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# The Awakening of Mihály Vitéz

On the Premieres of the Plays  
of Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, 1911–1948

## Abstract

Mihály Csokonai Vitéz's plays were only discovered by theatre-makers at the beginning of the twentieth century. The first comedy to be staged was *The Widow of Mr Karnyó and the Two Rascals* in 1911 at a matinee of the literary journal *Nyugat*. It was on this occasion that Endre Ady wrote his ode *The Awakening of Mihály Vitéz*. Placing Csokonai in the limelight was clearly an act of literary politics at the time. In addition to examining the first performance, the paper shows how the trajectory of the Debrecen writer's stage works continued between the two world wars. Although Csokonai's dramatic works did not make it to the national repertoire, occasional performances of *Mrs Karnyó* have repeatedly proved that the former school play offers a great opportunity to develop a new, bolder style of play. It should also not be overlooked that the performances of 18th-century plays in the 20th century became part of the political and theatre policy battles.

**Keywords:** Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, literary journal *Nyugat*, youth performances, National Theatre

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Despite their publication in 1844, Mihály Csokonai Vitéz' plays did not become part of the Hungarian theatre repertoire. There is also no direct record of István Balog's small company performing the play *Az özvegy Karnyóné s két szeleburdiak* (*The Widow of Mr Karnyó and the Two Rascals*), although a manuscript, drawn copy of it can be found in the theatre director's estate (Haraszty 1957, 5–6). It was only from the beginning of the twentieth century that Csokonai's plays were discovered by theatrical performers, mainly because the poet's personality and the message of his works fitted in well with the theatrical and literary aspirations of the turn of the century. Official literary historiography tried to take an objective approach to the works of Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, but Endre Ady played a much more important role in this process, who, in 1905, on the centenary of the poet's death, praised the Debrecen poet in a long article in the *Budapesti Napló* (*Budapest Journal*): "How Hungarian you were, how Hungarian. Oh, painfully Hungarian. [...] For all this, he was bitterly satiated. He was a lurk, a vagabond, uneducated, rude and a peasant. He was the most European man in this country at that time" (Ady 1966, 170).

It was from this personal opinion that six years later Lajos Hatvany, the editor of the *Nyugat* (*West*), took the initiative to consider Csokonai a forerunner of modern Hungarian writers, and planned to publish a Csokonai issue in his honour. The idea was not supported by Ernő Osvát, but he did not prevent the *Nyugat* from holding a Csokonai matinee in the *Vígszínház* (*Comedy Theatre*). The conflict between Hatvany and Osvát is well characterised by the fact that Hatvany's *Mit hagyott ránk Csokonai?* (*What Csokonai left us?*), which the author read out at an event in the *Nyugat* on Sunday morning, 29 January 1911, could only appear in the *Magyar Hírlap* (*Hungarian Newspaper*) (Hatvany 1911, 1–2).

Hatvany gave a thorough explanation of why he believed that the artists who had joined the *Nyugat* regarded Csokonai as their predecessor: "Csokonai thought of the great Western states with avidity: he greedily absorbed all Western influences, he turned away from the self-absorbed Hungarians of his time with disgust, but he wanted to express the feelings that filled the world in Hungarian, the West in Eastern way, and the East in the Western way" (Hatvany 1960, 332). But he also explained why they had chosen to put on the poet's theatrical play *Az özvegy Karnyóné és két szeleburdiak*: "We surround everything he touched with awe, even the student prank that has never been seen in the theatre before, and which the excellent actors of the *Vígszínház* are preparing to perform today. [...] And we present Csokonai's play in the frisian form

in which he wrote it for the students of Csurgó. Kölcsey saw in Karnyóné only degradation, Hanswurstiada – we do not want to overestimate this mischievous game, but the wonderful good-heartedness of the dialogue also brings to life the distorted image, especially the almost tragic figure of *Karnyóné*, the old woman in love” (Hatvany 1960, 333).

The programme of the matinee proves that the performance of contemporary works was just as important as the theatrical play. Vilma Medgyaszay recited Endre Ady’s poem *Vitéz Mihály ébresztése* (*The Awakening of Mihály Vitéz*), written for the occasion, while Zsigmond Móricz himself read his new – according to the *Népszava’s* (*People’s Voice*) colleague – “witty and warmly humorous presentation of the milieu”. According to the journalist, “the charming, beautiful writing characteristically and aptly paints a picture of the company of the wine drinking, fat and stiff-necked Hungarian gentlemen who surrounded the great poet with bewilderment and despice” (Ism, 1911c, 5).

Little is known about the performance. The cast was published in the 29 January 1911 issue of the Magyar Színpad (Hungarian Stage).<sup>1</sup>

The *Pesti Hírlap* (*Pest Newspaper*) drew attention to the casual nature of the play. And the fact that one cannot expect the quality of the other productions of the *Vígyszínház* to be the same: “Csokonai ‘composed’ this play 110 years ago in a short one-night session, tailored to the students of Csurgó as amateur artists. This play was born out of Csokonai’s student’s cheerfulness, and the directors of the matinée, by staging it, certainly wanted nothing more than to document the attachment of the ‘ones at the *Nyugat*’ to the first Hungarian literary innovator of the 19th century” (Ism, 1911b, 9).

Menyhért Lengyel wrote much more warmly about the performance in the *Nyugat*. The playwright began his criticism by stating that the theatre people “should really have noticed how much cheerfulness lurks in *Karnyóné* and how much theatrical life radiates from it, despite all its divine naivety. The man who does not hear the buoyance of life in the dialogue of *Karnyóné* is a man with a deaf ears, and he has little imagination who does not see at first reading that out of this confused story and the series of figures that are thinly drawn, a whole group of figures that are just right for the stage comes to life in a plastic way

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1 Karnyó – Jenő Balassa, Karnyóné – Hermin V. Haraszthy, Samu – Rezső Harsányi, Lázár – Zoltán Szerémy, Tiptopp – Frigyes Tanay, Lipitlotty – Gyula Csontos, Kuruzs – Ferenc Vendrei, Boris – Rózsa Pallai, Tündér – Margit Makay, Tündérfi – Irén Csáki

[...]” Lengyel noted that “not a single line of the text was left out, almost no changes were made to it”, and all the actors’ performances showed that they “love the thing” and “were keen to serve Csokonay [sic!]”. He praised the scenery and costumes of Elek Falus, because the designer “created something that was half realistic, half fantastic and Hungarian as a whole” (Lengyel 1911, 305).

