

András Timár

Revival of A' özvegy Karnyóné (The Widow of Mr Karnyó)

A Survey of József Ruszt's
Interpretation of Csokonai¹

Abstract

József Ruszt was a significant theatre director, teacher and company organiser in the second half of the 20th century. It is the task of contemporary theatre historiography to study his life's work and his approach to theatre. In Ruszt's entire oeuvre, the programmatic staging of Hungarian dramas, including Csokonai's works, was of outstanding importance. As Ruszt explains: "I love old Hungarian literature. I do not only love its language and its intellectual landscape, but also its undertakings, which are unparalleled in Europe, and I feel that this undertaking is still relevant today, although not for the same reasons as back then." My research attempts to explore the *topicality* of Ruszt's reading of Csokonai through the (re)construction of his production of *The Widow of Mr Karnyó*, which was performed at the University Stage in 1965. My paper focuses on three aspects: What extent can university (stage) life be a determinant of the freedom movement of theatrical language? What kind of form language did the Universitas Ensemble's performance use, which circumvented the contemporary realistic-naturalistic canon of form? How did a performance of an 18th century Hungarian drama become one of the most successful and internationally acclaimed performances by the Universitas Ensemble?

Keywords: Csokonai Vitéz Mihály, Hungarian drama, Ruszt József

¹ In the preparation of this study, I was assisted by former members of Universitas, written contributions by Tamás Fodor and oral contributions by Katalin Sólyom, thanks for them.

József Ruszt was a theatre director, theatre teacher and theatre company organiser of the second half of the 20th century. It is the task of contemporary theatre history writing and teaching to understand his oeuvre and his approach to theatre. In Ruszt's entire oeuvre, the performances of Hungarian dramas were of outstanding importance and programmatic. And although in the reception of theatre history it is mainly the national drama productions of *Bánk bán*, *Csongor és Tünde* (*Csongor and Tünde*) and *Az ember tragédiája* (*The Tragedy of Man*) that have survived, stage productions of Csokonai's dramatic works also appeared several times in his oeuvre. This is how Ruszt described the works of the 19th century and earlier: "I love old Hungarian literature. I love not only his language and his ideas, but also – in European terms – his unparalleled commitments, and I feel that this commitment is still relevant today, although not for the same reasons as then" (Nánay and Tucsni 2013, 165).

My study attempts to explore the topicality of Ruszt's reading of Csokonai through the (re)adaptation of his production of *A' özvegy Karnyóné*, which was performed at the *Egyetemi Színpad* (*University Stage*) with the *Universitas* company in 1965.² The study focuses on three aspects, three questions: to what extent the university (stage) existence can be a determinant of the freedom movement of theatrical language use; what kind of formal language was used in the performance of the *Universitas Ensemble*, which circumvented the realistic formal canon of the time; how could a performance of an 18th century Hungarian drama become one of the most successful and internationally acclaimed productions of the *Universitas* company with such then almost unknown company members as set designer Attila Csikós, or Kati Sólyom, Anna Adamis, Tamás Jordán, Péter Halász, Pál Hetényi, Tibor Kristóf and Tamás Fodor?

The surprising success

As is typical of Ruszt's work, he staged Csokonai's *Az özvegy Karnyóné* (*The Widow of Mr Karnyó*), or as the original title reads *Az özvegy Karnyóné s a két*

² *A' özvegy Karnyóné*, date of the premiere: 11 April 1965, *Universitas Ensemble*, Budapest, Egyetemi Színpad, directed by József Ruszt, music editor: Gábor Baross, set designer Attila Csikós (f. h.), Karnyó: József Kelemen, Karnyóné: Katalin Sólyom, Samu: Tamás Jordán, Lázár: Péter Halász, Tiptopp: Pál Hetényi, Lipitlotty: Tibor Kristóf, Kuruzs: Tamás Fodor and Elemér Kiss (role doubling), Boris: Katalin Csaplár, Tündér: Anna Adamis, Tündérfi: Zsuzsa Nyujtó. For the data sheet of the performance, see <https://szinhaztortenet.hu/record/-/record/OSZMI60186> Viewed on 8 October 2023

szeleburdiak (The Widow of Mr Karnyó and the Two Rascals) at different times in his life, with different companies: after the 1965 performance at the *Csokonai Színház (Csokonai Theatre)* in Debrecen in 1973 with Magda Csáky in the title role,³ and in 1992 with the *Független Színpad (Independent Stage)* company at the *Merlin Színház (Merlin Theatre)* in Budapest (with Géza Kaszás in the title role).⁴ Of Csokonai's dramatic oeuvre, Ruszt was not only concerned with the *Karnyóné*, although obviously in connection with its outstanding success in 1965, he also staged *Gerson du Malheureux* two years later, in 1967, also with *Universitas*.⁵ Together with *Karnyóné* in Debrecen in 1973, they also played *Tempefői* on the same night,⁶ with Sándor Csikos in the title role.⁷

