

Dorka Porogi

THE TIME OF THEATRE

Four Case Studies from 20th-Century
Hungarian Acting History

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INTRODUCTION

Although grounded in longstanding traditions, this book is an experiment: it examines past acting styles, approaching the history of twentieth-century Hungarian theatre through the lens of acting. Its central hypothesis is that, alongside – and around – the history of director-led theatre, it is possible to trace equally compelling histories of acting that have exerted at least as strong an influence on contemporary Hungarian theatre. In this volume, I analyse acting styles, performances, and artistic practices, approaching them through their histories of influence. My aim is to free them from the constraints of legends and stereotypes, and by repositioning them in a reconstructed past of the present, to view them as sites of knowledge transmission. As a theatre director, I frequently observe how actors learn from one another: by watching each other, they acquire the practical knowledge of their craft. Yet these practices largely remain unwritten, preserved only in anecdotes, stories, and metaphors. Commemorative speeches about actors are often so heavily imbued with cultic elements that their actual work and professional achievements remain obscured.

I began to engage with the history of acting because I consider the recognition, appreciation, and even the emancipation of actors' work to be essential. According to Alain Badiou, the theatre's advantage over the sciences lies in its capacity to express ideas sensually and instantaneously through play. Its effect is immediate: the spectator requires no prior knowledge to experience and respond to an actor's performance. Analysis, however, which is necessarily delayed, requires context and background. The audience reacts at once, but articulation takes time: the director reflects a few seconds after watching a scene during rehearsal, the critic reacts days later, and theatre history years, decades, or even centuries afterward.

In this book, I examine the intense presence, appearances, and power of actors, and acting not in theoretical terms, but within the framework of theatre history. Through four case studies, I argue that not only theatre as an institution but acting itself may be understood as a cultural model – and that theatre history is transmitted unwritten through the practice of acting. Methodologically, the case-study analyses of acting in this volume are primarily grounded in Marvin Carlson’s concept of the “haunted stage.” They investigate how past times, condensed into the present, manifest themselves in all acting. The analyses seek to move discussions of acting beyond the long-dominant dichotomy between role and actor, which has shaped discourse since Denis Diderot. Although each study considers the actor’s entire career as a contextual framework, it consistently concentrates on a single, specific performance – understood not as a closed or completed whole, but as one moment within a larger creative trajectory. Accordingly, the volume presents a series of micro-histories whose descriptions and analyses follow Philther’s method of theatre-historical writing; of its six dimensions, however, the focus here falls decisively on acting.¹ Even in research devoted to the history of acting, the object of analysis remains the theatrical performance itself, since it is performance that most precisely defines and frames the tools, possibilities, and limits of an individual actor’s work.

In this book, I select four performances from nearly a century of acting and examine them in great detail. By closely reading these performances and conducting micro-analyses

¹ The Philther method, developed in the early 2010s by Magdolna Jákfalvi, Árpád Kékesi Kun and Gabriella Kiss, provides a framework for analysing theatrical performances through six aspects: the context of the performance, its dramaturgy, its relationship to the direction and to fellow actors, its visual dimensions (movement and costume), and the impact of the performance. ÁRPÁD KÉKESI KUN, “Philther as a historiographic model”, in *Ambiguous Topicality, A Philther of State-Socialist Hungarian Theatre*, 7–19 (Budapest–Paris: Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church–L’Harmattan Publishing–Édition L’Harmattan, 2021).

of fragments of twentieth-century Hungarian acting history, I aim to gain insights into acting and theatrical work that extend beyond individual or personal examples. The earliest performance examined in this book dates from the 1930s, while the most recent is from 2015. Some of these I experienced live—most notably Lili Monori’s performance in *Faust*—but the reconstructions presented here are based primarily on performance recordings, including József Timár’s *Death of a Salesman*, Éva Ruttkai’s *The Visit*, and recorded performances of *Faust*.

In the case of Árpád Ódry’s poetry recitations, Éva Ruttkai’s Juliet, and Gizi Bajor’s portrayal of Lady Milford, audio recordings serve as important aids to memory. In other instances, such as Ódry’s stage performances, or even the 1963 production of *Romeo and Juliet*—only written accounts of the performances have survived. When viewing these recordings, I am, of course, aware that I am engaging with performances that are long past—finished and concluded. Yet it is crucial not to forget that at the moment of their recording, these performances were still open as acting and creative possibilities: the very same actors might have performed the same roles differently the following day. The recordings on which my analyses are based thus capture only singular, one-off realizations of performances. Nevertheless, they allow for repeated viewing, sustained attention, and careful observation of what those who remain in our cultural memory accomplished – and how they accomplished it.