Elemér Bányai was the only one who pointed out in the *Magyar Nemzet* (*Hungarian Nation*) that the merit of the performance was not only that it did justice to Csokonai, and that after a hundred and twelve years his play was performed “in a real theatre, the likes of which the poet of the Debrecen people had never dreamed of”: “The *Vígszínház* performance of the writers’ society of the *Nyugat* is of great importance, especially from the point of view of literary history. The verdict made about Csokonai must be revised after yesterday’s performance, because *Karnyóné* and the other Csokonai plays have a quite different significance in the development of Hungarian drama than has been established so far. At the premiere it became clear that the language of the stage in Csokonai’s dialogues already represented the stage of development that would appear in Károly Kisfaludy’s work two or three decades later, and that in *Karnyóné* there is not only an attempt at a Hungarian bourgeois comedy, but also elements of the singing farce, operetta and folk theatre” (Bányai 1911, 1).

The greatest benefit of the presentation, without any doubt, is that the text of *Karnyóné* was published in the *Nyugat Könyvtár* (*Nyugat Library*) immediately after the matinee, together with Ady’s poem. The book was already advertised in the 31 January 1911 issue of the *Pesti Hírlap*. A week earlier, around 26 January 1911, Csokonai’s work was published in the *Modern Könyvtár – Magyar Színműírók* (*Modern Library – Hungarian Playwrights*) series. “The publication of the book is timely because *Az özvegy Karnyóné* is currently being performed at the *Vígszínház*. And Gerson du Malheureux is one of the most popular subjects in the literary history of our secondary schools”, reported the *Ellenzék* (*Opposition*) (Ism, 1911a, 3). What this sentence might refer to, we do not know. As we understand it today, no literary work can be the subject of a secondary school curriculum without a popular edition. However, Mór Jókai’s recollection suggests that copies of the text of the work may have been circulated, as Gerson du Malheureux was performed in the mid-1830s at the Reformed secondary school in Komárom: “It was only later, when I was at school, that I had the unforgettable classroom experience of going to a performance given by the ‘insiders’ in the large hall of the college. The play *Gerson du Malheureux* by

Csokonai was performed. Mr Pápay, the chaplain, was the officer, Mr Harmati, the cantor, was the haunting spirit, and uncle János Szarka (then – and still now – the most lovable young gentleman in Komárom) – was the funny gypsy. The audience applauded him most of the time; and they were not satisfied with Mr Pápay, they said that he played as if he were preaching” (Jókai 1904, 252).

One might think that the publication of the Modern Könyvtár (Modern Library) gave Jenő Janovics, director of the Kolozsvári Nemzeti Színház (National Theatre in Kolozsvár), the idea to include this play by Csokonai in his cycle of Hungarian drama history series performances. All the more so because this edition is in Janovic’s library.<sup>2</sup> In his introduction before the premiere on 30 October 1911, however, the director said that he had compiled the text for the theatre production from three surviving copies of the drama.<sup>3</sup> And he also explained why Csokonai’s farcical joke was put on stage: “The characters that Csokonay [sic!] brought to the stage have lived and live on the Hungarian stage in various versions for more than a hundred years. Look today at the cunning, crafty, self-interested failing Jew, the know-it all, classic schoolmaster, the cowardly gypsy, or the brassy-voiced, János Háry-like lieutenant, and think how many comedy writers and folk theatre authors have used these figures in different versions over the last hundred years” (Janovics 1913, 27). He also drew attention to the fact that Csokonai could not be held accountable for not being familiar with “the rules and laws of dramatic composition”, since he had no models and had no opportunity to “become acquainted with these rules and try them out”. And he considered its triviality and everyday rudeness to be a fault of the period (Janovics 1913, 27).

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2 The collection of Jenő Janovics is kept in the *Kolozsvári Állami Magyar Színház Dokumentációs Tára* (*Documentary Repository of the Hungarian State Theatre in Kolozsvár*).

3 Janovics’s statement is somewhat contradicted by the fact that the copy of the prompter’s copy marked Sz/1130 in the *Kolozsvári Állami Magyar Színház Dokumentációs Tára* is a copy of the text published in the *Modern Könyvtár*. Only one entry guides the researcher: on the last page is the signature “Szigetvárij”, that of József Szigetvári, a prompter who worked at the theatre until his death in 1933. It cannot be ruled out that the copy in question was made for the 1924 reproduction, because the earlier one was lost. But it is more likely that it was used in 1911 and 1924. (Mihály Csokonai Vitéz: *Gerson du Malhereux vagy Az ördögi mesterségekkel találtatott ifjú* (*Gerson du Malhereux or The youth with devilish arts*). Prompter copy. Kolozsvári Állami Magyar Színház Dokumentációs Tár SZ/1130.) I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Tünde Kocsis, head of the *Kolozsvári Állami Magyar Színház Dokumentációs Tára*, for her selfless help.

It is strange that Janovics suddenly discovered Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, whose name we search in vain for in his book *A magyar dráma irányai* (The Directions of Hungarian Drama), published in 1907.

In his report on the premiere in Kolozsvár, a journalist of *Az Újság* (*The Paper*) emphasised that the performance of the “never before performed” comedy was “laughed at by the audience”, and “applause broke out several times in the audience” (Ism, 1911d, 4). While the journalist of the Kolozsvár-based *Ellenzék* stressed that, although Csokonai “wrestled feebly with the tasks of dramatic writing”, his work “has the merit that all its characters are Hungarian”. He found its comic “a little crude and naive, but enjoyable, and, as a sign of his great literary power, he drew his characters with so many characteristic features that they have not faded away, nor have they died to this day” (Sebesi 1911, 5).

Csokonai’s work was performed by the artists of Kolozsvár on 4 May 1912 in Budapest, at the *Magyar Színház*. Also staged were Mihály Sztárai’s play *Igaz papság tüköre* (*The Mirror of the True Priesthood*), the Pauline interlude then known as *Omnia vincit amor*, later as *Kocsonya Mihály házassága* (*The Marriage of Mihály Kocsonya*), and György Bessenyei’s drama *A filozófus* (*The Philosopher*). The newspapers wrote about *Gerson* almost exactly the same as after its premiere; it is true that the *Pesti Napló* criticised the play’s obscenity (Ism, 1912, 15).