Ruszt graduated from the *Színház- és Filmművészeti Főiskola (Academy of Theatre and Film Arts)* in 1962 as a director. From the 1962–63 season he worked in parallel at the *Csokonai Theatre* in Debrecen and in Budapest with the *Universitas Ensemble* of the *ELTE University Stage*. Rust documented his productions constantly, both in his diaries and in letters he wrote to actors during rehearsals. Interestingly and regrettably, however, he made few records of the two performances he produced with *Universitas* in 1964–65, Aeschylus' *Oresteia (Oresteia)* and the *Karnyóné*.⁸

The premiere of *Karnyóné* was held on 11 April 1965 in the University Stage, a building of the former Piarist Gymnasium chapel on *Pesti Barnabás utca*. This is what Ruszt wrote in his diary after the premiere on 19 April: "Next year looks bad for the foreseeable future. I don't know what to do. For the time being, no flat [...]. The premiere of *Karnyóné* was a great success. The second and third per-

3 For the data sheet of the performance, see <https://szinhaztortenet.hu/record/-/record/OSZMI55448> Viewed on 8 October 2023.

4 For the data sheet of the performance, see <https://szinhaztortenet.hu/record/-/record/OSZMI26969>, the pre-premiere of the production was in the summer of 1992 at the *Esztergomi Várszínház (Esztergom Castle Theatre)*, see <https://szinhaztortenet.hu/record/-/record/OSZMI26392> Viewed on 8 October 2023.

5 For the data sheet of the performance, see <https://szinhaztortenet.hu/record/-/record/OSZMI60278> Viewed on 8 October 2023.

6 For the data sheet of the performance, see <https://szinhaztortenet.hu/record/-/record/OSZMI55445> Viewed on 8 October 2023.

7 In his biography, Sándor Csikos talks in detail about his working relationship with József Ruszt (Kornya 2021).

8 On the basis of Ruszt's letters, it is perhaps not unfounded to say that his attention was occupied by his deepening disagreements with the Debrecen director, Ferenc Taar and György Lengyel, the main director, around the time of the premiere. He wrote a long letter to Taar two days before the premiere (Nánay, Tucsni and Forgách 2012, 80).

formances were fine [...] I myself am amazed at the response from the audience. Of course, there is still work to be done, but the two rehearsals we are going to hold outside will be just enough" (Ruszt 2011, 90). The diary quotation confirms that Ruszt himself was surprised by the success of the performance, and that he had been preparing for a trip to Western Europe long before the premiere.

Following the staging of *Karnyóné*, the *Universitas* has made a series of so-called "forgotten dramatic memories" part of its programming policy.⁹ In 1967 he directed János Illei's *Tornyos Péter* (*Péter Tornyos*) and Csokonai's *Gerson*, in 1969 Kristóf Simai's adaptation of Molière's play entitled *Zsugori* (*Stingy*), and in 1971 Ruszt directed a performance of the passion play from the passion plays of Csíksomlyó, edited by Imre Katona, entitled *Passió magyar versekben* (*Passion in Hungarian Poems*).

The *Karnyóné* is regarded as a so-called double production, although according to the actors' recollections it was directed only by Ruszt, while the other one-act play, Béla Balázs's "dramatic ballad" *A kékszakállú herceg vára* (*Prince Bluebeard's Castle*), premiered on the same night, was staged by Vilmos Dobai, the founder and artistic director of *Universitas*.¹⁰ The same Vilmos Dobai (comrade, as the members of the company called him), who was also the main director of the *Pécsi Nemzeti Színház* (*Pécs National Theatre*) between 1962 and 1974.¹¹

According to the *Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet Színházi Adattára* (*National Museum and Institute of Theatre History Theatre Database*), *Karnyóné* was performed only three times between 1945 and the *Universitas* production: In 1945,¹² then in 1953,¹³ in the *Nemzeti Színház Kamaraszínház* (*National Theatre Chamber Theatre*) (both times directed by Tamás Major, with the "eternal old lady", Hilda Gobbi, only 32 years old in 1945, in the title role), and in 1957 in Debrecen (directed by György Thuróczy, with Éva Hotti in the

9 The two volumes of the *Régi magyar drámai emlékek* (*Old Hungarian Dramatic Memories*) published in 1960 had a major impact on the repertoire of Hungarian theatrical art (Kardos 1960)

10 For the data sheet of the performance, see <https://szinhaztortenet.hu/record/-/record/OSZMI60183> Viewed on 8 October 2023.

11 It should be noted that Ruszt was present at almost all the rehearsals of other *Universitas* productions, and Dobai also attended many rehearsals, so they mutually supported each other and the company.

