

THEATRE

CINEMA-
TOGRAPHY

MEDIA

URANIA

2025

VOLUME 5,
NUMBER 2

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACADEMIC JOURNAL

UNIVERSITY OF THEATRE AND FILM ARTS

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Mór Jókai, theatre critic

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URANIA INTERDISCIPLINARY ACADEMIC JOURNAL

2025 | VOLUME 5 | NUMBER 2

Peer-reviewed, open-access scholarly journal. Not for commercial use.

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Online access: urania.szfe.hu

Published by the University of Theatre and Film Arts, 1088 Budapest, Rákóczi út 21., Hungary

Publishing director: Enikő Sepsi, Rector of the University of Theatre and Film Arts

Prepress: Krisztina Csernák, L'Harmattan Kiadó

Press: Prime Rate Ltd.

ISSN 2786-3263

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Greetings to the Reader

Mór Jókai, one of the most prolific and versatile writers in Hungarian literature, was born two hundred years ago. Joining in the Jókai 200 commemorative year celebrations, this special issue of the University of Theatre and Film Arts' periodical, *Urania*, examines the great figure of Romanticism, who was a novelist and playwright, a public figure and a devoted fan of theatre, from the perspectives of theatre, film and linguistics.

Jókai was also one of the media workers of the 19th century, contributing to the shaping of public taste and the image of national culture as a journalist, editor, and theatre critic.

In his study, *Márton Kakas at the theatre*, **Tamás Gajdó** evokes Jókai's journalistic alter ego, who commented on the operation of the National Theatre in the columns of the *Vasárnapi Ujság* and later the *Üstökös* in an ironic yet thought-provoking tone. Gajdó shows that there is more than just joking behind these letters; rather, Jókai made observations about the day-to-day reality of Hungarian theatre, problems of the repertoire, and issues related to educating the audience that are still valid today.

The playwright Jókai also resonated with the intellectual currents of his time through his interest in the Hungarian Conquest and the nation's past. **Géza Balázs's** essay on Jókai's drama about the Hungarian conquest, *Levente*, considers the work, which was written for the millennium, to be an experiment in poetic theatre, focusing on questions of Hungarian origin myths and historical identity. The study does not only follow the story of the play, but also explores what *Levente* might mean today: a kind of symbolic linguistic-visionary theatre that speaks of national remembrance through Jókai's archaic use of language.

Csaba Galántai's study explores the history of the early 20th-century adaptations of Jókai's novels, examining the circumstances and reception of Sándor Hevesi's premieres at the Magyar Theatre. The stagings of *Kárpáthy Zoltán* (Zoltán Kárpáthy), *Az új földesúr* (The New Landlord) or *A kőszívű ember fiai* (*The Baron's Sons*) were not only a literary success, but these plays also created a bridge between Hungarian Romanticism and modern theatre through Hevesi's dramaturgy.

The 19th century image of Jókai is closely linked to the world of fashion and visibility. **Csilla Kollár**'s study *Jókai and national fashion* explores the relationship between clothing during the Reform Era, national identity, and film adaptations. The costume descriptions in Jókai's works are chronicles of the history of Hungarian bourgeois fashion. The study shows how Jókai's aesthetics lived on in the mid-20th-century through the costume designs of the film adaptation of *A kőszívű ember fiai*.

In the "Case Study" section of the journal, we publish **Balázs Lázár**'s article, which reveals the story behind the first stage version of *A kőszívű ember fiai*. The study revisits a forgotten chapter in the history of theatre by showing how Jókai's play ended up on the stage of the Budai Nyári Színkör instead of the National Theatre. Through careful analysis of the sources, the author sheds light not only on the dramaturgical specifics of the stage adaptation, but also on the functioning of the cultural institutional system of the time.

Zoltán Bódi's study draws attention to issues of language and national identity in Mór Jókai's play *Olympi verseny* (Olympic Competition). Written for the fiftieth anniversary of the National Theatre, this occasional work redefines the role of the Hungarian theatre through an allegorical debate between Past and Present. Bódi's analysis shows, through the layers of vocabulary, rhetoric and symbolism, how Jókai's image of the nation is constructed and how the cultural identity of the late 19th century is linguistically shaped.

The "Exhibition" section of this issue contains a review by **Beáta Huber and Erika Zsuzsanna Kiss** of the Jókai exhibition titled "*I too had a life on the boards*" at the OSZMI (National Theatre History Museum and Institute), which visually evokes the writer's oeuvre, the era in which he was active, and the legend around which two centuries of Hungarian culture have been built.

Finally, the journal presents the new publications released in the fall under the auspices of SZFE (Hungarian University of Theatre and Film Arts).

The articles in this issue are inspired by different eras and approaches, yet they share a common question: what are theatre, film, language, and national culture doing today with Jókai's legacy? Please enjoy this selection—a tribute and a reinterpretation, a recollection of the past and a reflection on the present.

Zsolt Antal
Editor-in-Chief

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and the volumes can be purchased from the L'Harmattan Publishing House
webshop: <https://harmattan.hu>

Tamás Gajdó

Márton Kakas at the theatre

Mór Jókai, theatre critic

Abstract

Appearing first in the *Vasárnapi Ujság* in 1856, Márton Kakas, Mór Jókai's character, quickly gained great popularity. The figure, created in the likeness of characters from satirical journals, also voiced his opinions on theatre performances in his letters sent to the editor. Márton Kakas later became a regular character in Jókai's satirical journal, *Üstökös*, and evolved into Jókai's alter ego, offering his value judgments with a superior feel on the National Theatre during the era of absolutism. Readers were not presented with classical critiques; rather, they were informed about the daily life of the theatre, behind-the-scenes secrets, and, of course, Jókai's thoughts on the National Theatre's role and position and the relationship between opera and drama. This was not the first time Jókai had written about the theatre. His very first article, published on January 2, 1847, in *Életképek*, sparked a polemic. His surprising perspective undoubtedly contributed to Jókai not being typically mentioned among the theatre critics of the era, even though his accounts draw attention to lesser-known years in the history of the National Theatre.

Keywords: Mór Jókai, National Theatre, Hungarian Theatre Criticism, Hungarian Press History

Mór Jókai published ten theatre reviews in the literary weekly *Életképek* between 2 January 1847 and 6 February 1848—as discovered by the staff of the critical edition of the author's collected works (Jókai 1965). When Jókai began this work,

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Adolf Frankenburg's name still appeared as editor on the title page; however, in July 1847, he took over the role, and less than a year later, he co-prepared issue number 19, published on April 30, 1848, with Sándor Petőfi.