Mihály Babits in *Nyugat* and Dezső Kosztolányi in *A Hét* (The Week), wrote about the performance of the Kolozsvár performers in Budapest and the revival of old Hungarian plays. Kosztolányi was enthusiastic about the actors from Transylvania, which had a strange air. He wrote: “illusion surrounds them. They exude atmosphere. [...] We received them as if they had hidden treasures in their pockets, but all they brought was Hungarian poverty, an orphaned Hungarian past, a few avatars of our lost culture, a few weak dramatic pieces. Yet they are the richer.” However, he finished off the *Gerson* in one sentence: “Csokonai’s play looks like nothing” (Kosztolányi 1978, 432–433). On the same by Babits: “And the comedy chosen from Chokonai is very primitive” (Babits 1912, 893). Babits also believed that it was not the works performed that were important, but “the piece of life that came on stage with them, the old Hungarian life, which no one has ever dared to stage with such naturalism.” He praised Janovic because the costumes, the movements, the dialect of the actors “showed the healthiest naturalness”, and the performances showed a perfect sense of style: “With this great lifelikeness, we have indeed managed to evoke a single

piece of old Hungary. I have never felt the end of the eighteenth century so much," he confessed. Babits also used the critique to clarify the relationship of the generation grouped around the *Nyugat* to old Hungarian literature, and to reject the accusation of cosmopolitanism: "The auditorium was filled with writers, the new Hungarian writers, who, after a magnificent revolution, now feel more than ever their connection with the great Hungarian past" (Babits 1912, 893).

The indirect influence of the Kolozsvár performance can also be traced: Ödön Faragó, who played the role of the Jew Abraham, became theatre director in 1914 in Kassa, where he staged a cycle of classical writers in the first season, and on 21 November 1914 he staged the Pauline interlude *Omnia vincit amor* and Csokonai's *Gerson du Malhereux*. Before the performance, Jenő Janovics gave the introductory remarks, and we even know that the performance brought in 511 crowns. [In contrast to the 700 crowns of *Tatárjárás 700* (Tartar Invasion 700), and the 936 crowns of the war play *Mindnyájunknak el kell menni* (We All Have to Go), advertised as a novelty.]<sup>4</sup> According to a preview in the *Felvidéki Újság* (*Felvidék Paper*), "[b]oth farces were a frenetic success in Kolozsvár and Budapest, where the Kolozsvár company performed them" (Pres, 1914, 4).

Unexpectedly, on 19 April 1919, Mihály Csokonai Vitéz's play *Az özvegy Karnyóné s két szeleburdiak* was staged again in the *Vígyszínház*. A contributor to the *Színházi Élet* (*Theatre Life*) praised the choice of play, pointing out that the work "is free of all foreign influences and brings to the stage the social Hungarian comic characters that have lived on the stage for almost a hundred years. Particularly characteristic among them are a politicising shop-boy of 'Tót' nationality and a maid, in whom we must respect the first Hungarian subrette." (Ism, 1919a, 16). This was the first time that a work by Csokonai was not performed as a matinee, an occasional performance, an illustration for a literary programme or a drama history series. Of course, it had something to do with the theatre policy of the Soviet Republic, as it introduced the working class to the plays of the great Hungarian literary artist. But we only find traces of this in the aforementioned article in *Színházi Élet*, the author of the review in the daily newspaper *Az Újság* recorded the exuberant joy of the new, naive audience: "This old comedy,

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<sup>4</sup> The playbook of Ödön Faragó. [Kassa, 31 October 1914–Budapest, 1 May 1958] [2.] [2.]*Országos Színház-történeti Múzeum és Intézet Kézirattár* (*National Museum and Institute of Theatre History Manuscript Archives*) inventory no. 80.134

a vaudeville full of merriment, and especially its parodic second act, amused the audience, who laughed a lot and applauded the main characters enthusiastically. Hermin Haraszty, who played the fake widow with very impressive comedy; the splendid Tanay, who also sang lovely old songs; Kardos [sic!], who played the other fiddler beautifully; Kemenes, who could even be charming and endearing as the widow's grocer's dumb son; Vendrey, who played a quack reading fate from the palms of his hands in an interesting way; and Szerémy, who was very amusing as the shop-boy and directed the play well. I also liked Irén Csáky and Alice Rónai in two small roles, as well as Ella Gombaszögi, who played the role of a devious little maid" (Ism, 1919b, 8).

The actor Géza Kardoss, the impersonator of Lipitlotty, also mentioned in the review, became the director of the Debrecen theatre at the beginning of 1920, and on 17 November 1920, in commemoration of the "birth anniversary" of Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, he staged a gala performance in the theatre.<sup>5</sup> At this commemoration, the director staged the play by Csokonai, *Özv. Karyóné és két szeleburdiak* following the premiere at the Vígszínház. Although the performance was repeated on 3 December, there was little critical response. According to the article in *Egyetértés (Consensus)*, "Géza Kardoss was brilliant as Lipitlotty. [...] He was extremely well-liked and applauded in the open." The rest is not worth quoting, the journalist only listed the names of the actors. And he concluded by writing: "The careful, colourful setting and staging of the evening praise the fine sense of director Kardoss" (Ism, 1920b, 2).

Even less was written in the *Debreceni Független Újság (Debrecen Independent Newspaper)*: "We have no space to praise this memory of our colourful literature, fresh and alive with its archaic flavour, but only the performance; we highlight the perfection of the performance following the direction of the *Vígszínház* in Budapest. The genius of the modern director has brilliantly made up for what Csokonai could not have known in the infancy of Hungarian theatre. The performance was one of the rare cases in which all the actors were in their place and the harmony of the basic style prevailed throughout, despite the different personalities" (Ism, 1920a, 4).

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<sup>5</sup> The festive evening was introduced by a speech of the Secretary of the *Csokonai Kör (Csokonai Circle)*, Dr. Ferenc Papp. This was followed by Dr. Kálmán Kőrösi's dramatised version of *Csokonai halála (Csokonai's Death)*, and then the dramatised poem *A falu végén kurta kocsmá (The Short Tavern at the End of the Village)*.