12 For the data sheet of the performance, see <https://szinhaztortenet.hu/record/-/record/OSZMI105795> Viewed on 8 October 2023.

13 For the data sheet of the performance, see <https://szinhaztortenet.hu/record/-/record/OSZMI85275> Viewed on 8 October 2023.



Picture 1. Pál Hetényi (Tiptopp), Katalin Csaplár (Boris), Tibor Kristóf (Lipitlotty), József Kelemen (Karnyó), Tamás Jordán (Samu), Kati Sólyom (Karnyóné), Péter Halász (Lázár)

title role, and Zoltán Latinovits, a newly hired assistant actor, in the role of Lipitlotty).¹⁴ It is worth noticing the huge change in the canonisation of drama, which can be measured even in numbers: From Ruszt's production in 1965 to 2023, the Theatre Database lists almost forty performances of *Karnyóné*, as opposed to the three before.¹⁵

The upheavals by Ruszt

Béla Mátrai-Betegh writes about the 1953 performance of the National Theatre in the *Magyar Nemzet (Hungarian Nation)*: "Tamás Major, with the help of Hilda Gobbi, who is otherwise magnificent and who develops the inner and outer

¹⁴ For the data sheet of the performance, see <https://szinhaztortenet.hu/record/-/record/OSZMI85272> Viewed on 8 October 2023.

¹⁵ For the excellent study on the premieres of *Karnyóné* in 1911–1948, see this publication (Gajdó 2023).

characteristics of the character in depth and thoroughly, overemphasizes this widow at some points in the depiction of male hunger, almost to the point of distasteful naturalism" (Mátrai-Betegh 1953). Miklós Gyárfás calls Gobbi's transformation into the role "ugly sculpture" in his beautiful, role-analytical writing (Gyárfás 1958, 108). The invention of Ruszt's production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, in comparison, lies precisely in the fact that it seeks new formal possibilities for the playful freshness of a classic comedy for a young and brave audience of a company with a "playful freshness"¹⁶ and a "young and brave"¹⁷ approach. To repeat: all this in 1965.

In agreement with István Nánay, an excellent researcher of Ruszt's oeuvre, the *Universitas* performance departed from the canon of realistic-naturalistic comedy and the canon of folk theatre, which dominated the period of Hungarian theatre history under study. Above all, by beginning to experiment with the – supposed – tools of fairground theatrics and the formal language of *commedia dell'arte* in an amateur theatre setting.

The actors performed with great gusto in a very fast-paced production, in which the conventions of theatre are strongly subverted: historicism is constantly broken by jokes that refer to the contemporary, and the rules of realism are broken by a play that strives for stylisation. As Ruszt put it, "we were playing a living puppet theatre, [...] not psychological realism, but gesture realism".¹⁸ Years later, Ruszt says the following in an interview about his production of *Karnyóné* in Debrecen: "Thinking back to the performance of nine years ago, I was struck by the truth that the play must be even more exaggerated, even more illogical" (Ism, 1973). It is also worth recalling István G. Pálffy's remarks on the belated reception of Csokonai's dramas, such as *Karnyóné*, in literary history, which had serious consequences: "József Ruszt has a great merit in discovering the *Karnyóné* for the stage. For a generation that was not familiar with the post-war performance featuring Hilda Gobbi, he was in fact the discoverer. Before literary history or criticism had done so, he began to look for the tradition of Hungarian farce in Csokonai's student work. [...] *Karnyóné* is a fairground comedy. And Ruszt makes it played as one. [...] It is not a tragicomic love story of an old woman, but a story without any tragic overtones about an old woman who

16 From an interview with József Ruszt, *Universitas*, 2004 (documentary film, director: István Sipos)

17 Oral statement by Katalin Sólyom, Pécs, 13 November 2023.

18 From an interview with József Ruszt, *Universitas*, 2004 (documentary film, director: István Sipos)

is after a man, a “a violin so battered and worn out that even the devil could not canaphorise on it.” There is no characterisation, no dramatic hierarchy among the characters. Different amusing incidents occur between the characters, who are in various states of exuberance. This is why it is difficult for actors to play *Karnyóné*” (Pálfy G. 1974).

In one scene, the amorous Karnyóné forgives the debt of the swindler cavalier Lipitlotty, who, seeing this, uninhibitedly humiliates and abandons the widow.¹⁹ The staging in this single scene is a succession of jokes (which can also be seen as *lazzis* from the *commedia dell' arte*): Samuka (Tamás Jordán) enters the stage, speaks with his mouth full to the squeaky wooden legged Lázár (played by Péter Halász, later known as the neo-avant-garde leader), and then, talking to the arriving Lipitlotty (Tibor Kristóf), keeps spitting the pieces of food into his face. Péter Molnár Gál interprets the “food spitting” punch line, which was also seen in the 1973 Debrecen performance that was eerily similar to the *Universitas* performance, in this way: “It’s a wild and tasteless joke, even if it has been a staple of the folk stage for thousands of years. And what makes it poetic is that the actor retains his inner seriousness in the meantime. He is not joking, but characterizing” (Molnár Gál 1973).