Jókai was not very fortunate in his criticism, a fact he mentioned several times during his life. In his memoir titled *Az én kortársaim* (My Contemporaries), he claimed he didn't understand "theatre criticism" and praised everyone excessively, which is why Frankenburg immediately dismissed him (Jókai 1926, 25–26). Indeed, after his third review published on 16 January 1847 in *Életképek*, there was a long break; he only resumed his series on National Theatre performances in July 1847. The writer recalled that the biggest complaint against his work was that he "overpraised" the actors, particularly by lauding Lili Szilágyi in Ede Szigligeti's play *Pasquil*: "who, considering her young age, plays her short role quite skilfully and deserves ample praise; she shows no inclination towards affectation, which is why we take the liberty of promising her a very bright future from an artistic perspective, which we believe she will achieve with God's help, her own diligence, and the will of those concerned" (Jókai 1965, 10). As the quote shows, Jókai did indeed promise the young actress a great future—but so did his fellow critics, who were well-versed in theatre criticism. Therefore, this enthusiastic tone alone could not have been the reason for Frankenburg's decision. We must look for a much more serious reason to understand the editor's decision. Jókai—although he accepted the task of evaluating National Theatre performances "for a free box seat and ten forints a month"—declared in his introductory article that he completely rejected the rationale behind literary and artistic criticism. He believed that critics, "placing clumsy spectacles on their noses, began to look for a knot on a straw, spoke meaningless things about aesthetics and art philosophy, took great strides in their cothurni, said everything that no one doubted, and when they were bored to death by the kindly reader: they cried out with proud self-esteem: behold my country, do not say that I lived in vain, I have split two hairs, I lay them on your altar" (Jókai 1965, 6).

Instead of the quibbling criticisms he labelled as hair-splitting, Jókai considered writings with a completely different perspective desirable. He formulated his principles clearly and unequivocally: "In my opinion, the duty of criticism is not to separate the dandelion from the wheat, but rather: to bring to light the pearls where it finds them; because what is ugly, there is no need to point it out, any good soul will see it without it" (Jókai 1965, 7). And Mór Jókai had another very

important statement, suggesting that the radical, oppositionist writers of *Életképek* viewed the National Theatre of the reform era as an important political factor. Jókai emphasized—since the institution had “not only artistic but above all national interests”—that he considered it his conscience’s duty to solidify the theatre’s “moral credit” through his writings to the best of his ability (Jókai 1965, 7).

It is likely that Adolf Frankenburg initially agreed with his colleague’s endeavor, but the writer’s heretical thoughts provoked such opposition among the staff of conservative newspapers—*Nemzeti Ujság*, *Budapesti Híradó*—and the theoretical and critical weekly of the Kisfaludy Társaság (Kisfaludy Society), *Magyar Szépirodalmi Szemle*, that the editor had to reconsider the interests of *Életképek*, as this journal had been the official organ of the National Theatre since 1846. The editorial office could rightfully be accused of perhaps not holding back from serious critiques of performances for this very reason. *Magyar Szépirodalmi Szemle* also emphasised regarding its theatre section that “*Életképek* is the official theatre journal and thus can hold some authority before the public” ([Anon.] 1847, 208). And it was precisely for that reason that they received with incomprehension that the journal published “pearl criticism” ([Anon.] 1847, 209).

The disapproving remarks directed at the theatre column of *Életképek* certainly contributed to Jókai revisiting his views on criticism in his review of the *Othello* performance on 16 January 1847—albeit in a much milder form: “Yes: we believe that criticism is useful, that criticism is necessary; that everything that requires correction in matters of art or literature should be censured; but we flatly deny that this time should always be the readers’ time, and this place always the domain of journalism” (Jókai 1965, 26).

Mór Jókai’s first attempts published in *Életképek* in 1847 were not true critiques. Unfortunately, he also failed to fully realize what he initially promised. In his summary of Imre Vahot’s comedy *Farsangi iskola* (School at Carnival Time), published on 2 January 1847, we find no sentence alluding to pearls. Nor can praise be found in his lines about Ida Komlóssy: “Ida Komlóssy played the role of Veronka with a suitably charming rural clumsiness, and the critic feels no inclination to scold the esteemed lady’s peculiar headwear. Not at all. It is a matter of taste, a private affair, and he does not wish to interfere in such things” (Jókai 1965, 9).

However, it is striking how enthusiastically Jókai wrote about Gábor Egressy, who played the role of Firkászi in Ede Szigligeti’s play *Pasquill*, which premiered at the National Theatre on 21 December 1846. *Életképek* had already written

about the performance at the end of 1846. In it, Ferenc Hazucha, who published his reviews under the pseudonym Andor Vas at the time, accused the author and the lead actor that the audience identified Firkászi with a well-known public figure, and “the matter could become personal, especially if the performing actor facilitates it” ([Hazucha] Vas 1846, 815).

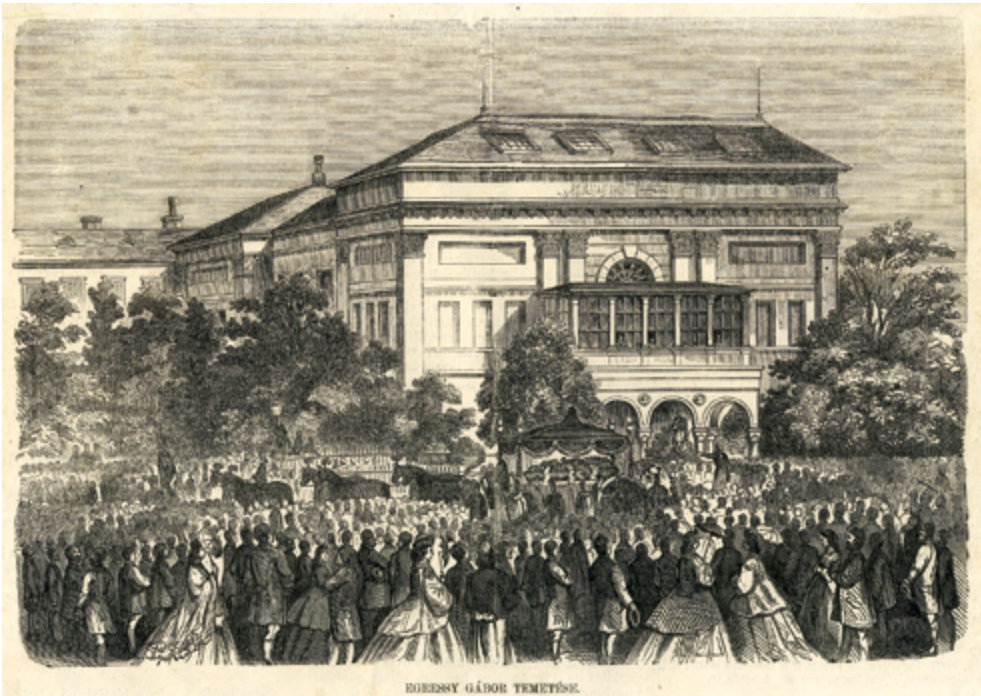
We know from Ferenc Kerényi that Gábor Egressy repeatedly made his roles recognizable during his career by modelling them on specific individuals; for example, “the journalist Firkászi [] after the editor of *Honderü*, Lázár Petrichevich Horváth, who was widely disliked” (Kerényi 2005, 1094).