In the first case study (*Identifying József Timár*), I examine József Timár’s most famous performance. I began my research here, since *Death of a Salesman* (1959) is one of the earliest performances still remembered as legendary by audience members who are alive today. I directed this play in the autumn of 2018, and while working with Ákos Kőszegi, who played the lead role of the salesman, we came to the conclusion that it is inevitable for the actor playing Willy Loman to remember his own career, his craft – that is, a small fragment of theatre history. The

legend of József Timár and the impact of his acting can only be understood in the historical context of his career, and this story reveals that the actor also makes a statement with his work and – for the first time in a series of analyses – draws attention to the phenomenon of “vox humana,” or natural speech.

The second case study (*Exiting the stage: Éva Ruttkai and Gizi Bajor*) focuses primarily on Éva Ruttkai’s acting. Drawing on both collective and subjective memory, she was the first actress whose film performances made a lasting impression on me and whom I continued to remember. In this chapter, I analyse her portrayal of Claire Zachanassien in the 1986 production of *The Visit*. To contextualise this analysis, I first reconstruct Gizi Bajor’s final theatre performance – *Intrigue and Love* (1950) – and then examine another key role in the career of Bajor’s successor, Éva Ruttkai, namely *Romeo and Juliet* (1963). Finally, I highlight the role of self-training and knowledge transfer in acting.

I began writing the third case study (*The words of Árpád Ódry*) in the autumn of 2020, during the rapid and forceful reorganisation of the University of Theatre and Film Arts, Budapest into a foundation university, when the student body, in protest, held its meetings on the stage named after Ódry. In this chapter, I continue to develop my thesis that theatre history is preserved in the tradition of acting. I outline and analyse the impact of Árpád Ódry’s poetry recitals from the 1930s, and examine his acting style – characterised by naturalness, simple speech, and speed – on the basis of contemporary descriptions. Here I will briefly discuss the Hungarian tradition of writing about actors and acting, which this work also follows.

Finally, I conclude with a performance that I witnessed live in the theatre at the time of its premiere. The fourth and final case study (*Lili Monori at the Katona József Theatre*), which brings the discussion into the historical present, focuses on four selected scenes from the 2015 production of *Faust*. I analyse these scenes one by one. On the one hand, I examine how Lili Monori, through her radically natural acting on contemporary

stages, reactivates the neo-avant-garde acting and theatrical experiences of previous decades; on the other hand, I explore how she maintains her independence – how she articulates a sovereign actor’s statement and mode of communication to such a degree that it may be regarded as an “autonomous art form with its own language of form”.

First case study:

IDENTIFYING JÓZSEF TIMÁR

"I envy Molière not for his plays, nor for the roles he wrote. I envy him for his death, my friend, he fell ill in the theatre, on stage, performing in a role, and died the next day – and has been immortal ever since: he lives on stage."¹

"The essence of theatre is memory.[...] To view theatre as memory means, on the one hand, to view it as history, role and play, and on the other hand, to view it as a renunciation of history, as a battlefield of physis and non-play."²

In his book, Marvin Carlson describes theatre as a memory machine, a space where the audience is always haunted by the past, since theatre repeatedly reuses elements drawn from the community's memory.³ An actor's performance thus reflects not only his actions on a given evening, but is also haunted by his previous roles – and, indeed by everything the audience knows about him.

¹ József Timár, quoted by Imre DEMETER, *Köszönöm a tüzet... Timár József élete* [Thank you for the light... The life of József Timár] (Budapest: Gondolat, 1971), 157.

² Gerald SIEGMUND, „A színház mint emlékezet” [„Theater als Gedächtnis”, The Theatre as Memory], trans. Árpád KÉKESI KUN, *Theatron* 1, no. 3 (1999): 36–39, 39. Originally published in German: *Theaterschrift* 8 (1994): 214–235). Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from foreign-language sources that were cited in Hungarian translation in the Hungarian edition of this book and for which no official English versions exist are translated into English by the author.

³ Marvin CARLSON, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as a Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001).

In the memory of the Hungarian theatrical community, the name of actor József Timár –who played the role of Willy Loman in the Hungarian premiere of *Death of a Salesman* during the 1959/1960 season – has remained closely associated with the salesman in Arthur Miller’s play to this day. I now investigate the reasons for this unusually strong identification. I seek to answer what and whom audiences of the 1959 performance may have remembered through Timár’s character, and finally – on the basis of the surviving television recording – what Timár accomplished, or could have accomplished, in the role of the salesman.

Identification

“Pop! I’m a dime a dozen, and so are you!” the son shouts at his father in Miller’s play, to which the father replies: “I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman!”⁴ At the climax of their final argument, the meaning of their names becomes a matter of existential importance for the main characters of *Death of a Salesman*, the father and son. The son believes that they are just like everyone else, but the father clings to the name: its uniqueness, its individuality, its unmistakable destiny.