During the analysed scene, the actors often perform a series of brilliant movements that detach themselves from the meaning of the text, relying on repetition as a source of comedy: Karnyóné (Kati Sólyom) explains fervently, as she moves with the loved and hated Lipitlotty as if they were duelling or even dancing on a piste. Then, when the cheated woman is truly speechless with shock, Lipitlotty, for all his humiliating insults, instead of responding, she gives a big hiccup. And with her umpteenth, arguing claw thrust, she accidentally slaps Lázár, the shopboy, so hard that he falls off his chair. In the scene, Karnyóné repeatedly bends her body and talks to her partner’s genitals. Here, too, Ruszt’s range as a master of the game shines, since beyond the old-fashioned humour, we constantly sense how much vulnerable and unrealised sensuality and sexual desire there is in the abandoned woman. In the heat of the argument, Karnyóné falls on the squeaky wooden leg of Lázár, who of course

¹⁹ A 10-minute recording of the performance is available as a DVD supplement to the volume on the history of the University Stage (Nánay 2007). However, we know that *Magyar Televízió (Hungarian Television)* recorded the whole performance and broadcast it in prime time on 14 November 1965. However, the item is not available in the *MTVA Archivum (MTVA Archive)*.

is still sitting on the bench, and who almost holds the fragile actress in the air. From a long suspended, ungrounded state, the desperately wailing Karnyóné, then planning her death, leaning on a large stick, tries to rise from the ground for a long, unsuccessful struggle, while Lipitlotty jumps on a child's toy stick, and throws off the stage. The departure of the man not only evokes the playfulness of fairground plays and somewhat the language of puppetry, but also transforms the amoral and infantile personality traits of an adult male into a stage image.

None of the actors in their twenties have learned the tricks of the trade from the *Színház- és Filmművészeti Főiskola (Academy of Theatre and Film Arts)* of the 1960s. However, from the very beginning of his career, Ruszt taught the amateur theatre ensemble members he worked with, mainly from various faculties of ELTE, with whom he rehearsed nightly, often until dawn. "So many generations have grown up on Ruszt's theory and his theoretical practice," Tamás Fodor said in a documentary about *Universitas* produced in 2004.²⁰ The reviewer of *Magyar Nemzet* praises the performance and the company precisely from the point of view of leaving amateurism, understood as lack of skills: 'with the help of a few talented young directors, a group has grown up that can speak Hungarian well, knows the basic elements of the play and performs its educational task excellently. [...] Viewing Csokonai's play could even be a compulsory lesson for students" (G.I. 1965). The characters "were individualized in movement, costume and speech to the extreme, almost caricature-like, the director was not afraid of black humour or trivial comedy, and the dances and songs blended into the performance with a naturalness that was self-evident" – writes István Nánay (Nánay 2002, 21). The playful and funny music played by Gábor Baross' live orchestra and the Csokonai text inserts set to music divided the reviewers. While the reviewer of *Magyar Nemzet* said that the "music of the play was a great success, colouring the period and fitting the style of the play" (g.i. 1965), the reviewer of the magazine *Jövő Mérnöke (Engineer of the Future)* said that one cannot agree with the music of the performance, because "it is not the music of 1799 that is played at times, but the music of another century, which does not move the plot forward, but stops it" (A.P. 1965).

The performance of Kati Sólyom, the title character, is interesting for several reasons. She played Judith in *A kékszakállú herceg várá (Prince Bluebeard's*

²⁰ From an interview with József Ruszt, *Universitas*, 2004 (documentary film, director: István Sipos)



Picture 2. Kati Sólyom (Karnyóné)

Castle), and the press found the distance between the two roles in the same evening revelatory in terms of the acting, and of course the young actress' captivating beauty (we should recall her performance as Anni in the 1966 film *Apa (Father)* directed by István Szabó) and her masked, fake-nosed, ugly and ridiculous old woman characterisation. In this respect, the role assigned to the then 25-year-old Kati Sólyom is in any case contrary to the tradition of professional theatre acting, which assigns roles according to the rules of conformation, age and the prevailing rules of aesthetics. Just think of the casting tradition of the title role and its subtle modifications: Hilda Gobbi plays Karnyóné in the *Nemzeti Színház* in 1945 and 1953, then in 1979, also directed by Major, already Mari Törőcsik, in the great 1969 radio play *Manyi Kiss*, and in 1989 in *Kapocs*, directed by Imre Csiszár, Kati Berek plays the title role. How much this tradition, and the interpretative framework of the widow and the unfortunate old

woman's sorrows itself, changes, if we think of Ruszt's 1992 independent stage production, in which the maximally masculine Géza Kaszás was cast as the title character, or Bálint Szilágyi's direction, who, with excellent wit, harking back to the all-boys roles of the original premiere's school for boys, staged Csokonai's play with three young male actors in 2015, first at the *Szentendrei Teátrum (Szentendre Theatre)* and then at the *Mozsár Műhely (Mozsár Workshop)*.²¹