However, figures in the literary world at the time were not entirely certain, and as we read in *Pesti Divatlap*: “Through Egressy’s deeply moving performance, not one, but several writers felt themselves touched and struck” (Szinéri 1847, 29). Gusztáv Zerffi condemned the stage pamphlet in the harshest terms in the pages of *Honderü*: “The stage—oh God! how regrettable it is that there are writers and actors among us who, filled with arrogance from head to toe, overestimate themselves” (Zerffi 1847, 17).

Jókai took a stance on this issue by sincerely praising Gábor Egressy’s acting talent—“we never could appreciate him as much as he deserved”; and denied that it was a stage action against conservative literary taste (Jókai 1965, 8). He found the outrage accompanying Szigligeti and Egressy’s pamphlet amusing and made it clear that he had no objection to a politicizing National Theater and a politicizing Gábor Egressy.¹

Mór Jókai’s early theatre reviews are not only different from the accepted critiques of the era due to their political charge. They suggest that what happens in the theatre should not be taken so seriously. And above all, the principles of dramaturgy and theatre aesthetics, on which extensive treatises were being written at the time, should not be taken seriously. His articles published in *Életképek* in early 1847 bear witness to his attempt to establish his own style in this genre, speaking in an original, individual voice. We believe he succeeded in this to some extent. Consider, for example, the opening of his review of *Kalmár és tengerész* (Merchant and Sailor), published on 9 January 1847: “Every week, it occurs to us five times that Lendvay is gone. If our actors truly have to travel

1 “There are gentlemen who are displeased with everything; there are gentlemen who consider the bread of unsolicited advocacy very tasty, and these find monstrous allusions to public figures in this role, and attack and defend the individuals with indignant philippics. For my part, if I were among the latter, I would not even thank them for such defence.” (Jókai 1965, 9.)



Picture 1. A drawing published on the cover of the 19 August 1866 issue of *Magyarország és a Nagy Világ*, a political, popular science, and literary illustrated weekly, depicting the funeral of Gábor Egressy.

for two months for studies to be gathered in the countryside: then let us close the theatre for two summer months, let them all travel at once, rather than at a time when the theatre is the only enjoyment for the public, one of our better actors turns his back on the institution" (Jókai 1965, 17). He then immediately moves on to reviewing József Szigeti, who took over Lendvay's role: "Mr. Szigeti has a peculiar habit: when he wants to say something big, very big, he takes three steps back; when he wants to express surprise, he takes two steps back; when he wants to declare love, then only—four" (Jókai 1965, 17).

But how did the competing *Pesti Divatlap* report on the same performance? The reviewer, hiding behind the pseudonym Aladár, stated: "one cannot expect Szigeti to transform the naval lieutenant Endre Kelendfi into a character that Lendvay created with his emotionally rich and warm performance, because Szigeti has neither enough time nor enough acting skill for that. But how could

he, when he is essentially an everyday performer at the institution for months, with only a few evenings as an exception, and it is difficult to divide his time in such a way that enough remains for him to learn his role. And roles need not only to be memorised, but learned" (Aladár 1847, 87). And so on, at length, in detail, excusing the actor.

It is no coincidence that Elemér Császár stated about the paper *Életképek* in his work on the history of Hungarian criticism that "the decline of the journal's critical section, which was noticeable in the last year of Frankenburg's reign, became sudden at this time. Like a boulder rolling down a mountain, it accelerated towards complete degradation with uniform speed. In the first half of Jókai's editorship, the reviews shrank; in the second half, the first half of 1848, their number also decreased, and in the third half, we hardly find any criticism in the journal. And this quantitative impoverishment is matched by a decrease in the value of the critiques" (Császár 1925, 324). Indeed, Mór Jókai's theatre writings in 1847 and 1848, in the period immediately preceding the revolution, were far removed from the domestic theatrical criticism tradition, which primarily took the works of József Bajza, József Garay, and Mihály Vörösmarty as its model. These essays, by demanding adherence to the laws of the genre, primarily critiqued the dramatic work and sought to idealize the stage presence of the first generation of actors at the National Theatre. We find no trace of didactic criticism in Jókai: he provides no advice to either writers or actors. However, if he is pleased with an artist's stage performance, he expresses his delight with enthusiastic words. His review of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, performed on 24 June 1847, is instructive in this regard, in which he virtually only praised Róza Laborfalvi.² This characterisation belongs in a study or monograph on Róza Laborfalvi, while other Jókai writings from this period will hardly be cited in theatre and drama history overviews examining

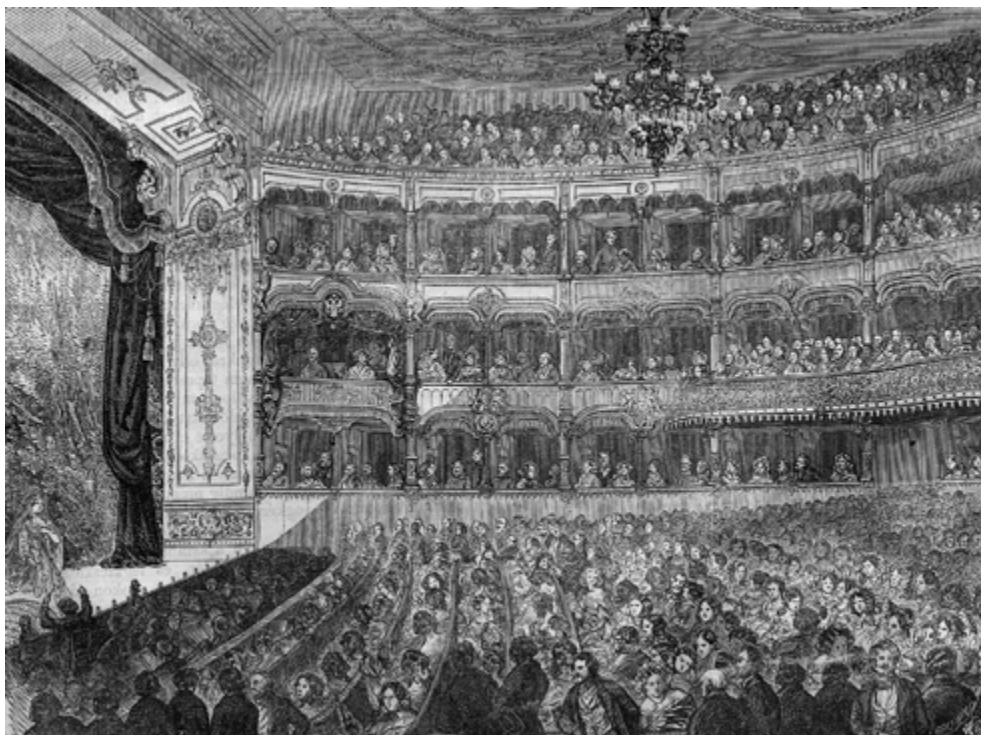
2 "Laborfalvi R. (Mother of Coriolanus) is the most outstanding in this role; in scenes like this, where the respectable Roman matron comes to her son in the camp and speaks more than begs, she is unsurpassable. Miss Róza is the most beautiful stage figure, but only where her role touches upon true grandeur; the direction should appropriately utilize our artist's rare talent only where it is truly required. Miss Róza is mediocre, incapable of elevating roles that are not motivated or pseudo-grand—her strength lies in conveying true goodness.—Thus, the young lady always errs when she applies the tone and gestures with which she earned crowns in grand roles to roles in which there is nothing grand beyond the words—grandeur is not inextricably linked to dark clothing.—Mother Coriolanus... and not to mention, the Marquise d'Auray in Paul Jones, these are two roles that make Miss Róza unforgettable to us.—May the young lady be jealous of these roles. These are not roles with which we do good by sometimes giving them to beginners—otherwise, it happens as it did the other day (in *Angelo*), that beautiful pagan converts come in." (Jókai 1965, 201.)

