

His/story, Her/story,
Theatre Histories

edited by

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FOREWORD

Our volume *His/story, Her/story, Theatre Histories* plays with words, genders, stories, and above all, theatre as it incorporates ‘play’ into the possibilities of historiography as an analytical technique. We play with the reader’s attention guided by the interpreting historian and his or her position, and we play with the idea that the shared insights of theatre practitioners and theatre researchers (the fundamentals of performance studies) are simultaneously embodied in *doing, showing doing, and explaining showing doing*. We play with theatrical genres, theatrical moments, languages of performance, and geographical distances, yet the rules of the game are strict, for we are writing theatre history. The studies in this volume employ a common methodology, known as the Philther (see Andreas Kotte’s introductory essay), which regards the performance as the object of theatre studies. We interpret its cultural context, directorial and dramaturgical characteristics, the actors’ performances, sight and sound exclusively from the perspective of the work of art, and we trace its impact from the perspective of the performance as a whole.

The Philther method—a portmanteau of the words ‘philology’ and ‘theatre’—was developed in the early 2010s by Hungarian theatre historians who founded the journal *Theatron* (see <https://theatron.hu>). The analytical methodology of Magdolna Jákfalvi, Árpád Kékesi Kun and Gabriella Kiss is based on simple observations: if art historians document the nature of aesthetic impact, and the history of art works traces the history of a genre or an artist’s oeuvre, then histories of the theatre must also focus on the works—which in this case are theatrical performances. Researchers have been confronted with the fact that a theatrical performance is ephemeral, unique, and unrepeatable; its description is impossible even in

the age of technical recording, since not even a multi-camera video recording can represent the work of art (the event) itself. The Philther method accepts this protocol of theatrical aesthetics, yet through its analytical steps and philological scrutiny, it is capable of interpreting any theatrical performance as a work of art rather than as a product of sociology, cultural anthropology, etc.

In this volume, readers will find analyses of theatrical works that, by examining productions from Transylvania, Vojvodina, and Hungary, trace a shared history of theatre: the history of Hungarian-language theatre. We will bring together the joint research of three theatre studies workshops and present the findings of three Philther Hubs, showcasing the diversity of approaches to writing theatre history, for which in most cases Philther provides the interpretive framework. You can read analyses of the first theatre of Târgu Mureş, a contemporary dance performance, 19th-century drama, the characteristics of Molière performances under state socialism, the avant-garde under control, and the performativity of political upheavals; yet what all these essays have in common is that they view and reveal the community's cultural customs, theatrical repertoire, and traditions of stage expression through the history of performances.

The introductory essay to the volume was written by Andreas Kotte, who recognizes the distinctive features of the historiography conveyed through the performances and thus situates the Philther method within the framework of contemporary theatre studies. Philther's systematic approach, consisting of six criteria, allows the work of art to be linked to events in literary history, the history of an institution, or an actor's career, while also permitting the analysis to highlight the potentially varying proportions among the six criteria. Using this approach, one can write, for example, about improvisational dramaturgical techniques, urban theatre as community theatre (The Community Building Department), and *The Habitus of Reality*.

The strength of this volume lies in the fact that it brings together the writings of researchers who have been shaped by diverse educational and academic traditions; while they conduct their official business in three different countries and in three languages—Hungarian, Romanian, and Serbian—theatre history is presented to us through performances staged in Hungarian or featuring Hungarian artists. This Hungarian, steeped in multilingualism, may even be discernible in the analyses translated into English. Our Philther-Hub network is strengthened by the ongoing work of three dozen theatre historians; our findings are available in Hungarian, English, and Romanian. Our research is supported by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and our researchers' institutions.

Târgu Mureș, Pécs, Szolnok, March 21, 2026

Erzsébet Bob Fülöp, Magdolna Jákfalvi,
Árpád Kékesi Kun

Publications of the Philther-Hub

MÁRIA ALBERT, KINGA BOROS, MAGDOLNA JÁKFALVI, ÁRPÁD KÉKESI-KUN, eds. *Analize Philther asupra teatrului maghiar din România*. Târgu Mureș – Cluj-Napoca: Editura UArtPress, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2024.

BOROS KINGA, JÁKFALVI MAGDOLNA, KÉKESI KUN ÁRPÁD, eds. *Nagyváradai Magyar színház-történet 1950–1990*. Kolozsvár – Marosvásárhely: Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület – UArtPress, 2022.

JÁKFALVI MAGDOLNA, KÉKESI KUN ÁRPÁD, eds. *Nemzeti színház-történet 1948–1996*. Budapest: Arktisz – Theatron Műhely Alapítvány, 2022.