In Ruszt's oeuvre, for the first time, the construction of space can be seen "when a raised, distinguished part of the stage is able to organise the space by itself" (Nánay 2007, 23). On the platform in the middle of the stage was Karnyóné's shop, and all the other scenes outside the house were played around the podium. The idea was intended not only to increase the space, but also to allow more time for the play, as the actors coming from the director's left had to walk across the entire stage to the house entrance set on the right. According to Ruszt himself, this solution was actually the result of an accidental situation that had to be resolved during a stage rehearsal: "This inside-outside was not born out of a conscious, preconceived directorial concept, just as nothing in the theatre is born that way. At the rehearsal, Tibi Kristóf came in from the left as Lipitlotty, looked out at the audience, showed himself and then stepped up to the podium. It was bad. Short. And besides, we agreed that the entrance is on the right side of the podium. Kristóf understood, and with his typical posture, shoulders hunched, and steps pattering, he walked around, showing himself again and again, each time looking out into the audience. In doing so, he created space, time and a style in which the inner life of the figure and the detachment from the figure appeared together" (Nánay 2002, 20). This duality of the actor's experience and the theatricalisation of the play was one of the defining ideas of Ruszt's entire oeuvre, the "theatrical liturgy"..

The scenery avoided theatrical historicism as much as possible, in contrast to the scenery of the Major-directed productions at the Nemzeti Színház. And even if not abstract in its current meaning, the visual world of the Ruszt performance can certainly be considered puritan, fairground-like and stylised. The scene consisted of only a table, a bench and a stall, with two ladders in the background, on which an unpainted canvas was stretched as a backdrop. A special mention must be made of the ladders, which became an almost iconic and joked-about constant in amateur and then alternative theatre and

21 Oral communication by Bálint Szilágyi. Budapest, 14 November 2023.

later in Ruszt's performances at the *Universitas*. Ruszt also used the ladder – as a self-quotation – in his 1992 independent stage production. The props, the bunch of peppers on the ladder, the bowls and jars hung on the stage, were also just signs of the grocery shop.

As we can see from the descriptions of Géza Juhász's semi-disapproving review of 1965, the Ruzsts have also made major changes to the costume concept: the German-mimicking Lipitlotty appeared in Hungarian attire, with braided trousers and "a moustache so pointed that all the butlers of Swabian Pest would have run after him" (Juhász 1965), and the Frenchy Tiptopp "is so cosmopolitan that there should be a man on his feet who understands what the good-eyed Boris could have loved about this repellent Sanyaró Vendel" (Juhász 1965). According to the reviewer, Kuruzs looks like an Italian travelling comedian in his international costume, and he was not satisfied with the costume of Karnyó either, who came in at the end of the performance, as he found it incomprehensible how he could have run home with a huge, gaudy sword dangling over his dress and why he was not caught immediately. "What does it want to express? His militant counter-revolutionaryism?" – he asks in 1965 (Juhász 1965).

The superiority/primacy of cultural policy

One of the most, if not the most, significant events in the reception of this production was the fact that the preliminary selection of the World Festival of University Theatres²² considered that *Karnyóné* and *A kékszakállú herceg vára* were worthy of inclusion in the competition programme of the meeting held in Nancy. The international theatre meeting was held in France from 25 April to 2 May 1965. The main topic of the festival was the idea of "classics for today", and the performances of the twenty-five ensembles that took part in the festival were all related to this.

22 The festival was held for the second time in 1965 and was organised by Jacques Lang, later French Minister of Culture. The jury was chaired by writer Armand Salacrou and included filmmaker Julien Duvuvier among its members, and Ferenc Hont also had a place, who was then Director General of the *Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum (National Museum of Theatre History)* in 1952-57. Hont reports in the *Esti Hírlap (Evening Newspaper)* about his trip to France, and from there to Hessen in West Germany for an international conference on actor education, where the most interesting speakers were Piscator and Barrault (K.K. 1965).