the outstanding era of the National Theatre. Despite this, it is missing from Mór Jókai's the history of the National Theatre that during the years of absolutism he frequently pointed out that this institution, from its founding, was considered one of the most important political organs. It is no coincidence that his novel *Kárpáthy Zoltán* begins with the celebration of the National Theatre's opening. (The first chapter of the work was published in *Pesti Napló* on 16 May 1854.) And let us not forget Mór Jókai's earlier thoughts, formulated on 28 June 1849, in *Esti Lapok*, according to which the "National Stage is not merely a place of entertainment for the Hungarian nation, but one of its domestic altars, where the people come to sacrifice" (Jókai 1980, 425).

When Count Gedeon Ráday became director of the theatre again in December 1854, Jókai, three weeks later, on 14 January 1855, repeated his former sentences almost verbatim in *Vasárnapi Ujság*: "What is the Pest National Theatre to a Hungarian? Oh, very much! This is not merely a house of entertainment that brings us higher pleasure; it is a temple for us, where the most enduring altars of our nationality burn, a constant school of our civilization, the most certain testament to our existence, a blessed link that binds our elders and our young in interests, desires, and joys." He also declared that "among all the factors that have made Pest a worthy capital of our country, the National Theatre is the most important" (Jókai 1968a, 135).

These thoughts also explain why the situation of Hungarian acting and Hungarian dramatic literature occupied a prominent place in Jókai's journalism, and why he repeatedly attempted theatrical criticism. We have already discussed what role the politicized intelligentsia assigned to the state-subsidized cultural institution during the reform era. The National Theatre—as Jókai's lines demonstrate—was intended to fulfil this role even after the crushed war of independence. However, the theatre could not meet this expectation, as its direction fell into the hands of aristocrats loyal to the Viennese court, who considered their most important task to be—even at the expense of the national drama literature withering away—raising the standard of opera performance and popularizing ballet.

Another important turning point occurred around this time: Mór Jókai's personal connection to the National Theatre changed completely, as in 1848 he married Róza Laborfalvi, the leading actress of the institution, and in 1853 he became a member of the drama judging committee. The writer needed an alter ego; he felt he could not sign his name under his theatre-related publications. The shift took place on 1 June 1856: on this day, the first letter from Márton Kakas,



Picture 2. The auditorium of the National Theatre in 1855 (*Vasárnapi Ujság*, June 24, 1855).

penned by Jókai, appeared in Gusztáv Heckenast's cheaply illustrated popular newspaper, *Vasárnapi Ujság*, founded in 1854, titled "Márton Kakas at the Theatre." The paper's "newly hired" theatre critic introduced himself thus: "My intention is nothing less than to sign on as a permanent theatre correspondent for *Vasárnapi Ujság*. It is true that I have just arrived from the countryside, and yesterday I saw a play for the first time (I cannot say I heard it, as they performed a silent play—likely for the deaf), but another theatre critic has also opened with such an introduction, and I am saying nothing new. I have enough sophistication not to shout at the actress, "Let's see what you can do, young lady!"; nor do I rush onto the stage when someone is about to be killed. The rest I will learn from other newspapers" (Jókai 1968a, 215).

The figure of Márton Kakas proved to be a perfect hit, as he represented the Hungarian countryside in every respect. It was not a classic theatre review that was born from his pen, but the rural readers would not have been

interested in that anyway, as they had not seen the performance. However, many followed with interest what was happening in one of the most important national institutions. Jolán Kádár Pukánszkyne drew attention to the fact that in the 1850s, the social composition of the ground-floor auditorium in the theatre changed. Precisely the group that Márton Kakas represented disappeared from the National Theatre: "The minor nobility, withdrawn from official positions, went to the countryside, and although this class, with its patriarchal social life, was never a first-rate audience for the theatre, its absence was still felt. Its empty place was increasingly occupied by the honoratiors and the increasingly Hungarian bourgeoisie" (Pukánszkyne 1940, 180).

In his first letter, Márton Kakas, Jókai interpreted the National Theatre's "silent play," the five-act ballet *Szerelmes ördög* (The Devil in Love), which premiered on 20 September 1851, and has been performed with unbroken success ever since, in a way that suited the taste of those who stayed away from the theatre for political reasons. The writer ridiculed this type of spectacle, while at the same time noting details that are important sources for the history of Hungarian ballet performance.³

Jókai's literary feat is that he appears in the letters, because he himself is often present in the audience. On the first occasion, he sat next to Márton Kakas as an unfit old gentleman who "grumbled throughout the entire performance" (Jókai 1968a, 218): "...so is this the purpose of the National Theatre, to fill the entire evening with leg-fiddling? What service do such empty spectacles provide for the moral development of the people, the expression of good feelings, and their taste? Yet, these would be the goals of such an institution as the National Theatre of Pest, and not the stimulation of the audience's jaded senses and other such things. I could not silence him; finally, I told him that if he made too much noise, I would hand him over to the ticket collector, and he would not get any more admission tickets.—Did I do well?"

Speaking about the birth of the Márton Kakas figure in 1860, in an article titled "Ki hát az a Kakas Márton?" ("Who is Márton Kakas?") in the newspaper *Üstökös*,

3 "A great lord comes out, takes one step to the right, one to the left, meaning he is looking for his servant. He shakes his leg, which was a ringing: the servant heard it and came in. The lord lifts his left leg: with this, he asks where the coffee is. The servant extends his leg backward, with which he says they won't give coffee at the café until the old bill is paid. The lord then spins with his extended leg like a spindle, which means: but when there is no money-minting institution in the whole world where they would print banknotes for him." (Jókai 1968a, 216.)

