

Attila Szabó

There are an Overwhelming Number of Books Here...

Csokonai 250: *Tempefői* Performed
by the Second-Year Class of Acting



Photo: Milián Kovács

Picture 1. The premiere of *Tempefői* at the Csokonai National Theatre in Debrecen (Csokonai 250 event series of the University of Theatre and Film Arts, Debrecen 2023)

Mihály Csokonai Vitéz wrote his first, unfinished, play at the age of 20, as a student at the College of Debrecen. The second-year students of acting at the University of Theatre Arts (the class of Frigyes Funtek and Konrád Quintus) are in fact the same age as the poet, which is perhaps why the spirit of *Tempefői* is such a "good fit" for them. Debrecen's theatre, renewed in both its building and its management, together with the University of Theatre Arts, dedicated a three-day celebration to the poet, who was born two hundred and fifty years ago. On 15th November, students of directing and dramaturgy together with students of Ady Endre High School of Debrecen dramatised the poet's well-known and lesser-known poems: the little etudes, starting from the "Orpheum" of Csokonai Forum, travelled in a staged manner through several locations of the city: from the dormitory to the wine bar – truly in the spirit of Csokonai. The young people acquitted themselves well, breathing life into the sometimes difficult, archaic texts: helped by music, theatrical ingenuity and, above all, the student's quick wit that always shone through the allegorical poetry. The following day, a professional conference was held on Csokonai's dramas and various adaptations of his oeuvre, and in the evening the event series culminated in an adaptation of *Tempefői* by the second-year class of acting, directed by Benedek Csáki, also in "Fórum's" chamber hall.

The script was written by third-year dramaturgy students Apolka Bakos, Noémi Orosz-Bodgán, Zsófia Pálfi, Ágota Szalánczi and Rudolf Varga-Amár, who, having picked up Csokonai's original play, saw immediately that they could only stay true to the spirit of the work if they put aside all its letters and compiled a completely new play. Not because the original would not have been a great literary history treat, but because the young student-author's impetuous and often cheeky satire was fundamentally based on a critique of the current 'trends' of his time, which can only be viable on the contemporary stage with equivalent replacements. And the roars of laughter from the audience confirmed that they were: printer Betrieger's original bestseller was about "new French compliments and greetings, English boots, frock coats and coiffures," while the rewritten version features "a social psychology textbook for civilians, with lifestyle advice that comes with "recipe supplements" offering health food for every mood. Although the equestrian theme remains a symbol of one-upmanship in the contemporary version, dog breeding, pipe smoking, card playing and "crude compliments" are replaced by mobile phones, star signs, jogging and "intermittent fasting" to represent the ostentatious fashion mimicry of our times.

Photo: Milián Kovács



Picture 2. Ádám Garamvári (Fegyverneki),
Alexandra Seres (Rozália)

Either way, the parallels are a given: in Csokonai's Hungary, reading was not yet popular, and today it is already not popular. At least reading the high poetry that Tempefői, Múzsai or Rozália represent. Tökkolopi wraps a pack of cards in the paper of Ádám Pálóczi Horváth's epic poem, and the more sophisticated lyrical works are mostly used for pipe-lighting. In the production, directed by Benedek Csáki, the centrepiece of the set is a background wall made of brightly coloured foam toy

letters, which does not only provide a variety of humorous play opportunities, but can also refer to our communication tools that have degenerated to the level of emojis and one-line messages. This playfulness is echoed in the colour and style palette of the costumes. From the costume collection of the Debrecen theatre the students chose a mixture of Biedermeier-style men's and women's costumes, with frilly hair, striped "Carmen dresses" and other nineteenth-century costumes, complete with contemporary dressing gowns and sunglasses. A further pair of quotation marks lies in the fact that, regardless of the rich clothing, everyone is barefoot.

Our Tempefői (Gábel Horváth) is anything but dreamy here. He could hardly afford this luxury: if he wants to succeed as a budding poet, he has to write a proposal for a competition, found his own journal and raise funds to print his first volume. On top of that, it would not hurt to marry well, i.e., to marry Pap Fegyverneki's elder daughter Rozalia, who, as an exception, is not a parvenu snob, but a true connoisseur. Our poet of course makes the mistake of ordering the printing of his first volume from the printer before the official results of the 'young writing talent' competition are made public. Csokonai's poet hopelessly trusts in the help of the emerging Hungarian patronage, and then is always left in the lurch, and today, in the absence of private patronage, gov-

ernment support may be the only way forward. "I've got a pretty sure tip from Múzsai," exclaims Tempefői (Gábrriel Horváth) enthusiastically, but we already know from Csokonai to Ibsen that taking out a loan on such promises is irresponsible at the very least. The often ungrateful role of "countess" Rozália, who is originally attracted to poetry rather than our poet, is given the intelligence and playful eroticism of a modern liberal arts girl by Alexandra Seres. They have already progressed beyond a cautiously budding relationship described by Csokonai: in a silk dressing gown borrowed from Rozalia, the slightly naive, dishevelled but lovable Tempefői, stands up on the red sofa, already making serious plans: "I'll have an editor's job, a journal, I'll be known in the profession, I'll publish my volume [...] forty years, and with plenty of money we can have a thirty-square-metre bedsitter of our own!" The familiar morning scene of the secret lovers is followed by another great etude. The younger Fegyverneki girl, Éva (Mária Rigó) and her little friends (Zita Nadrai, Annamária Tabajdi), make fun of the chatter of the spoiled young ladies in a much more exaggerated acting style. In their opinion, reading is not cool because there are too many letters, although opinions are divided on Vuk: the story of the little fox would be fine if it was not so depressing. Éva hopelessly pines for the love of Gedeon Serteperti (György Veress), who woos her sister "Rose" instead. Here, Szusz-

mir is not a smoky, unkempt stove burner who entertains the younger girl with his never-ending tales, but a pretty, Latin-tempered nail technician (Adrienn Kern) who also offers astrological and life coaching advice. The four girls revel in the parodies, obviously because they can look at these familiar behavioural patterns from a distance. And because they depict the world of the silly girls with remarkable acting seriousness and a great deal of relish, we tend to cheer them on in the context of the