It is a fascinating question why the ruling (cultural) political elite allowed the performance to be performed abroad. Moreover, why Universitas was the first Hungarian prose ensemble that might perform in Western Europe in a long time. In István Nánay's opinion, the fact that not only music, folklore and film, but also theatre linked to language could now be represented at the festival is a consequence of the opening of Hungarian foreign policy towards the West.²³ In fact, they were given passports as an experiment, tightly controlled by the party-state, to filter the kind of reception they would get.²⁴

At the festival, the jury awarded two 1st and four 2nd prizes. Performed on the vast stage of the Opera House of Nancy, the production of *Karnyóné* was awarded 2nd place, praised by the French press and hailed as an outstanding achievement by leading Hungarian newspapers. On 12 June, Ruszt recorded some details from the French press coverage in his diary: 'ARTS, 12 May 1965. The Hungarians played an 18th-century farce... in a very likeable and lively way, without a hint of vulgarity throughout, with an actress who would make a wonderful *Übü mama* [...]; LES LETTRES FRANÇAISES May 19. Amusingly staged [...] a charming little world, without any forced efforts [...]; LE REPUBLICAIN LORRAINE, 3 May. The actors are excellent [...] The *Egyetemi Színpad* of Budapest captures our attention and makes us laugh, despite the fact that the comedy of the play's text is completely incomprehensible to us [...] LE MONDE, 4 May. If we were to reward this folkloristic genre, the lively farce of the Hungarians would have deserved a better ranking" (Nánay, Tucsni and Forgách 2012, 81). The success of the performance in France, according to the recalling members of the

23 "Foreign audiences who do not understand the text will surely miss much of the "naughty" flavours of the play, the words of the country bumpkins who monkey with the "latest Parisian fashions", the delightful characterisation of the shopboy's ignorant cluelessness, the tender dialogue between the widow hungry for love and her son always hungry for anything edible. But this lively comedy, because its subtle changes of tone and heavy humour can be interpreted by the acting, can still give a taste of Hungarian theatre culture" (E. M. 1965).

24 The following passage from the 1965 report of the *Egyetemi Színpad* tells us a lot about the expectations of the time: "This new body [i.e. the Cultural Committee] has already had a positive impact with the help it provided in the elaboration of the guidelines for cultural work in 1966-67. The material is the result of a meeting held with Comrade György Aczél, and, starting from an assessment of the present situation, it indicates the main aims and aspirations of the work, the areas in which it should have a radiating effect, the importance of ideological education, the broadening of general education, and the methods to be used. ... we need to shape our entire programme policy in such a way that our events have the desired balance between entertainment, education and direct political education". Draft programme of the cultural work of *Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem (Eötvös Loránd University)* for the academic year 1965/66. Archives of the *Egyetemi Színpad*, OSZMI, *Kézirattár (Manuscript Archives)*.

company, was mainly due to its playfulness, amateur theatrical flamboyance and juxtaposing jokes, which made it stand out among the happenings of the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s, which were fashionable but strange and little known to Hungarian participants.²⁵ The performance was “like a healthy sneeze in the slightly parched avant-garde,” Ruszt said in an interview.²⁶

The success was also congratulated by Károly Kazimir, Secretary General of the *Magyar Színházművészeti Szövetség (Hungarian Theatre Arts Association)*, who had earlier recommended *Universitas* for the Award for Socialist Culture, and also by István Sőtér, Rector of ELTE. We have detailed information on how the ensemble got back to Budapest from Nancy: they stopped in Paris to be the first Hungarian company to perform at the *Nemzetek Színpada (Stage of the Nations)*, *Théâtre Montparnasse-Gaston Baty*, then, at the request of the University of Vienna, they went to Vienna and performed *Karnyóné* and *A kékszakállú*.²⁷ Ruszt did not write any diary entries at all during his stay abroad, and only after his return home did he record a few rather painful sentences: “Well, back home [...] and with very mixed feelings and very mixed emotions. While I was out, I longed for home, and now that I’m back home, I would crawl back on my hands and knees” (Ruszt 2011, 90).

Not only the news reports of the time, but also the historians of the *Universitas* story that has come to an end, remember the *Karnyóné* as the greatest (or first greatest) success of the ensemble. It is easy to see that this was actually the time when *Universitas*, working in amateur, academic conditions, was clearly and – if the term can be understood in 1965 – definitively put on the map of Hungarian art. Directors, actors and reviewers began attending their performances, which were covered by the major cultural and political weeklies and dailies. Their influence can be detected in contemporary Hungarian theatre and film,²⁸ and became a prominent meeting place for artists in internal exile a few years after 1956.

25 István Petur, Director of the University Stage, said about this: “From classical tragedy to Bekettian [sic!] antidrama, we have seen a wide range of experimentation. The exaggerated, over-modernist aspirations naturally failed” (H. J. 1965).