Jókai revealed that he detested writing criticism: "...I wonder why in Muscovy, instead of lead mines, mortal sinners are not sentenced to theatre critic trench work" (Jókai 1968b, 332). Perhaps this is why he invented such an entirely unusual way of reporting on theatrical performances. According to István Fried, Jókai thereby introduced a new genre, "he experimented with less academic criticism, ranging from gentler humour to sometimes crasser self-ironic performance to satirising reports, at most approaching the more accustomed, objective tone with the depiction of outstanding actor personalities and guest performers" (Fried 2024, 74). One important characteristic must be added to Fried's brief, insightful footnotes: these letters often inform us about how theatregoers relate to the repertoire. Jókai did not invoke the audience solely for the sake of his humorous presentation; he considered the opinions of viewers to be at least as important as the objections of critics. Not to mention that he brilliantly depicted the types of people who sat in the stalls, boxes, and galleries with a few excellent character sketches.

Jókai Mór wrote his theatre reviews as Kakas Márton for *Vasárnapi Ujság* for five years, from 1856 to 1861, initially on a weekly basis. Later, as letters were also written on other topics, these writings were published under the series title "Kakas Márton levelei" ("Letters of Kakas Márton") in the "Tárház" column by Pákh Albert, the paper's editor-in-chief. If the numbering was not mistaken, a total of one hundred and thirty-five (CXXXV) letters were published. The hundred and thirty-first (CXXXI) was the last one dealing with theatre, on 25 November 1860. Those interested could read Kakas Márton's grumbling one more time on 21 July 1861. He picked up his pen in outrage because a French company was guest-performing Offenbach's works at the National Theatre. He rightly felt that an unprecedented event had occurred, as musical works consisting of waltzes were being staged. Moreover, the composer had mixed French jargon with German lyrics! "What does he know of German words to us?" the critic exclaimed. Then he came up with a solution: "After all, it is high time that productions in a foreign language come to an end on the Hungarian national stage. The country raised this theatre for national purposes; it demands those from it" ([Jókai] 1861, 344).

Several pieces in the series made readers acquainted with Jókai Mór's views on the National Theatre. During the period of absolutism, censorship prevented political issues from being discussed, but it was possible to talk about operas and ballets dominating the theatre's repertoire, while original (i.e., contemporary Hungarian) dramatic works were staged much less frequently. These reviews,

of course, could also remind readers of the ideal state when representatives of the radical intelligentsia, who were enthusiastic about the ideas of the bourgeois revolution, could participate in shaping the repertoire as playwrights, actors, and directors.

Similarly, mentioning the name of Egressy Gábor was considered a political act, as the whole country knew what an important role the actor played in the 1848–1849 revolution and war of independence, and that he was a leading actor and director of the National Theatre from its founding. Jókai, when discussing the performance of Obernyik Károly's *György Brankovics*, praised the actor's performance with rapture, just as he had in 1847. At the same time, emphasising the naivety of Kakas Márton, he jabbed at his fellow critics, who often criticized Egressy: "I don't understand the rules of art; I can only judge what I see and feel. I can only say that I cannot imagine a nobler, more lifelike, more true-to-life character in every movement than Egressy was as the old Serbian prince, and I believe only in the emotion that sounded from his voice, what his face expressed. When he was angry, I trembled; when he cried, I cried with him, and it didn't occur to me that this was acting, that this was art; I thought it was all true; and it seems the audience was of the same opinion as me, because throughout the entire play, there was such unprecedented clapping, such activity of hands, eyes, and handkerchiefs, that if this is not a sign of approval, then I don't know what is?" (Jókai 1968a, 225–226).

As a sign of some weakening of the absolutist regime's power, in the second half of the aforementioned hundred and thirty-first theatre letter in November 1860, Jókai Mór formulated an indictment in defence of Hungarian-language theatre. He exposed that the municipal authorities of Buda and Pest were supporting German actors and striving to push the Hungarian company into the most adverse financial circumstances. He also gave an example of how censorship interfered with the theatre's repertoire: "The performance of foreign plays causing great sensation is permitted on the German stage, but banned on the Hungarian, and they only agree to it when it has been completely worn out there (this happened with *Ravennai viador* [The Warrior of Ravenna], which was held back from the Hungarian stage because the Hungarian audience would understand 'Hungarian' almost everywhere the word appears: 'German,' and instead of 'Roman,' they would understand: 'Austrian')" (Jókai 1965b, 431–432).

Most of Jókai's Kakas Márton reviews naturally dealt with the performance of the staged plays, and there were hardly any of the presented works that

he praised. It is striking that alongside many witty, satirically sharp critiques, he spared the works of some playwrights, such as Ede Szigligeti. True, he remembered the actor and playwright's work, *Mátyás fia* (Son of Matthias), in a somewhat unconventional way on 14 December 1856. He claimed that on the evening of the play's premiere, he had dinner with his fellow critics at Komlókert, and while they wrote serious articles about the premiere, he could only report on the menu: "So, I humbly beg:—since I was there where the others were:—I confess that the first act: the stew meat went down a bit quietly. It was a good idea by the author, by the way, to include gnocchi with it." Then, mentioning all the acts and dishes, he concluded his report: "Here, in good conscience, I have written this review. My report may be the weakest of all, but one thing is certain: it is the truest" (Jókai 1968a, 193).

A few months later, when discussing the premieres of two Szigligeti dramas—*A mama* (*The Mother*; April 17, 1857) and *Béldi Pál* (Pál Béldi; April 27, 1857)—he praised the author (Jókai 1968a, 370–371 and 394–396). Not to mention that he published a lengthy tribute to him in *Vasárnapi Ujság* under the signature Jókai Mór (Jókai 1968a, 367–370). The question of historical authenticity was already one of the central themes of Hungarian literary criticism at that time. Almost all publicists criticised Szigligeti Ede because he "erred in history by portraying Mihály Teleki as a well-intentioned, honourable man" (Jókai 1968a, 395). Jókai's outburst reveals much about this dilemma: "If someone thinks that the stage is for people to learn history, then you can also convince them that people buy calendars because they learn to plough from them!" (Jókai 1968a, 394).

In most of his Kakas Márton writings, Jókai Mór tried to remain faithful to the worldview, anecdotal style, and way of thinking of the feigned author. However, there are some details where there is no trace of parody. The direct style addressed to the editor remains—but the information, arguments, and conclusions of the letter's author are now those of the capital's theatre critic. We could explain this by assuming that Kakas Márton acquired deeper aesthetic knowledge from his learned colleagues, but the following sentences convince us that besides poking fun at theatrical life, Jókai also took care to argue seriously while criticizing phenomena important to him. He did so, for example, when he believed that the task of the theatre management should be to contract actor personalities for the National Theatre, rather than mechanically filling roles: "Because I don't think that the company consists of eight people; and for a theatre, if there is a lover, a hero, a comic, a kind father on the male side, and on the other hand,

a lover, a heroine, a mature lady, and a quirky lady from the crinoline gender, then every category is filled. Indeed, I believe that for every kind of personality—I mean talented personality—there is a corresponding role category on stage” (Jókai 1968a, 509–510).