As a minority theatre director, Jenő Janovics did not forget Csokonai either. On the 150th anniversary of the poet's birth, in 1924 (a little late), he staged a play entitled *Csokonai halála (Csokonai's Death)* by Aladár Kuncz, which was known to the Budapest audience as *Vitéz Mihály a halál révén (Mihály Vitéz on the Ferry of Death)*; the play was performed at the Writers' Demonstration Theatre on 15 April 1923. In addition to the one-act play, something else had to be added, so *Gerson du Malhereux* was staged again "with Lajos Cselle, László Kemény, Ödön Réthely, Mihályfy, Ihás, Leövey, Izsó in the leading roles" (Ism, 1924, 6). The performance was repeated a week later, but Csokonai's work was not part of the repertoire in Kolozsvár.

The premiere of the Új Színház (New Theatre), which together with the public play *Omnia vincit amor* was first performed on 13 April 1929, is part of the history of the performance of *Karnyóné*. We cannot talk about the critical response, only short reviews of the performance were published.<sup>6</sup> The theatre critic of the Új Nemzedék (New Generation), Jenő Gergely, however, argued why it is not advisable to give the youth Mihály Csokonai's *Vitéz*: "they are so fond of crude, even brutal ridicule, and some of their remarks are so offensive", was the reasoning (Gergely 1929, 7). But it is also clear from this outraged writing that "the theatre company may have performed the comedy out of overzealousness or misdirection, with a more burlesque distortion than burlesque". And what was the conclusion? "If the Új Színház wants to stage youth productions, it should stick to patriotic plays, because the curved mirror of satire is not always and not everywhere suitable for the hands of the student youth" (Gergely 1929, 7).

The movement called the *Független Színpad (Independent Stage)*, organised in early 1937 under the leadership of Ferenc Hont, was associated with the presentation of Mihály Csokonai *Vitéz's* drama *A méla Tempefői, avagy Az is bolond, aki poétává lesz Magyarországon (The Melancholic Tempefői, or Fool*

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6 "The dress rehearsal for the press of Csokonai's *Özvegy Karnyóné* and *Omnia vincit amor* was held at the Új Színház on Tuesday afternoon. The two plays will be presented in a series of performances for the youth, but will also be performed in the evening. The dress rehearsal proved to be a success. Among the performers, Paula Bacányi, Rezső Harsányi, László Keleti, Elemért Baló, Margit Kolos and Anikó Törs should be highlighted. [...] The performance was directed by József Baróti" (N. N. 1929a, 10).

"The healthy and abundant, pure humour, the raving, muscular Hungarian satire, which flows so freely from our two literary-historical memories of the play, was stylistically, in its unadulterated integrity and yet in accordance with today's taste, fulfilled in the careful performance of the *Új Színház*, under the skilled director József Baróthy" (N. N. 1929b, 13).

*Is Who Becomes a Poet in Hungary*). The premiere was held on 28 April 1938 at the Erzsébetvárosi Színház (Erzsébetváros Theatre).

The unfinished drama was adapted for the stage by Gyula Schöpflin and András Benedek: they made a three-part version of the five-act work; they eliminated the epic character of the last acts; they extended the song settings with Csokonai songs. The music for the performance was composed by conductor and composer Sándor Vándor, the set was designed by Károly László Háý, and choreographer Aurél Miloss also participated in the work.

The script of the original première has not survived, but when the play was presented by the *Nemzeti Színház* (*National Theatre*) on 27 May 1948 under the direction of Dénes Rátai, the play was adapted by András Benedek (who was then already playwright of the *Nemzeti*) and Gyula Nagypál (the writer's name of Schöpflin). The stage manager's copy of the production is kept in the library of the *Nemzeti Színház*.<sup>7</sup> A single scene from the 1938 performance was published in the *Független Színpad*, issue 4–5 1938. If we compare this with the 1948 text, we see that only minor changes were made in this scene. In the reviews published in 1948, however, it is written as if it were a completely new adaptation...

In 1938, the dramaturgical team of the *Független Színpad* reported on how they had coped with the most difficult of these; that is, how they had managed to make the play enjoyable for contemporary audiences. Fortunately, the first two acts held up almost without further ado, only the third and fourth acts had to be reworked because they were almost "entirely episodic, repetitive", and only a few scenes advanced the plot (*Working Community of the Független Színpad* 1938, 11). But they could not ignore the need to preserve the spirit of Csokonai without distortion and falsification. The scale of the work was described in their writing in this way: "Playwright, director, literary historian, set designer, musicologist, we sat together for long hours, debating the importance of a scene, its belonging, its plot, searching for the writer's true intention, which is manifested in the tendency of his play. With much thought and deliberation, we have tackled the thorny issues of the inevitable omissions, altered scene connections, text fidelity, obsolete expressions, and weak dialogue pas-

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<sup>7</sup> Mihály Csokonai: *Tempefői*. Prompter copy of the 27 May 1948 premiere at *Nemzeti Színház*. Library of *Nemzeti Színház* IV-5/857. I would also like to thank Ágnes Kamondy, Head of the Library of the *Nemzeti Színház*, for her selfless help.

sages; with hard and conscientious work we have rebuilt the play, imagining ourselves in the role of an imaginary dramaturg of the time of Csokonai, who, according to the eternal rules of the stage, is forced to suggest changes to the submitted play" (Independent Stage Working Committee 1938, 11).

And with what success? The review of the company states that excellently: "They managed to accomplish this task so perfectly that not a single foreign sentence was included in the piece. The grouping of the scenes was done without prejudice to the original text, in such a way that the audience will be able to watch three staged acts of perfection instead of disjointed scenes. The working community has also composed some of Csokonai's couplet songs and poems into the piece, and these are accompanied by music composed by Csokonai himself. The music will be accompanied by an orchestra of period instruments. Clavicembalo, viola de gamba, viola d'amore, flute and children's choir will underline the first premiere of the great Hungarian poet, which he managed to earn almost one hundred and fifty years after his death" (Újvári 1938, 4).