26 From an interview with József Ruszt, *Universitas*, 2004 (documentary film, director: István Sipos)

27 A detailed account of the trip can be found in István Nánay’s book (Nánay 2007, 64).

28 Irén Psota and Tamás Ungvári saw here for the first time Garcia Lorca’s *Yerma*, directed by Vilmos Dobai. Through Psota’s intercession, György Aczél finally gave permission to the *Madách Színház (Madách Theatre)* to stage the production. *Universitas* was the first to stage Genet’s drama [*Cselédek (Maids)*, 1967, directed by

The success of *Universitas* contributed to the fact that several university theatre groups started to operate: from the mid-1960s, the *Szegedi Egyetemi Színpad* (Szeged University Stage) under the leadership of István Paál became an increasingly important experimental theatre, in 1968 the literary stage of the *Budapesti Műszaki Egyetem* (Budapest Technical University) changed its name to *S(z)kéné Együttes* [*S(z)kéné Ensemble*], and at the same time the construction of a permanent theatre space on the second floor of the University's Building K was started. But in 1966, the *Pince Színház* (Cellar Theatre), which had grown out of the *Budapesti Ifjúsági Színpad* (Budapest Youth Stage), also started operating at Török Pál utca 3, under the direction of István Keleti between 1969 and 1985. And it is obviously a measure of the success of the *Universitas* company and other amateur theatre ensembles that the boom in amateur theatre has been met with increasingly fierce resistance from professional theatres.

Of course, the Hungarian critical reception of *Karnyóné* was not unanimous, as several critics disapproved of the title change (instead *A' özvegy*, they requested back the 'z' of *Az özvegy*) They missed Csokonai's message, while the denunciation of the ideology of state socialism was called for. "Csokonai reflects here the most pitiful Hungarian world of his time: the small town in Western Transdanubia ... the beggaring nobility, which is either in the foreign monkey business or already beginning to alienate itself in its blood. The petty bourgeois couple are rivals in their admiration for aristocracy and German swagger. There are only two workers here, minor characters, but they are the only ones who show intellectual demand. World politics is of feverish interest to Karnyóné's assistant; it depends on his social position, a victim of the most inane whispering propaganda. And the maid is the only one with a demand for poetry; she cannot help it if she has to make do with Kuruzs" (Juhász 1965).²⁹ And although the company performed Illyés's adaptation of *Karnyóné*, the need for the text to be untouchable is still reflected in the reviews: "the deleted Csokonai song and the

József Ruszt] and Dürrenmatt's [*Pör a számára árnyékáért* (*Trial for the Shadow of the Donkey*), 1967, directed by József Ruszt]. István Szabó and several directors of the *Balázs Béla Stúdió* (*Béla Balázs Studio*) have selected the cast of their films from the *Universitas* company.

²⁹ The reviewer's train of thought is obviously not unique, and is very similar to, for example, Gyula Illyés's statement on the 1953 performance of the play that used his revised text: "We shall see how fitting this play, which mocks the moneymaking bourgeois as well as the wealthy nobleman, was for a respectable audience at a year-end celebration" (Illyés 1953).

poem insertion must be reinstated, but the *Dorottya* part can be omitted: the Lilla song is downright offensive as the parody of the *szeleburdi*" (Juhász 1965).

After the success of *Karnyóné*, the company was invited back to Nancy, however, the following year's production of Vilmos Dobai's *Egy szerelem három éjszakája (Three Nights of Love)*, was a just a bit successful, while Ruszt's twenty-minute *Impromptu du Nancy*, on a topic previously set³⁰, was not successful at all.³¹ The title character in *Karnyóné*, Kati Sólyom, was not allowed to go abroad after a shameful, blackmailing visit to György Aczél, typical of the psychology of the dictatorship. She could not act in the new productions either, as her sibling, who was working in Italy as a researcher and had accepted a US fellowship, was considered a dissident. The biggest problem in the life of the company, however, was that during the 1966 guest performance, "András Hajagos, a student at the Technical University, has disappeared in Nancy and apparently does not intend to return to the country [Hungary]."³² As a result, István Petur, head of the *Egyetemi Színpad* and secretary of the Cultural Committee, was dismissed, and the attempts of *Universitas* to become independent and its leaders' theatrical ambitions were radically curtailed. On 15 June 1966, barely a year after the great success of *Karnyóné*, István Sőtér, then Rector of ELTE, proposed the immediate dissolution of *Universitas* to the Rectors' Council.³³ Fortunately for us, the ensemble continued to exist, Ruszt worked with *Universitas* until 1973, and the company continued in various forms until 1991, when the chapel was returned to the Piarist order.³⁴

And although the authorities continued to be concerned about the international cultural involvement of university groups after the defection scandal,

30 The theme – ten years after the 1956 revolution – was the following: a revolutionary movement unfolds in a rural town, involving a young man who turns out to be an important functionary of the established order.

31 Tamás Fodor reports this in his letter of 2 May 1966: "[...] I am very, very nervous. In half an hour, we might be on stage with our obligatory twenty-minute piece, and we might be booed, and it might be a success. This is such a booing audience. [...] The obligatory piece was booed, they took it as a national insult. The *Egy szerelem (One love)* had a very good success. We were not awarded. The jury is the assembly of incompetent animals. We had a good laugh at the evaluations" (Nánay 2007).