In contrast, when the National Theatre staged Jr. Alexandre Dumas’s *La Dame aux camélias* under the title *Gauthier Margit* (Margit Gauthier) on 26 November 1855, as a benefit performance for Lilla Bulyovszky, Jókai Mór knew how Hungary, whose mentality Kakas Márton authentically represented on the pages of *Vasárnapi Ujság*, would react to this play. He played with the thought of what would happen if the critic arrived at the theatre with a child of a distant relative: “I thought: they’re giving a tragedy, it can’t hurt him,” he remarked (Jókai 1968a, 277). Then, when it turned out that the heroine of the work was a prostitute and what the story was about, he concluded the letter: “I do not demand that the management not stage similar plays, if such a play suits the taste of today’s audience, but at least they should put on the playbill in similar cases: ‘no admission tickets will be sold to youth under twenty years of age for today’s performance,’ then I will be satisfied” (Jókai 1968a, 278). (The author seemed to already sense that at the beginning of the 20th century—in Debrecen, for example, from 1910 onwards—theatre directors would indicate ‘frivolous plays’ with red playbills.)

In Jókai’s journalism, theatrical writings dried up from 1861 onwards. As the political situation eased, the writer plunged into public life, where theatre matters were relegated to the background for a considerable time. Some of his theatre reviews still appeared, but he considered it much more important to influence public opinion with his articles. In the 1861 parliamentary elections, he became the representative for the town of Siklós and a member of the Resolution Party faction in parliament. This marked the beginning of a new chapter in his life.

Mór Jókai’s work as a theatre critic was viewed with suspicion by posterity and evaluated ambivalently. True, few took the trouble to read his publications in depth. They were content with the quoted anecdote found in recollections of Jókai. Jolán Kádár Pukánszky, on the other hand, completely misinterpreted the writer’s work as a theatre critic. She wrote that he belonged to those critics working in fashion magazines and daily newspapers who ‘increasingly’ got lost in the ‘witty manner,’ of which Saphir Móric Gottlieb was a highly influential master. This style places wit for its own sake before the search for truth and

gradually loses all moral seriousness and all impact: it only offends, but it does not improve" (Pukánszky 1940, 176).

However, Jókai Mór was never offensive, and although his writings about the National Theatre are amusing, their moral seriousness remained.

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Géza Balázs

Jókai's drama of the Hungarian conquest period, *Levente*

“Let the stage be a bit of a podium for a good audience. To learn the history of their ancestors...”¹

Abstract

The five-act dramatic poem *Levente* by Mór Jókai is centred on the death of Árpád's four adult sons in the ethnic clashes of the Hungarian Conquest Period. The work was written to mark the millennium of the Hungarian Landtaking, or Conquest, and although the National Theatre announced its premiere several times in 1898, and even prepared a musical version, it was never performed there or on any other stage. Reading the text from today's perspective, its performance could at best be imagined as a Gesamtkunstwerk of “poetic theatre.” As in all his works, Jókai also indulged in linguistic antiquities. *Levente* thus remained a book drama for those interested in linguistic archaisms. This study also covers the afterlife of the dramatic poem.

Keywords: Mór Jókai, *Levente*, historical dramatic poem, linguistic archaisation, language of the Hungarian Conquest Period, medial transformations

¹ Jókai's letter to Antal Váradi, see Jókai 1987, 390.

Introduction

Mór Jókai wrote *Levente*, a five-act historical dramatic poem, consisting of seven sections, for the National Theatre on the occasion of the Millennium (millennial celebrations) of the Hungarian Landtaking (the Hungarian Conquest of the Carpathian Basin). He intended it to be a synthesis and a retrospective work, crowning his oeuvre. For forty years, he had been carrying within him the idea of a Hungarian *Nibelung*, a romantic vision akin to the world of Wagner's *Ring*. His youthful attempts at painting were awakened. He was the one to inspire the idea for his relative, Árpád Feszty's circular panoramic painting *Arrival of the Hungarians*. According to one opinion, Feszty's *Cyclorama* can be seen as an illustration of *Levente*. Here, Jókai tells the story of the sons of Árpád, the Chieftain, and the conquest of the territory occupied by the Khazars, based on his own research and ideas. The dramatic (ethical) core of the story is the death of Árpád's four adult sons in the context of the ethnic clashes of the Conquest Period, their sacrifice for the sake of the new homeland. But the drama lacks true drama, the "eternal human." *Levente*'s character is not well developed; he is not a true tragic hero, he has done nothing wrong, yet he must die. Jókai also strove to create the illusion of the language of the Conquest Period. As in all his works, he revels in linguistic antiquities. He himself felt the awkwardness of this, so he offered the actors a simplification of the text ("dialect"). Although the National Theatre announced the premiere of *Levente* several times in 1898, and even made a musical version of it, it was never staged there or elsewhere. The dramatic poem, read from today's perspective, could at best be imagined as a performance of a Gesamtkunstwerk of "poetic theatre." Jókai added a lengthy afterword (a kind of explanation, an instruction for interpretation) to the drama, in which—against the Finno-Ugric linguistic theory that was gaining strength at the time—he fervently professed his belief in the Hungarian nature of the Hungarian people and language. He also read this text at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, but his appearance and opinion were not enthusiastically received by the linguists of the time. *Levente* has remained a book drama for those interested in linguistic archaisms, having no reception, no resonance—and probably no readers, either. It is an exciting question, however, how a historical event can be transformed into a painting, prose, dramatic poem and musical theatre.

Jókai as a playwright

When one turns to Jókai's dramas, the question inevitably arises: Jókai as a playwright? After all, no one knows him for that. There is hardly anyone who knows a single drama by Jókai. How is it that he was also popular as a playwright in his own time, working for the theatre throughout his writing career? His most successful play, *Az arany ember* (*The Man with the Golden Touch*), was performed by the National Theatre two hundred and fifty-two times between 1884 and 1937 (Szalisznyó 2023, 69) but has since been withdrawn from the stages. Jenő Pintér had already given the answer in 1934: "As a playwright, he did not create long-lived works. In his time, he rendered a valuable service to the developing Hungarian stage, but later he was relegated from the prominent position to which he had been elevated by the dramaturgs and theatre-goers of the era of authoritarianism and the Austro-Hungarian Compromise. His playwriting was romantic dramatic art, presenting life with the exaggerations of imagination" (Pintér 1934). Perhaps the only one on stage is *A cigánybáró* (*The Gypsy Baron*) (Jr. Johann Strauss's operetta, written by Ignaz Schnitzer based on Jókai's short story *Szaffi*, although very few people associate it with Jókai (Zentai 2023). "Research on Jókai still owes us a systematic inventory of theatrical, musical, musical theatre, film, cartoon, comic and hybrid adaptations, as well as an assessment of how these transpositions and medial transfers have influenced the evaluation and interpretation of the texts" (ibid., 8). The inventory is complicated by the fact that the second volume of the dramas (1861–1887) was never published (for the others, see: Jókai 1971; 1974; 1987). Jókai's career as a playwright began at the age of seventeen with *A zsidó fiú* (*The Jewish Boy*), a five-act romantic historical drama, and continued until *Levente*. According to the calculations of József Perényi (1926), he wrote twenty-six plays, but there are more than that, and there is no precise list. Historical plays: *A zsidó fiú* (revised version: *A kincstárnok* [The Treasurer]), *A varchoniták* (*The Varchonites*), *Manlius Sinister*, *Könyves Kálmán* (Coloman, the Learned), *Dózsa György* (György Dózsa), *A szigetvári vértanúk* (*The Martyrs of Szigetvár*), *Milton*, *Az aradi hős nők* (*The Heroic Women of Arad*), *A murányi hölgy* (*The Lady of Murány*), and *Levente*. His dramatised works from short stories and novels: *Dalma*, *Szép Mihál* (*Beautiful Michal*), *Az arany ember*, *Fekete gyémántok* (*Black Diamonds*), *A bolondok grófja* (*The Count of Fools*), *Keresd a szíved* (*Search Your Heart*), *Fekete vér* (*Black Blood*) and *Helvila*. Folk theatre works: *A két gyám* (*The Two*