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- JÁKFAI MAGDOLNA, KÉKESI KUN ÁRPÁD, eds. „Hát újra itt...”. *Operettkánon és -műfaj*. Budapest: Rózsavölgyi Kiadó – Theatron Műhely Alapítvány, 2021.
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Andreas Kotte

WRITING THEATRE HISTORY.
THE MAINSTREAM APPROACH AND ALTERNATIVES

Abstract: How do we deal with theatre in history? This was the subject of my lecture at the University of Arts, Târgu-Mureş on 9 November 2024, where I discussed the concept and contexts of my 2013 book on theatre history. This article explores how the predominantly philological research of theatre and the idea of progress have produced the logic of the theatre-historiographical mainstream. Theatre is equated with drama and thus researched from antiquity onwards only. This develops the notion of a theatre vacuum in the early Middle Ages and promotes bourgeois theatre. However, shifts and changes in theatre forms produce alternative perspectives. Provoked by the twentieth-century theatre avant-garde, and later performance art and postdramatic theatre, a wider understanding arises of theatre that existed before the narrowing to drama. This consequently undermines the grand narratives of theatre historiography.

My book, *Theaterwissenschaft. Eine Einführung*, was published in 2005. Known as *Studying Theatre. Phenomena, Structures and Functions* in English, the book is also available in Czech and Hungarian translation. The book was widely well received with good reviews. Then, in 2006, the publisher asked me to write another book, an introduction to European theatre history. This subject was to be dealt with in 400 pages.

I looked at the European theatre histories on my bookshelf. Some of them were extensive and included many details and contexts. Lucien Dubech moves from Aeschylus to his

present in more than 1,500 pages, although he concentrates heavily on France. Heinz Kindermann's ten volumes of 6,950 pages were extended to the end of the twentieth century by Manfred Brauneck. This took an extra 4,630 pages. As you can see, there is no shortage of facts about the history of European theatre.

Other European theatre histories flow smoothly into histories of world theatre. Oskar G. Brockett, for example, begins with his *History of the Theatre*, cited as a few ceremonies and rituals. He then follows with European theatre and finishes by extending his theatre history to other parts of the world. Cesare Molinari also precedes Greek tragedy with some rituals and shaman performances of the 'primitive peoples'. John Russell Brown's Oxford theatre history, which is also translated into Hungarian, begins with theatre in Greece. While rituals and representations of shamans or mysteries in Egypt often form the beginning of the art form, for the mainstream, the 'real theatre' or 'the theatre' begins in ancient Greece. When people write about the origins, they usually mean something like theatre, something that can become theatre when it grows up.

Most theatre histories come from countries that once held a leading position in the history of theatre. They are written in the scheme of 'grand narratives' (Jean-François Lyotard). Most researchers of each period or subject have agreed on the grand narratives. The authors do a lot of research and write a story based on their wealth of experience; a sort of novel that claims to be better than the previous ones. These narratives become part of the knowledge learnt through education; they steadily improve in detail and variation. The differences between these histories can be observed in the year of publication, the country of the author, and in textual verbosity – note the number of pages, but the content seems to remain similar. And yet, isn't plurality a basic tenet of research?

In Search of Alternatives

A few years ago, a colleague gave me a Dutch theatre history edited by Robert L. Erenstein. Only now do I realise that this history is not a grand narrative. Over 873 pages, this theatre history contains 120 descriptions of single performances typical of time and genre between the years 1130 and 1993. The gaps are filled by the readers' cultural and historical knowledge. The book is richly illustrated. The authors adhere to several basic criteria that determine how a performance and its context are described. The Dutch book is something like the Philther method developed later in the 2010s. "The acronym "Philther" comes from two words, "philology" and "theatre" (Kékesi Kun 2021, p. 7). The Philther is radically limited to important dramas in significant productions. It is a method that has many advantages. The space for written and pictorial representation is uniformly restricted and so creates comparability and practicability online. The method is largely removed from ideology, and the examples can always be expanded. The Dutch theatre history and the later Philther method show that well-written fragments of theatre history can improve the shortcomings of mainstream historiography.

Such thoughts in 2006 led me to the book *Theatre Histories*, edited by Gary Jay Williams. The title alone states its programme: *Theatre Histories*, in the plural. Various authors present their approach to different epochs. There is no need to standardise; disparate views on sources and times are acceptable. This puts aside the grand or master narrative. The book also breaks from a Eurocentric view, including sections on theatre from other parts of the world. The contributions interrupt an accepted order. For example, Roman comedy is followed by Indian Sanskrit theatre. The authors borrow the term cultural performance from ethnology, a term also used in research on theatricality and performativity. Cultural performances are interwoven with everyday life and include all theatre performances, whether tied to scripts, texts, dramas, or not. To avoid

theatre theory arguments, the authors use the joint term 'cultural performances, theatre and drama'.