Both points of view are understandable. The son is only beginning to free himself from the burdensome expectations attached to the family name, having realised that the inheritance of a name is not, in itself, a privilege. Facing his death, the father knows exactly what he must take responsibility for: what he has got, and nothing more. Even if Willy Loman did not live the life he imagined in his youth, but rather that of

⁴ Arthur MILLER, *The Death of a Salesman: Certain Private Conversations in Two Acts and a Requiem* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998). 105. The Hungarian edition: Arthur MILLER, *Az ügynök halála* [*Death of a Salesman*], trans. Kornél HAMVAI, script (Kecskemét: Kecskeméti Katona József Theatre, 2018).

an ordinary man, the uniqueness and irreplaceability of his life cannot be denied or called into question.

In the English title of Arthur Miller's play, the article is indefinite, referring to *a* salesman, whereas the Hungarian translation uses the definite article *the* – a choice that, for linguistic reasons, emphasises the specificity of the death named in the title. The most famous performer of the role of “the salesman” in Hungarian theatre history is József Timár, who first played the part in 1959 at the National Theatre.⁵

Although Timár's contemporaries and those a generation younger remembered him in a wide range of roles, today he is recalled almost exclusively through his final one, that of the salesman. Indeed, Timár himself is now mentioned primarily in connection with this role. In public consciousness, he became identified with his performance in the legendary 1959 production directed by Endre Marton at the National Theatre, and to this day he remains the most iconic and widely recognised Hungarian salesman – *the* salesman. This is all the more striking given the enduring popularity of the play, which has been staged thirty-five times in Hungarian-speaking countries since 1959 and performed by numerous actors.⁶

⁵ Endre Marton: *The Death of a Salesman*, 1959. (Premiere: 21 November 1959.)

⁶ For example, in 1972, in a production directed by college student Péter Valló in Veszprém, Zoltán Latinovits played the title role, followed by Tamás Jordán in Szombathely in 2011; Gyula Bodrogi in a production directed by Róbert Alföldi in 2004, and László Gálffi in a production directed by Pál Mácsai in 2016. The role of the salesman has been played by Péter Andorai, Péter Haumann, András Kern, Róbert Koltai, Ákos Kőszegi, Zsolt Kovács, László Mensáros, Tibor Szilágyi (twice) and Géza Tordy (twice), among others. The National Theatre last staged Miller's drama in 2017, with Péter Blaskó in the title role (directed by Imre Csiszár). OSZMI Theatre Database. <https://szinhaztortenet.hu/search>. Last accessed: 28 January 2025.

“The analysis of József Timár’s art is hampered by his last role, the fact that his personal tragedy, together with the tragedy he witnessed on the last night, 24 May 1960, transforms from well-functioning double speech into straightforward theatrical speech, a performative statement. A man is preparing for death.”⁷

The situation in which the actor is approaching death just as the character he plays is doing, simply and brutally, gives the performance a stake that neither the analyst nor the contemporary audience can ignore. This theatrical situation was not accidental: József Timár had already been ill for two years when the National Theatre called him back, rehired him, and offered him the leading role in a production directed by Endre Marton.⁸ A terminal illness is reason enough, but it does not fully explain the degree to which the actor and the role have been fused and reinforced by collective memory over the decades. There are other celebrated final performances that have not shaped the framework of memory to a comparable extent. In Timár’s case, the *moment* of the salesman has proved stronger in collective memory than any of his earlier roles.

To capture the moment, “if a truth is to be settled in the memory of a group it needs to be presented in the concrete form of an event, of a personality, or of a locality.”⁹ Timár’s image has been preserved for later generations in visual form,

⁷ Magdolna Jákfalvi–Dorka POROGI, “Elhallgatás, némaság, depresszió, halál” [“Silence, muteness, depression, death”] 86–98, in *National Theatre History – 1948–1996. Performance Reconstructions*, ed. MAGDOLNA Jákfalvi–Árpád KÉKESI KUN (Budapest: Arktisz – Theatron Műhely Alapítvány, 2022), 95.

⁸ In the 1957/1958 season, it becomes clear that he is ill with lung cancer. He underwent surgery and spent a season in a sanatorium. Géza BALOGH, “Egy magányos lázadó (1)” [“A Lonely Rebel (3)”] *Critikai Lapok* 31, no. 4–5. (2022): 12–17, 16.

⁹ Halbwachs, qtd. in Jan ASSMANN, *Cultural Memory an Early Civilization – Writing, Remembrance and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 24.