

Katalin Gyürky

“Be Mindful of Your Unleashed Desires”

About the Performance of Dorottya at the Csokonai National Theatre

“Csokonai guffaws to avoid crying. He creates relentless comedy, to drive away the lurking shadows of destruction that circle around him with loud merriment. He throws himself into the bustle of the masked ball to forget Lilla, to forget his failures, his humiliating search for patronage, the judgments of the foolish louts who considered him a good-for-nothing slacker, a histrion, even when they laughed at his stunts” – wrote Béla Horgas in the Dorottya chapter of his book on Mihály Csokonai Vitéz. In doing so, he put his finger on the tragedy buried deep in the soul of the Debrecen poet, who was described as a “poet of a cheerful nature”. It seems that the best way to conceal this tragedy was indeed to write a comic epic through which he could immerse himself in a “carnavalesque” state of being.

A twenty-four-hour carnival atmosphere, the ambivalent nature of which was also demonstrated by director István Szabó K. in his large-scale production for the poet’s 250th birthday, 17 November 2023 – in no other place than the Csokonai National Theatre, named after the poet. As if “listening” to Béla Horgas’ opinion, suggesting that when interpreting Dorottya – and thus also when staging it – it is worth first examining Csokonai as a person, his personal “motives” and the inner tension that is building up inside him.

Thus, when the young but already sufficiently broken Csokonai enters the stage, played by Bence Pálóczi, to interpret his Preface to Dorottya for himself, as a permanent epic characteristic in the play, Zsolt Prieger and his band

Photo: Vera Éder



Picture 1. Dorottyaák from the performance *Dorottya* (Director: István Szabó K.)

– “looking down” from above, i.e., indicating visually that they represent the poet’s “superego” – warn Mihály: “I will not be me”. In other words, it already signals to him and to us, spectators, that if someone, including the poet, throws himself into the bustle of the “carnival”, he should forsake all hopes, because he becomes part of such a state of being in which everything that has hitherto been familiar, including the norms of social hierarchy and status quo, will be subverted, the boundaries of the self will dissolve and become blurred in the mass festivities, everything will be turned inside out, and relativised.

Realising this, Csokonai announces to the audience that the “Preface” (‘előszó’) will from now on become a Live speech (‘élőszó’), i.e. the written literary text will become theatre. And the emphasis in István Szabó K’s staging, which overwrites all previous interpretations of *Dorottya*, is precisely that from now on what we witness is not a play imitating a “carnival” situation, but an adaptation in which Csokonai’s twenty-four-hour amusement grows into a carnival in the tradition of *commedia dell’arte*, into a kind of sensual rapture,

which, as we have known since Mikhail Bakhtin's brilliant reasoning, is "in itself a ritualistic, syncretic form of theatre". In other words: there will be theatre in the theatre, or if you like, carnival in the carnival, a kind of 'let your hair down' experience, valid only for the duration of the play, in which, as Ernő Verebes, the dramaturg, says in his wonderful rendering of Csokonai's archaic text, with embedded texts and humorous digressions and interjections, everything will be seen through a 'curvilinear perspective', i.e. 'deceptive optics'. The linearity of time being disrupted, time becomes circular, so birth – as we know from Bakhtin – becomes fraught with death, and death with rebirth, so we can safely obey Prieger's "higher" command "up, to death!". And we also have to come to terms with the sacred and the profane merging into one another, and although "there is no room here for religious philosophy", in the cultivation of fleshliness and lush eroticism "the clergy is also secretly having fun".

This means that a situation is created in which everything is allowed. It is also permitted to hold Csokonai's "carnival" in Debrecen instead of Kaposvár, to the delight of the people of the "Civic City", celebrating the poet's birthday, and it is even permissible to have Dorottya's (Dorothy's) part not be played by an ageing actress, but an actor, Árpád Bakota, who in this case, by "remaining unmarried", symbolizes Csokonai as a person, the life situation he experienced with Lilla, i.e. the origin of the writing of *Dorottya*.