But the adaptation was much more than that, and not just because they were trying to curry favour with a twentieth-century audience. It is clear that Dorottya (instead of the original Eve), whose dialogues were edited from the lines of Csokonai's comic epic, was placed on stage as the second female character, following the dramaturgy of the period's hit plays. While the heavy-handedness of the work and the naïve plot complexity were counterbalanced by the adaptors' attempt to fill the work with Csokonai poems.

Writer and poet Andor Németh, criticizing the interpretation of director Ferenc Hont, wrote in the newspaper *Újság (Newspaper)* that the reworkers of the play recited Csokonai's most beautiful poems with Tempefői: "However enjoyable, this is actually a cheat, since the hero of the play is Tempefői, not Csokonai, and what makes Tempefői pathetic is precisely that he is not an exceptional genius as a creator, but a seer among the erring, who is closer to the poor than to the lords and who awaits salvation from below, because he only meets with incomprehension above. He is not at all a "flaming poet", as romantic souls imagine him to be; only a modest literary man, who already in this nationless, foreign-obsessed age realizes that as long as literature is not the work of the community, as long as the class walls of society do not come tumbling down, poetry will remain the narcotic, the painful private affair of unhappy eccentrics" (Németh 1938, 3). Németh projects this lesson of the work to the present, and at the end of the work he again emphasises that "salvation can only come from

below, from the poor – and until we realise this, the word and power belong to the Csikorgós, the breast-beaters and the lovers, from whom the poet inspired by God can indeed hang himself” (Németh 1938, 3).

Andor Németh also pointed out that the production won the audience’s sympathy already with its subtitle – “fool is who becomes a poet in Hungary” – and another witness confirmed that the play was a huge success because the Hontes found a parallel between current public events and the world of the play. According to Andor Becsky, “the staging seized the slightest opportunity in the play to emphasise the principles of the popular front politics. The curtain was still down, but workers’ movement songs were being sung in the rows of the audience, and throughout the performance there was an enthusiastic, fervent, protest-like atmosphere. The presentation was attended by well-known representatives of popular front politics, with village researchers and writers of the March Front seated in a box. In those days they were tried and convicted (21 April 1938).<sup>8</sup> When it was said on the stage that “...prison is no disgrace if there is no vice with it...” and the stage direction flooded the box of those sentenced to prison with a spotlight, the audience jumped up as one and greeted those sentenced for the common cause” (Becsky 1961, 90).

The importance of the scene is well illustrated by the fact that this scene of the play was published in full in the *Független Színpad* (Csokonai 1938, 13–14).

*Tempefői* was transferred to the *Józsefvárosi Színház* (*Józsefváros Theatre*) in mid-May, and was performed at the end of the month and in early June at the *Márkus Parkszínház* (*Márkus Park Theatre*). It was played in several cities in the countryside, but the mayor of Szeged did not give permission for the planned guest performance.

Gyula Ortutay’s letter to Mihály Babits of 16 June 1938 contains interesting details about the circumstances of the performance. In it he asks the poet to support Ferenc Hont, who turned to the Baumgarten Foundation for help: “Since I know that you enjoyed watching the *Tempefői* lecture and saw the

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<sup>8</sup> The five leaders of the March Front were prosecuted for their article “What do the Hungarian people want?”, which was part of the Manifesto of the March Front. “The court found the five defendants guilty of national defamation and therefore sentenced Gyula Illyés, György Sárközi and Imre Kovács to 1-1 months in prison, Ferenc Erdei and Géza Féja to 2-2 months in prison, 1 year deprivation of office and the suspension of their political rights for the same period. According to the reasoning of the judgment, the facts of the article are untrue and are capable of diminishing the esteem and damaging the credibility of the Hungarian nation” (N. N. 1938, 11).

great struggle with poor and humiliating opportunities, I have taken the liberty of writing this letter. Ferenc Hont now stands before the public as the successful director, even though *Tempefői* only brought income to the owner who rented the theatre, and only a deficit for him. Besides, the play was not allowed to be performed in Szeged, although he hoped it would turn his fortunes around. The unfortunate man is now being squeezed by both bills and rent at the theatre school where he and all his fellow teachers (e.g. Ascher too) have been dismissed. At the moment he has not a penny of income and hope: nothing" (Ism, 1983, 64).

Although the success of the Csokonai premiere was essentially driven by its political intent, the artistic impact of the performance was also appreciated by critics. This is what *Népszava* wrote after the outdoor premiere at the *Márkus Parkszínház*: "The secret of this new success, beyond the immortal art of Csokonai, beyond the relevance of the poignant satire of *Tempefői*, which will be revived today, one hundred and fifty years later, is the great work of the cast. These excellent and largely young artists: Erzsi Hont, Klári Szánthó, Endre Gellért, László Bánhid, Miklós Harsányi, Kálmán Halász, István Kalla, Bihary, Darvas, etc. fully embraced the progressive aims of the IFüggetlen Színpad, and enriched Hungarian acting with a completely new – but at the same time subtly matching the atmosphere of the patina play – unified style of acting" (cf. 1938, 7).

On 14 May 1939, Mihály Csokonai Vitéz' play *Az özvegy Karnyóné s két szeleburdiak* című was staged at the *Nemzeti Színház* in the exam performance of the *Színművészeti Akadémia* (*Academy of Dramatic Arts*). *Pesti Napló* reported on the event with unusual enthusiasm. He wrote that the acting academy's "final exam performance was a pleasant surprise for the audience – from two aspects. Firstly, because Tibor Hegedűs, the Academy's new teacher, dared to bring out Csokonai's *Özvegy Karnyóné* with his students, which until then had only been known to literary historians as a "wry, heavy humoured antiquity". And the spectators were surprised by the uninhibited, resolute skill of the play, the safe artistic delicacy, which more than once delighted the audience with roaring laughter and deserved applause" (Ism, 1939, 14).

We know from the Academy's newsletter that Sándor Galamb wrote a prologue to the play, which not only told the story of the work's creation, but also listed the characters. The atmosphere and style of the play is perhaps somewhat evoked by the prologue:

*“(From the right, Karnyóné drops in.)*

Prologue: Behold, Karnyóné, the widow!

Talking in a whisper, coming and going.

Her face is wrinkled, her teeth are wrinkled,

But she is nice to guys.

She thinks her husband is dead,

And would tie her life to another.

*(Karnyóné comes in front of the curtain.)*

Prologue: But suddenly from Mantua

Karnyó arrives home.

