2012. szeptember 4–7.
3. *A Shakespeare-drámák tananyaggá formálása Egressy Gábor színészeti könyvében* = Tavasz Szél 2013, Sopron, 2013. május 31. – június 2.
4. *Orra hajlós, arcalakja hosszas, termete közép: Egressy Gábor testképei* = A test a társadalomban. A Hajnal István Kör konferenciája, Sümeg, 2013. augusztus 22–24.
5. *Egressy Gábor missziója: Shakespeare-drámák vidéken* = Jágónak IV. Ki merre tart a magyar Shakespeare-kutatásban?, Szeged, 2013. szeptember 19–21.