Guardians), *A földönfutó* (The Runaway), *Világszép leányok* (Beautiful Girls). Plays written for occasions: *Hős Pálffy* (Heroic Pálffy), *A jószívű ember* (The Good-hearted Man), *Olympi verseny* (Olympian Race), *Thespis kordéja* (Thespis's Cart), *Földönjáró csillagok* (Stars Walking on Earth), *Harangok* (Bells). Social drama: *A hulla férje* (The husband of the corpse). Of course, there are more dramas, such as *A gazdag szegények* (The Rich Poor) and *A Barangok, vagy a peoniai vojvoda* (The Barangs, or The Peonial Voivode), but in addition to these, there were other plays (*Alina*, *Immetullah*, *Keresd a szíved*) and plays written after *Levente* (*Helvila*, *Melyiket a kilenc közül?* [Which of the Nine?], *Fekete vér*). "Why did these dramatisations fail? The answer to this question is that because characterisation and justification are Jókai's weakest points, even though these are the fundamentals on which the essence of drama is based. By dramatising, Jókai in fact ruins his novels. The brightest parts of his novels become void in the dramas. Of all his dramatised novels, only one, *Az arany ember*, remained on stage, the others... were taken off the programme after a few performances" (Perényi 1926, 74). But then why did some of them succeed in their own time?

"He spoke in a voice that always found its way to the hearts of his listeners... At that time, the National Theatre was in fact the only place where the national spirit, the national life, could find expression. In those bleak and sad times, Jókai, together with a few others, revived national sentiment and nourished the national spirit with his dramas as well as his novels... The audience of that time did not just want to be entertained, but rather to be inspired and to draw hope. In fact, historical dramas encouraged, inspired and taught. The National Theatre became the true school of the nation, with playwrights and actors as master-teachers, whose words of comfort and encouragement were eagerly awaited. In the 1850s, no one could write more magnificently, captivatingly, and with greater suggestive power to the hearts of the Hungarian audience than Jókai. His eloquent poems could be recited effectively, and at the same time no one could recite as beautifully as Jókai's wife, Róza Laborfalvi. Jókai's dramas were valuable in their time." (Perényi 1926, 75–76.)

Such was the inciting drama, *Dózsa György*, which was presented by the National Theatre on 3 November 1857, to overwhelming success, with packed houses and thunderous applause greeting Dózsa's words at the beginning and end

of the play. A further sign of success is that Ferenc Erkel composed his opera about Dózsa, which was staged in 1867, based on Jókai's drama (to a libretto by Szigligeti). Despite this, others also believe that Jókai's "dramatic talent is undoubtedly weak" (Nemeskürty 1983, 536). So does a summary of the literary history of the sixties: "Drama was not a genre suited to Jókai's talent, and his loud stage successes (e.g. *A szigetvári vértanúk*, 1860) were soon forgotten, but his initiatives and diversity nevertheless had an impact on his contemporaries, especially on Szigligeti" (N., M. 1965, 4/294).

With regard to *Levente*, it is objected that although the title is *Levente*, he is not the central character in the drama, his character is not well developed, he has done nothing wrong and yet, he must die (JÖM 1987, 407, 409); "the hero falls in a petty love complication." "The reading of the play is tiresome, because of its far-fetched antiquity... The whole work is overcrowded, it is full of poetry, and the story of the Hungarian Conquest is shrouded in a rosy cloud of fairy tales" (Perényi 1926, 74). Along with others, Ferenc Zsigmond (1924, 322) notes: Jókai can never portray a complex character correctly. The author of the JÖM study, Edit Mályuszné Császár, notes that *Levente* is "a work refined into a book drama," "a nice book drama, possibly a good film script" (JÖM 1987, 394).

The plot of *Levente*

Levente is set in the time of the Hungarian Conquest. The main players are: Grand Prince Árpád ("Lord of Hungary"), Regehű (wife), sons: Levente (twenty-five years old), Jellek (twenty-three years old), Jutócs (twenty-one years old), Tarkóc (eighteen years old), Zsolt (four years old), Jahel (Jellek's wife), Ménmarót csakán (the Khazar Grand Prince, Lord of Bihar County), his son: Csombord and five daughters: Búvellő, Illangó, Szemőke, Délibáb, and Estilla (four years old); then there is Göncöl (Árpád's kincsur [treasurer]), Táltos [shaman], Halvaél (the daughter of the táltos); Árpád's six chieftains: Tas, Szabolcs, Gyula, Kund, Örs, Töhötöm; son of Tas: Chieftain Lehel, three Székely rabonbáns: Upolet, Apor, Ugron; six Hungarian lieutenants: Tana, Zila, Tahó, Kerencs, Sudár, Dancs; Kund (Kuman envoy), Tarcál (plain envoy), Privina (Svatopluk's envoy), Főbokolábrás (in Marót's court); Kurut (Marót's clown) and two Karsar guards: Bagó and Cikás.

It is already clear from the list that the large cast of characters includes special titles and names that were not even known at that time: csakán, kincsur, főbokolábrás, rabonbán; followed by a list of people with occupations that are

sometimes difficult to decipher: Khazar őrpata, geisa, cifra, legyezős, tömlős, igreces, bokolábrás, garabonc, lyüki, paszkonca, horkáz, billogos, gyászleány, etc. Four daughters of Ménrót: alirumna. Alirumnas are magical women among the Huns, here they are evil fairies. Jókai read about them in Arnold Ipolyi's *Magyar mythologia* (Hungarian Mythology), and Ipolyi in Jordanes' *Getica*. In the Hungarian translation of *Getica*, their name is haliurunna (zegernyei 2015). In addition to the unusual names, the drama contains more than a hundred special words, which Jókai explains in two hundred and twenty-six footnotes (JÖM 1987, 417–468).