What the poor man finds at home,

It’s probably better not to talk about it.” (Galamb 1939, 46–47).

It is interesting that the most talented student of the exam performance, Zsuzsa Lengváry, who played the role of Karnyóné, “an extremely difficult role – that of an old woman who loves men – with a thousand nuances and a sparkling humour”, did not stay on the stage for long, while Lajos Rajczy (Karnyó), Gyula Benkő (Samu) and Sári Feleki (Boris) became the leading artists of the post-1945 era (Ism, 1939, 14).

There is no record of whether this performance influenced Tamás Major’s decision to stage it as part of a youth performance at the *Városi Színház* (City Theatre) on 9 October 1939. These performances were organised by the Public Education Department of the City of Budapest, under the leadership of Tamás Major’s mother, Mariska Majorné Papp. Little is known about Major’s first production of *The Özvegy Karnyóné*, which was repeated twice more (on 10 and 11 October), apart from the cast.<sup>9</sup> The two-page flyer of the performance also informs that the music was composed by Mihály Turai, the conductor of *Nemzeti Színház*; and that it was performed together with Ferenc Herczeg’s *A holicsi Cupido* (*The Cupid of Holics*).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Karnyó: Bodnár Jenő, Karnyóné: Gobbi Hilda, Samu: Apáthi Imre, Lázár: Rajczy Lajos, Tiptopp: Várkonyi Zoltán, Lipitlotty: Ungvári László, Kuruzs: Tapolczai Gyula, Boris: Olthy Magda

<sup>10</sup> [Városi Színház, 9, 10, 11 October 1939. Performances for the youth]. Flyer. [3–4.] Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet Kisnyomtatványtár

In this brochure, the organisers seem to be making excuses: “Karnyóné is not a first-ranked work by Csokonai. If art criticism and taste found something to criticise or judge in his major works, it may be more true of his minor works. If the harsher features of the 18th century, in spite of the softening, disturb our taste for art, let us attribute it to the age, but let us admire it all the more, and enjoy the ingenious freshness of comic force and the subtle variety of shades of amusement.”<sup>11</sup>

The premiere, which took place three years later on 27 October 1942, brought a much greater resonance. At that time, the façade of the theatre building on Tisza Kálmán tér was already emblazoned with the *Magyar Művelődés Háza* (*Hungarian House of Culture*). But the cast of the production has also changed a bit in three years.<sup>12</sup> And by then Csokonai’s play was already performed with music by Gyula Dávid. Moreover, György Lőrincz planned a choreography for it, but reading Tamás Major’s memoirs, the public could only learn about this much later: “There are all these miracles in the play, that the angel comes in at the end and solves the thing. And when she thinks she has drunk poison and dies. And the coming home of the insane Karnyó. These cannot be played in a naturalistic way. Such things were solved brilliantly by György Lőrinc. It helped us a lot to find this way, the coexistence of realism and pantomime. We played the realistic one at a time, and that the joke and reality should be together” (Koltai 1986, 38).

“On Tuesday afternoon, Csokonai’s satirical comedy “*Özvegy Karnyóné*” was presented at the Hungarian House of Culture in the framework of a youth performance, which was an extraordinary success on the first day” – reported the critic of the *Újság*. – “Some parts of the first act and a short part of the third act are a bit of a stumbling block, but the experience of the second act, the result of Tamás Major’s excellent direction and interesting artistic conception, and the quite magnificent performance of Hilda Gobbi, is such a first-class theatrical event that we will deal with it in more detail in the Friday issue of our newspaper” (h. s. 1942, 8).

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11 [Városi Színház, 9, 10, 11 October 1939. Performances for the youth]. Flyer. [1.] Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet Kisnyomtatványtár

12 But the cast of the production has also changed a bit in three years: Karnyó: Bartos Gyula, Karnyóné: Gobbi Hilda, Samu: Lázár Gida, Lázár: Ungvári László, Tiptopp: Apáthi Imre, Lipitlotty: Szabó Sándor, Kuruzs: Balázs Samu, Boris: Olthy Magda, Tündér: Eőry Kató, Tündérfi: Pásztor János.

In the Friday's issue, Sándor Barcs, later CEO of the *Magyar Távirati Iroda* (*Hungarian News Agency MTI*), wrote about the performance under the title *Karnyóné feltámadása* (*The Resurrection of Karnyóné*). A few days earlier, the publicist had proposed the idea of a "theatre of the excellent". The essence of his proposition was that a theatre company should be created which would apply only strict literary criteria in its programme, and whose performances would be attended primarily by an educated audience (Barcs 1942a, 5). Barcs discovered this theatrical idea a week later in the *Nemzeti Színház's* youth production of the *Özvegy Karnyóné*. And he wrote about Tamás Major's direction and Hilda Gobbi's portrayal of Karnyóné in the highest possible terms: "The way the director – Tamás Major – shakes the thick layer of dust off the whole piece, the way he shakes the characters out of their corpses, the way he makes the plot interesting, and the way he presents the pantomime-like solution of the second act, is art – art at its best. And the way the actress – Hilda Gobbi – who is growing big in this very performance, brings out the tragicomic figure of the widowed Karnyóné's aging, ugly but conceited female, who is running after the favours of young men, the way she warms one and cools the other, the way she clownishly fills the spectator with horror and pity – even children cannot laugh at the grotesque dying scene – Chaplinian heights!" (Barcs 1942b, 5)

Although there were rumours about it, Antal Németh did not let Mihály Csokonai Vitéz into the country's first theatre. However, it helped the young members of the theatre, led by Tamás Major, organised by the *Magyar Gyár-iparosok Országos Szövetsége Gyári Szabadidő-szervezetek Központja* (*National Association of Hungarian Industrialists Centre of Factory Leisure Organisations*) to tour Tatabánya (23 July), Pént (27 July), Diósgyőr (29 and 30 July), Salgótarján (31 July), Ózd (1 August) and Csepel (2 August) in the summer of 1943. The ensemble's fee was set at seven hundred and fifty pengős. This amount also included the cost of the costumes for the actors and the piano accompanist. In places far from Budapest, accommodation, travel and meals were reimbursed.<sup>13</sup> A newspaper report says that on Saturday, 7 August 1943, the factory workers of Kőbánya were able to see "Mihály Csokonai Vitéz's musical comedy *Özvegy Karnyóné* on the Dreher-Haggenmacher open-air rock stage" (Ism, 1943, 8).