Fotó: Kovács Milán



Picture 3. Anna Tabajdi (Hajni),
Zita Nadrai (Ivett), Mária Rigó (Éva)

theatrical situation, as opposed to the serious and somewhat dull Rozalia. The sarcastic critique of public taste creates theatrical situations worthy of Molière's pen. Seeing such sensitivity and enthusiasm for comedy, the theatre history teacher may (also) feel some self-justification: perhaps it was not completely useless to look at many adaptations of Molière during the semester, to talk through the different acting solutions. Serteperti and Éva's "armchair scene" is another comic highlight of the performance, mainly due to Mária Rigó's girlishly probing but intense infatuation, which is ignored by Serteperti, the well-coiffed pretty boy who matches her character.

Fegyverneki (Ádám Garamvári), who speaks with an aristocratic rhotacism, is also only willing to read a book about horse breeding and of course insists that his daughters marry well, i.e., not in any way below the rank, for example to a "useless little liberal arts student majoring in Mickey Mouse studies". In a great etude, he challenges Mátér Köteles (Kira Ábrahám), who is not an enlightened Franciscan friar finding a spiritual companion in Tempefői, but a disciplinary delegate of a private church school, about the way his hyper-sensitive son, Petike, who makes impertinent remarks about the teachers, is treated at school: "We put him in private school so that this kind of thing wouldn't be a problem," the good family man exclaims, thus completing the picture of the pathology of the nouveau riche family then and now. Meanwhile, the young people are celebrating Rozália's name day, where the poet-aster Csikorgó (Bálint Laczkó) also appears. The turbo disco-paced Hungarian mulatós [turbo folk] dance tunes, accompanied by the corresponding lighting effects and exuberant choreography (lighting designer: Barnabás Nánási) are a perfect match for the atmosphere and the values skewered, but it's a pity that the rap song of Csikorgó, who is dressed up in a white suit with a bow tie, is drowned out by the pub tune "Pub door opening onto the street." In Csokonai's text, the poetry duel of the two poets is more pronounced, and this could have been intensified here as well. In Csokonai's play they are playing the "chair of shame" game, while in the performance there is a quiz game, the substantial prize money of which would come in handy for the indebted Tempefői, except that unfortunately it is Koppóházy who wins and not him. Marcell Kirády is very entertaining as the muscle man with a one-but brain who knows everything about 'horses, dogs, mouflons' and 'other alpha males,' and it seems that in this company that is more than enough for him. To quote Múzsai from the original text, "I see now that to be a virtuous Hungarian is nothing but to dress in

clothes that are thrown out, to keep lots of beautiful hounds, to jump on magnificent horses, to swear periodically, to eat and drink, to watch others work, to hate sciences and to help the learned to starve.”

The initial cheerfulness soon turns to sorrow as the hopelessly cornered Tempefői says no to Fegyverneki’s humiliating job offer. Rozália defies her father, giving the players a chance to show more dramatic tones: alongside our protagonists, the also bankrupt Múzsai (Domonkos Lajcsik), who is less stubborn than our poet and would rather shovel shit than starve (he even turns up in the finale in a denim outfit, stinking of manure, with a big shovel on his back). Printer Betrieger (Máté Hostyinszki), with the help of two goons in sunglasses, is about to beat our hero to a pulp when he receives the shocking news of Tempefői’s origin by phone. In the unfinished fifth act, Csokonai may have intended the poet to be of aristocratic origin, and here, as we learn, he is the son of ‘Muki, the Muki’, the powerful Ártány (suspected to be the local oligarch). The hypocritical and servile Fegyverneki and his entire entourage swiftly turn and swirl around Tempefői admiringly, queuing up for his autograph, so the financial problems seem to be solved in one fell swoop.

The young actors and dramaturgs continue Csokonai’s unfinished play, and yet I am left with the feeling that the denouement does not provide closure. The morally disappointed Rozália and Tempefői stand in the light in tears, and as a final gesture, the disillusioned poet nervously slams his first volume – carefully unwrapped from its protective foil – to the ground. Meanwhile, the wild bang-bang rumbles. The dilemma that rightly preoccupies young people comes to a head: is it possible to make a living off of high art today in one’s own right, without any kind of internal conflict or nepotism? Behind the question mark of the final scene, I hope, lies the uncertainty of anticipation: judging by the effervescence, humour and vitality of the first (and let’s hope not premature) public performance of the second-year class of acting there is certainly reason for optimism both for them and for us.

■ **Mihály Csokonai Vitéz: Tempefői**

Cast list: Kira Ábrahám, Ádám Garamvári, Gábrriel Horváth, Máté Hostyinszki, Adrienn Kern, Marcell Kirády, Bálint Laczkó, Domonkos Lajcsik, Zita Nadrai, Mária Rigó, Alexandra Seres, Anna Tabajdi, Szabolcs Varga, György Veress; *Dramaturgs:* Apolka Bakos, Noémi Orosz-Bogdán, Zsófia Pálfi, Ágota Szalánczi, Rudolf Varga-Amár; *Visual designer, choreographer and director:* Benedek Csáki; *Lighting designer:* Barnabás Nánási