However, the director also made sure that the historical elements of Csokonai's *Dorottya* should not suffer any detriment in this carnivalesque expansion of the "carnival", in this inverted world, i.e. that they should be present in a consistent way, bowing before the greatness of the poet. In other words, anyone who longs for a classic work will not leave the theatre feeling the play was somehow lacking in classic features. Because after István Szabó K, starting from the realistic space and life situation – a pub interior – and following Carneval (a person played by János Mercs), almost imperceptibly leads the spectator into the surreal space of the merriment, while respecting the characteristics of epic, we also get the most important nodes of the plot. We leave the perpetually drunk character of the pub (Dániel Takács), who subsequently makes constant and futile attempts to enter the carnival scene with his profuse "I do apologise", but the rejection of the "carnival participants" indicates that from then on he is seen as an eccentric, misplaced character, and even his constant drunkenness is not enough of a "different state" to integrate him into the carnivalesque state of being. Thus, he is excluded from the enumeration,

the obligatory catalogue of the epic genre, during which the participants of the funfair step out of a wagon from the days of Csokonai and present themselves. Seated in front of Carnival, Dorottya's main enemy, they quickly abandon the "regular seating arrangement" and begin their dance to the tunes composed by Zsolt Lászlóffy, which are reminiscent of a fairground bustle, to the classical music performed by the choir of the Csokonai National Theatre, or to the modern, innovative yet catchy sound forms of Prieger's band. This dance also plays an important role in Csokonai's comic epic, but here we see a carnivalised version of it, not without sultry eroticism. Where, again, everything is permitted, even women's breasts can be touched. The women – or more precisely, the matrons, Adelgunda (Anna Ráckevei), Rebekka (Sándor Csikos), Martha (Anna Vékony), Orsolya (Zsuzsa Oláh), alongside Dorottya – from then on fight a constant battle for the register of births possessed by Carneval and for their own honour, and do so embedded in the women's cooperation, alliance and warfare of Csokonai's work.

Photo: Vera Éder



Picture 2. Stage design of the performance *Dorottya* (Director: István Szabó K.)

All this is a little – or a lot, depending on your perspective – different. The war between the two sexes – which is, in my opinion, the most powerful scene of the performance – becomes nothing more than a kind of group sex, an orgy, beautifully stylized by István Szabó K, because it is envisioned in a sunken "pool", in which the not-so-distant meaning of killing ('ölés') and embracing ('ölelés'), beautifully expressed in Hungarian, is also represented. After the orgy, the characters, who may or may not have come to their senses, rightly declare: "God forgive us, for we will not forgive ourselves".

But since it is a carnival, and the sacred and the profane are intermingling, the gods and demigods who wander freely among the revellers – Venus (Imelda Hajdu), Cupid (Máté Gergely Kiss) and Hymen (Zsolt Csata) – are happy to do so. In fact, not only do they exonerate the participants of the orgy, but to ensure that they never forget this perhaps never-to-return state of being, Venus also captures various segments of the debauchery on camera.

It is Eris, the goddess of strife and discord, who mingles only once in the crowd – as a kind of prefiguration of the doughnut to be eaten by Dorottya (Dorothy) and the "furiousness" thus instilled in her – to then also watch her from the gallery as a "superego", or more precisely to cheer on and direct the events from there. But Eris's intrigue, complete with eerie melodies, in Kinga Újhelyi's marvelous performance – as everything is turned inside out at the carnival – will also ultimately turn out differently. After a bit of 'interlude', following the ingenious 'almost-burial' scene of Dorottya (Dorothy), injured in the melee, Eris's intercession will ensure – instead of the demise of Dorottya or the men – their well-being after they return to their normal way of being.

It offers them rejuvenation, opportunities and love. In other words, they are restored into the familiar and realistic atmosphere of a small pub, where "time is set right", but where, in the light of what we have seen, we know how much we have to "be mindful of our desires". Because we so rarely get to live them. But thanks to István Szabó K's direction and the entire Debrecen company performing in the play, we will never forget about these and the exceptional options to experience them.

■ **Mihály Csokonai Vitéz: Dorottya (Miss Dorothy)**

Comic epic as rewritten by Ernő Verebes

Cast list: Bence Pálóczi, János Mercs, Árpád Bakota, Zsolt Csata, Kinga Újhelyi, Imelda Hajdu, Gergely Máté Kiss, Anna Ráckevei, Sándor Csikos, Zsuzsanna Oláh, Anna Vékony, Artúr Vranjecz, Zsolt Dánielfy, István Papp, Richárd Kránicz, Eszter Balázs-Bécsi, Tamás Garay Nagy, Zsófia Wessely, Kíra Nagy, Julianna Horváth, Ibolya Mészáros, Klári Varga, Hella Tolnai, Bence Gelányi, Dániel Takács, Vivien Edelényi; *With the participation of* the Choir of the Csokonai National Theatre and PR-Evolution Junior Debrecen Dance Company; *Director:* István Szabó K.; *Dramaturg:* Ernő Verebes; *Costume:* Erzsébet Rát-kai; *Design:* Balázs Horesnyi; *Live music of the performance composed by:* Zsolt Lászlóffy; *Contributing from recording:* Zsolt Prieger and his band; *Choreography:* Gábor Katona