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<sup>13</sup> Letter from the *Magyar Gyár-iparosok Országos Szövetsége Gyári Szabadidő-szervezetek Központja* to Tamás Major. Budapest, 19 July 1943. Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet Kézirattár Itsz. 2016.129.3



We know of only one performance that ended in failure: On 20 July 1943, only a quarter of the full-house audience gathered in Nagyvárad, allegedly because there was a circus performance in the city that day. *Népszava* recalled the most laughable moment of the performance: “A few months ago, in the two-thousand-seat auditorium of the Hungarian House of Culture in Budapest, high school students laughed themselves to tears for three afternoons at the tragicomic case of the old woman grocer, and indeed they watched with bated breath, heartbroken, when Karnyóné, in her love sorrow, drank the cup of poison (which though contained only laxative), rang the bell of the shop door like a bell of the soul, and lay down on the counter, on her mortuary made by herself” ((-lgy-) 1943, 10).

It is interesting that the same scene was recalled decades later by Tamás Major: “in this, as in all Csokonai’s works, there is something moving. For example, when Hilda Gobbi, who plays Karnyone, is left by Lipitlotty, whose debts she has forgiven, he nevertheless leaves her, and even mocks her with lines like “Your excellency is a violin so battered and worn out that even the devil could not canaphorise on it”,<sup>14</sup> as Gobbi listened to it, it was as if she was playing Phaedra, and when she sat on the counter afterwards, it brought tears to everyone’s eyes, she sang so movingly: “Oh hopes dashed, oh lads, oh lads...”, that the audience was almost moved, but at the same time you had to laugh, because to counterbalance the tragedy, Gobbi’s two curved legs were dangling under the counter, and you had to laugh at that. The whole performance was like that, I think it was the biggest success of Gobbi’s life...”<sup>15</sup>

The commemoration reveals that the performance was initiated by the composer Béla Reinitz, however, Major did not say why this was the first premiere in the *Nemzeti Színház* after the siege of Budapest. It must have been a factor that the roof of the *Nemzeti Színház* was severely damaged by gunfire; the ceiling of the theatre was lowered by half a metre; and the floor of the auditorium collapsed over a large area. Therefore, the first performance had to be held at the *Kamaraszínház* (*Chamber Theatre*) on Andrásy út. Mihály Csokonai Vitéz *A’ özvegy Karnyóné ’s az két szeleburdiak* was performed on 28 February 1945

14 Correctly: “and Your ladyship is a 60 year old battered, worn-out violin that even the devil could no longer canaphorise”. (Act II, Scene III)

15 Major Tamás: Csokonai Vitéz Mihály. [1970s]. Typewritten. 3. Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet Kézirattár ltsz. 2017.150.1

at 2:30 in the afternoon. The title role was played by Hilda Gobbi, accompanied by Gyula Bartos, Zoltán Várkonyi, Ferenc Ladányi, László Ungvári, Tamás Major, Erzsébet Somogyi, Kató Eöry and János Pásztor.

Only a few articles were written about the performance, but these faithfully reflect the fact that Tamás Major and his colleagues have made their mark with this production, and have demonstrated that from now on the *Nemzeti Színház* will not be characterised by a faint-hearted respect for the classics. In the summaries of theatre history, it was often omitted that Tamás Major recited Csokonai's poem *Az este (The Evening)* as an introduction – in the words of Aurél Kárpáti “with deep feeling and perfect artistic expression” (Kárpáti 1945, 4). According to Géza Staud, the poem “mixes melancholy sentimentality with harsh revolutionary colours, and precisely because of its bold social purpose it has not been possible to tell it in Hungary” (Staud 1945, 3).

The most political report of the opening performance was written by Sándor Barcs, which appeared in the Communist Party's newspaper, *Szabadság (Liberty)*: “Tamás Major has finally reached where his talent and almost fanatical love of his profession should have taken him long ago, the freedom to recite without censorship, without police watchdogs watching – what a great thing! – Csokonai's century and a half old poem, and the fact that this innocent, naive little play, *Karnyóné*, could finally be presented to the Budapest public at all, is the fulfilment of a symbol of which a year ago we could only dream, and for which a year ago we could only fight with clenched teeth” (Barcs 1945, 2).

But even though this play became the symbolic play of the opening of the new era, and even though it was the most notable production of the youth performance series at the *Városi Színház*, in April 1945 the Lord Mayor of Budapest, János Csorba, decided that it could not be performed in an organised form for the youth of secondary school. In fact, the *Nemzeti Színház* “agreed with the public education department of the capital to make the ten houses of *Karnyóné* available to secondary schools for youth performances” (Ism, 1945, 2). According to an article in *Népszava*, Csorba refused to allow it because he considered the play “outdated, tasteless and crude”. The *Népszava* journalist tried to refute the mayor's statement: “There is no doubt that *Karnyóné* does not represent the superficial and empty bourgeois spirit of the recent past. However, its heavier, healthier folk humour is more in keeping with the spirit of the new times. Youth will not be harmed if it tastes human and folk phrases instead of whiny, sentimental, bourgeois romanticism. One of the principles of the new

pedagogy is to bring youth closer to the realities of life. Even the squeamishness of the mayor will not prevent this principle from being enforced" (Ism, 1945, 2).

However, the newspapers did not report that on 13 April 1945 Tamás Major asked the *Vallás- és Közoktatásügyi Minisztérium* (*Ministry of Religion and Public Education*) for a statement on whether the play could be performed for secondary school students according to the original plans despite Csorba's ban (Dancs 1989, 34-35). The very next day, the reply arrived, a letter from the Ministry with the following text: 'I inform the Sender that I have no objection to the performance of Csokonai's play *Özvegy Karnyóné* for the learning youth. I would, however, prefer that the passages of the play listed below be omitted in youth performances, as these details may offend contemporary taste, but do not affect the structural unity of the play, its literary and artistic values.' And three suggestions as to where and what should be deleted (Dancs 1989, 36).

The resolution, also dated 14 April 1945, stated that "there is no doubt that *Karnyóné* is not the most suitable type of youth drama" (Dancs 1989, 36).