32 *Verification report of the trip of the Universitas Ensemble of the Egyetemi Színpad to France and England from 20 April to 14 May 1966*. Archives of the *Egyetemi Színpad*, OSZMI, Kézirattár (Manuscript Archives).

33 *Minutes of the Rectors' Council meeting of 15 June 1966*. ELTE Archives. 1744/66

34 On the 10th anniversary of its premiere, *Karnyóné* was revived with the old cast for one performance only. This performance was seen by János Szikora, who was delighted by the charm and humour of the players. Oral statement by Katalin Sólyom, Pécs, 13 November 2023.

the *Karnyóné* was able to be performed, even if not in Western Europe, but was successful at the 1966 Zagreb and 1967 Wrocław festivals. In Zagreb, Kati Sólyom, who played the title role, won the award for best female performance, and the company applied for admission to the *Egyetemi Színházak Nemzetközi Szervezete (International Organisation of University Theatres)*, UITU. However, the 1967 festival in Wrocław, where the twice-performed *Karnyóné* received an 18-minute ovation, unexpectedly and almost radically changed the way Ruszt and the ensemble saw theatre: it was here that they first encountered Jerzy Grotowski and his *Laboratórium Színház (Laboratory Theatre)* production of *Az állhatatos herceg (The Tenacious Prince)*. The influence of Grotowski's ritual theatre was enormous, and in 1968 the *Pokol nyolcadik köre (Eighth Circle of Hell)*, written by Péter Halász and directed by Ruszt, was born from this inspiration from János Pilinszky's *Sötét mennyország (Dark Heaven)* oratorio.³⁵

Sources

- [A. P.] 1965. "Az Egyetemi Színpad két bemutatója." *Jövő Mérnöke*, 04/26: 5.
- [E. M.] 1965. "Karnyóné utazik... Nemzetközi Egyetemi Színház Fesztivál Nancyban." *Film Színház Muzsika* 17: 20
- Gajdó Tamás. 2023. "Vitéz Mihály ébresztése. Csokonai Vitéz Mihály színműveinek bemutatóiról, 1911–1948." *Uránia* 2: 22–44. <https://doi.org/10.56044/UA.2023.2.2>
- [g.i.] 1965. "A Karnyóné és a Kékszakállú az Egyetemi Színpadon." *Magyar Nemzet*, 05/12: 4.
- Gyárfás Miklós. 1958. *Színész-könyv*. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó.
- [H. J.] 1965. "Nancyból." *Jövő Mérnöke*, 06/ 21: 6.
- Illyés Gyula. 1953. "Prológus a Karnyónéhoz." *Irodalmi Újság*, 06/04: 4.
- [Ism.] 1973. "Ma este 7 órakor díszelőadás a Csokonai Színházban." *Hajdú-Bihari Napló*, 1973. november 17.: 5.
- Juhász Géza. 1965. "Karnyóné Debrecenben." *Hajdú-Bihari Napló*, 09/26: 7.
- Kardos Tibor, ed. 1960. *Régi magyar drámai emlékek*. I–II. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.

³⁵ For the data sheet of the performance, see <https://szinhaztortenet.hu/record/-/record/OSZMI60282> Viewed on 8 October 2023.

- [K. K.] 1965. "Ifjú Karnyóné Nancyban. Hont Ferenc beszámolója." *Esti Hírlap*, 05/12: 2.
- Kornya István. 2021. *Csikos Sándor kulisszák nélkül*. Debrecen: Csokonai Színház.
- Mátrai-Betegh Béla. 1953. "Karnyóné – Tűvé-tevők. Két komédia a Katona József Színházban." *Magyar Nemzet* 06/02: 5.
- Molnár Gál Péter. 1973. "Csokonai Samuja." *Népszabadság*, 12/14: 7.
- Nánay István. 2002. *Ruszt*. Budapest: Új Mandátum Kiadó.
- Nánay István. 2007. *Profán szentély. Színpad a kápolnában*. Budapest: Alexandra Kiadó.
- Nánay István, Tucsni András and Forgách András, ed. 2012. *Ruszt József. Debrecen, Universitas Együttes 1962–1972*. Budapest: Ráday Könyvesház Kft.
- Nánay István and Tucsni András, ed. 2013. *Ruszt József. Zalaegerszeg, Független Színpad 1982–1993*. Published by the Hevesi Sándor Theatre and András Tucsni.
- Pálfy G. István. 1974. "Csokonai színházi ünnepe." *Alföld* 1: 85–88.
- Ruszt József. 2011. *Napló 1962–69, Rekviem*. Zalaegerszeg: Hevesi Sándor Színház.