Theatre Histories opens with a bang. Instead of Greek theatre, the book begins with 'Performance and theatre in oral and written cultures before 1600'. This includes a wide range of rituals, festivals, and ceremonies as a natural part of theatre before the turn of oral and written culture. Part 2 deals with theatre under the conditions of print culture up to 1900, and Part 3 describes 'theatre forms' under media conditions from 1850 to 1970. Global communication from 1950 to the present forms the final part. This is a cultural studies periodisation used for theatre history, thus eliminating the dispute between national cultures over the best theatre that is so typical of the mainstream. Each chapter ends with case studies and interpretive approaches, impossible in a grand narrative.

Alongside the question of the origins of theatre, the notion of periodisation is also decisive. According to Thomas Postlewait (1988), at least 22 different periodisation criteria have so far been used, including political periods and economic characteristics as well as sequences of monarchies, languages, art epochs, literary movements or periods of the history of drama. All these look at theatre from the outside and arrange history according to external criteria. The same events, such as Greek tragedy or Shakespeare's theatre, can always be included. Theatre items may simply be grouped differently. The significant advantage of *Theatre Histories'* cultural studies periodisation is that it allows space for the diversity of theatre forms. On this level, the book is a profound alternative to the mainstream approach. Yet its breakthrough is only achieved by effecting change from the current point of time onwards. This approach contains no reflection. There is barely any discussion of the history of theatre historiography. Could this be why the publication of *Theatre Histories* has not displaced the mainstream approach?

How Did the Mainstream Come About?

To dislodge the mainstream perspective from what is taught as knowledge, one must understand both mainstream and alternative perspectives of previous theatre histories, as well as the history of theatre historiography itself. How did theatre historiography come about in the first place? The most discerning and convincing answer to this question comes from theatre historian Stefan Hulfeld, who suggests that theatre historiography arose from various discourses on theatre (2007, pp. 17–85). He examines the following aspects:

1. Philosophical-aesthetic discourses. For example, Aristotle's *Poetics*.
2. Religious anti-theatre discourses. For example, *De spectaculis* (On the Games) by Tertullian, the first theologian to write in Latin, who demanded that Christians should abstain from the theatre and the amphitheatre.
3. Reports by travelling professional actors. For example, the *Commedia dell'arte* actor Francesco Andreini's book about his character Capitan Spavento.
4. Reports by travelling spectators. For example, the philosopher Michel de Montaigne's diaries on his travels through Europe discuss numerous theatre performances.
5. The countless attempts to reform some existing genres and theatre forms had to endure. The actor Luigi Riccoboni, for example, advocated for the literarisation of theatre in his two theatre histories from 1728 and 1738. In doing so, he created the earliest narratives of the mainstream. He was convinced that the Italian improvisational comedy should become a more moral literary comedy. He also considered performed tragedies. His was considered a path of theatre from the morally lower to the morally higher (Hulfeld 2007, p. 59).

Pietro Napoli-Signorelli wrote another early history of theatre, which I will briefly discuss as an example because, as a historian, he was a rather neutral observer. He wrote his universal theatre history from a literary-dramatic point of view. For Napoli-Signorelli, theatre begins before Greece as the anthropological common property of people from all parts of the world. Many of the later theatre histories of the mainstream narrowed this clear thought to cults or rituals that are only remotely comparable to theatre. He used 24 pages for his introduction, half for his theoretical concept, and half for non-European cultures. He looked to the Orient and Asia as well as to 'America' to report from Mexico and Peru in particular. This was followed by 146 pages on Greek and Latin dramatic theatre, as this corresponded to his objectives and was where he had the most material.

In this way, he filled one third of his book. He then devoted nine pages to the 'Emptiness of theatre history' (*Vuoto della Storia Teatrale*), the so-called theatrical vacuum, a time supposedly without theatre. He speaks of dramatic poetry and states that no Roman writer or playwright since the second century is worth mentioning. Dramatic poetry, he argues, did not rise again until the thirteenth century (Napoli-Signorelli 1777, pp. 174, 186). For him, the vacuum lasted one thousand years, twice as long as that discussed by the mainstream today. Napoli-Signorelli gives the Renaissance 29 pages, the sixteenth century 59 pages, and the seventeenth century 48 pages. He assigns to the eighteenth century as many pages as the two previous centuries combined. Although this prototype of theatre history was modified in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it has continued to shape the axioms of theatre historiography.