The interesting part of the story is that Mariska Majorné Papp, who tried to continue organising youth performances with the support of the City of Budapest, thought that Lord Mayor János Csorba's action was a personal attack. In a letter to her son, she wrote: "My Tomi! *Karnyóné* – cannot go. After the three deputy mayors Jámbor [Péter], Bechtler [Péter] and Morvay [Endre] – especially the former – had negotiated and signed it with the greatest enthusiasm, the great dummy – the mayor – yelled, scolded and slammed down *Karnyóné*. Partly to me, partly by phone – today – to Jámbor. He also has a problem with me – with my person. I can feel t[hat] that the Arrow Cross feet were sawed off by Ernő Füle, who was bending down to earth to lick them. A bloody rat – today a member of the certifying committee. Apparently he's talking to you tonight – the mayor. (He said this to Jámbor.) For once, please try to enlighten that stupid pre-10-year-old mentality a little. If I could – I would retire today. Although I was so eager to prepare. The finances were discussed with Bechtler on the old basis. He agreed on everything. This horse has been gelded by someone.

Of course, we were too late. This takes 25 + 45 thousand pengő out of the *Nemzet's* pocket. It doesn't matter to him, of course."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Letter by Mariska Majorné Papp to Tamás Major, [Budapest, around 10 April 1945] Országos Színház-történeti Múzeum és Intézet Kézirattár I. sz. 2014.182.3

This is how the performance of *Karnyóné* became a political issue in Budapest, which is on the road to democratisation. And when on 1 May 1945 the actors of the *Nemzeti* performed the play in the *Városliget* (City Park), Jenő Pataky – as proclaimer – mentioned the unprecedented incident. In her book *Közben* (*In Between*), Hilda Gobbi has recorded some extracts from the text:

“Hey, hey, here! Audience, Soldiers,  
Hey, stop, why are you going on?  
Here is Karnyóné, it is here only now!  
It was disliked by Aunt Csorba.  
Wicked play, but a good laugh!  
... Can be watched here! Vow, what a woman!

Here is Hilda Gobbi,  
Who was banned for two years.  
Here you see the biggest embarrassment,  
Tamás Major plays here now.  
What will be here will be better than beans and gersli  
Apáthi, Ungvári, Erzsébet Somogyi.  
Come on, come on, does not cost a penny,  
And you can laugh at it widely.  
Come on, come and have fun, it is great,  
That Feri Kiss cannot ban this...” (Gobbi 1984, 217–218).

At the *Független Színpad*'s premiere of Csokonai in 1938, it was mentioned that the *Nemzeti Színház* premiered Csokonai's bitter satire *Méla Tempefői* on 27 May 1948. It is evident that the script of this performance was partly identical to the original performance, owing to the identity of the adaptors. Unfortunately, it is impossible to prove this today. But it is a fact that in 1948 the audience of the *Nemzeti Színház* saw a politicised play. While at Csokonai, Tempefői is accused of being a French spy – a theatrical cliché from the late 18th century – by 1948 he is already a republican French spy. And the drama, written in 1793, also contains references to the Hungarian Jacobin movement of 1794. Múzsai, Tempefői's friend, is part of the conspiracy, and at the end of the work he lists the imprisoned writers: “Kazinczy, Versegthy, Szentjóni, these bright stars of our homeland, prisoners, are on their way to the dungeons of

Spielberg. The noble abbot, and his companions, who, with their eyes fixed on holy liberty, stand in the shadow of the gallows, Batsányi is in hiding beyond the borders of our homeland! And I, too, flee, followed by the gendarmes of Vienna."<sup>17</sup>

The only mention of the political nature of the performance was in Miklós Molnár's review in *Szabad Nép (Free People)*: "The mocking, grotesque happy end [sic!] is the subject of two excellent adaptations: Gyula Schöpflin and András Benedek added to the play, but Csokonai's entire oeuvre is a testimony to the fact that he knew that there would be a continuation, a victorious conclusion to the struggle for a free, educated Hungary, Kazinczy, Bacsányi [sic!], Csokonai, Vörösmarty, Petőfi, Ady and Attila József fought for." It's true that Molnár also wrote that "the song inserts are sung by actors without voice or hearing. The whole performance is thus somewhat bland and sluggish, although some of the performers give the best of their knowledge and talent" (Molnár 1948, 8).

Other reviewers, however, praised rather than criticized the performance, although there were some statements that called it a stylistic parody (Balassa 1948, 7), and the director, Dénes Rádai, was criticised for failing to "unite heterogeneous elements: perfect poetry and experimental drama" (Hárs 1948, 4).

In a critical edition of the plays of Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, Jolán Pukánszkyne Kádár recalled the premiere as follows: The title role was played by Ferenc Ladányi, Csikorgó by Gyula Gózon, and the actors and students who had just graduated from the College, barely rising above the standard of the exam performances. But no better performance could have coped with the inherent lack of colour, and the adaptation preserved as little of the original ideas as did the later stage adaptations. In all, it was worth sixteen performances" (Csokonai 1978, 264).

It should also be noted that in the years following the Second World War, the theatre in Debrecen staged a Csokonai play even on two occasions. On the anniversary of the poet's birth, on 17 November 1947, *Karnyóné* was performed, and a few months later, on 28 May 1948, the audience was treated to *Méla Tempefői*. None of them have become the glory of the poet's hometown, both performances were noted by the reviewers so that the theatre was not filled to capacity (Tar 1976, 160; Pósa 1948, 7).

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17 Csokonai Vitéz Mihály: *Méla Tempefői*. Stage manager's copy, [1948]. 83. Nemzeti Színház Könyvtára

The review showed that some of Mihály Csokonai Vitéz's dramatic works were discovered by theatre-makers in the first half of the twentieth century, but they did not become part of the national repertoire. These efforts were not entirely wasted, however, as they kept interest alive in the poet's most prominent works. The performance of *Az özvegy Karnyóné s két szeleburdiak* proved on several occasions that the former school play – in addition to entertaining the audience – offers a great opportunity to develop a new, bolder style of play. The most notable performance of this play by Csokonai was given by József Ruszt at the *Egyetemi Színpad (University Stage)* in 1965, marking the beginning of a new era in the history of the play's performance (Timár 2024).

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