The basic idea of the drama stems from the probably erroneous assumption that Árpád's four sons did not live to see the Hungarian Conquest, only the fifth son Zsolt, born in the Carpathian Basin.

Act One: In the northern Carpathians (beyond Verecke). Halvael, the daughter of the *táltos* (who has a speaking name ['live dead']), foretells the death of the four sons of Árpád.

ÁRPÁD Who can understand this? If all four of my sons
Fall victim in the battle to conquer the homeland,
How can a long line of country leaders
Descended from my blood follow in my footsteps?

Jahel (Jellek's Jewish wife) doesn't believe the prophecy, but Jellek's body is already being brought in.

Act Two: Munkács. Hungarians arrive in the new homeland.

LEVENTE Well, father Gönczöl, now it's your turn to speak.
Break camp, get the people moving,
Buglers, blow the horn.
Let the mountains proclaim to the plains,
Now Hungarians descend into their ancient inheritance. (W1)

Act Three ("historical illustration"): The plain below Ungvár. The settlement. Árpád makes a blood oath with the seven chieftains, the Slavs, the Huns, living here since the time of Attila, and the Seklers pay homage, and the fifth son, Zsolt, is born.

ÁRPÁD Gönczöl, my friend, now take your reed pen
And then write that the seven Hungarians
Had restamped the old covenant
In their new homeland, with their mingled blood. (W1)

Act Four (the climax of the drama): Biharland: Marót's castle. Two of Árpád's prince sons, Levente and the boyish Tarkóc, go to the dirty, untidy and immoral court of the Khazar Prince Marót. Levente asks Délibáb to marry him. Levente and Marót's son, Csombord, get into a fight. Illangó poisons Tarkóc, who strangles the girl during sex.

LEVENTE (Lifts Tarkócz onto his arms.)
My dear little one, my loving beautiful brother!
I curse the day I brought you here,
How do I account for you to our dear mother?
But for your corrupted innocent soul
I will take strong revenge! I swear to God! From this skull castle. (W1)

Levente and Délibáb leave Marót's castle in a hurry.

Act Five: Bihar Castle. Árpád and his leaders continue the Conquest, Levente lives with his wife in Bihar Castle, his task (besides hunting) is to reconcile the Khazar people. Jahel brings news: Marót supports Árpád's opponents, Szemőke's daughter assassinated the third Árpád-offspring, Jutócs in a battle. Marót is an old man, Levente duels with Csombord. Levente kills his brother-in-law (who is protected by Solomon's magic ring), and the mourning Bűvellő wounds Levente with a poisoned dagger. Levente and Délibáb, who sucked out his wound, die.

LEVENTE And then the faithful maidens
Cover our graves with walnut leaves,
Raising a large mound, with flowery lawn,
"Tell my mother she was my last word."
[...]

JAHEL (Lamenting.)

Terrible homeland! How many more sacrifices

Do you demand from us, of the noblest blood? (W1)

Act Five ("historical illustration"): Alpár plain, meandering Tisza. Levente and Délibáb are buried according to pagan rites. The broken, blind Marót appears at the funeral feast (on a camel's back). He brings his sixth and last child, Estilla, and offers her and Biharland to Árpád's fifth son, Zsolt. In the conclusion, they ask God's blessing on the Hungarian people and their new homeland. In the first version Jahl, in the last Jahl and Árpád say the solemn final words:

JAHEL Curses were my daily prayer!

There were curses at dawn and at dusk.

But now they have turned into blessings. Jehovah is a great God!

Bless this land, this nation!

ÁRPÁD God of Hungarians! Whom we see everywhere,

In heaven, in earth, in water, in the works of your hands,

Pour out your soul on this nation!

May it flourish for centuries upon centuries,

Whenever it falls, lift it up again.

Protect it from its enemy, protect it from itself!

Cover it with your heaven, enrich its earth!

Immortalise the glorious tribe of Árpád upon it.

As long as the world is the world, as long as Hungarians are Hungarians,

May you reign over it for all eternity. (W1)

Of all the quirky, mysterious twists and turns characteristic of Jókai, the Ring of Solomon is the one that heightens the tension the most. Jahl gives the ring to her husband, Jutocs, to make him invulnerable:

JAHEL My husband, Jellek, will not be taken by a weapon.

I gave him a talisman in a ring,

Left to me by my great-grandfather, Eliezer.

It bears the seal of the wise king, Solomon,

Whose name is engraved in clear stone.
He who wears it becomes invulnerable.

Jutocs is killed anyway. How could it happen? Jutocs cheated on his wife with Marót's eldest daughter, Bűvellő, and gave her the ring, leaving himself unprotected, so Bűvellő was able to kill him. (The same Bűvellő is also the lover of her brother, Csombord.)

LEHEL ...by the time the moon had risen,
The charm ring was on Bűvellő's finger,
And her ring on Jellek's finger.
[...]

JAHEL She who killed my husband, first took him from me,
Charmed the talisman ring off his finger,
Then lulled him to sleep in her lap and killed him...

Délibáb also tells the story of the journey of the ring:

DÉLIBÁB You gave a charm ring to your Jellek,
Which made his body iron-clad in battle.
[...]

Jahe!l, it would have been better,
If, instead of his outer body,
You had made his heart invulnerable

JAHEL And where is my ring that was taken from him?

DÉLIBÁB My sister took it home for her sweetheart. [That is, Bűvellő took it home to her lover: Csombord.]

JAHEL He is your brother!
How could he be your sister's sweetheart?

DÉLIBÁB He is not her brother, as he was born to a different mother.
It's the custom among the Khalil people,

To only recognise a sibling by the mother.
The mother is certain: what is there to know about others?

JAHEL Are your religion, your customs sinful, a den of iniquity?
You are God-deniers, incestuous,
Marót csakán himself and all of his offspring!

So Bűvellő gives the ring to Csombord, who is now also protected. Levente can kill him by pushing him off the top of the bastion.

LEVENTE But I will not kill you with your own gun.
[...]
But, my dear brother-in-law, Csombord, you'll die!
(He grabs his shield in both hands, rushes towards Csombord and pushes him off the top of the bastion.)

Levente is also killed by Bűvellő with a poisoned dagger:

DÉLIBÁB (Screams.) She stabbed Levente with a dagger of deadly poison. (W1)

Sources and language

In the drama, Jókai wanted to convey the language of the Conquest Period (9th–10th centuries). As there are no recorded Hungarian texts from this period, he turned to historical sources, mythological, ethnographic and linguistic works, as well as dialects. The critical edition has accurately reconstructed the sources he relied on (to which the author himself referred in the footnotes. Arnold Ipolyi's *Magyar mythologia* (1845) was a favourite reading of his, and he used the chronicles of Anonymus and Kézai, Mihály Horváth's historical work, Balázs Orbán's *Székelyföld* (Székely Land), *Csíki Székely Krónika* (Székely Chronicle of Csík; 1533?), Sámuel Diószeghy's *Magyar fűvész könyv* (Hungarian Herbarium), and dictionaries: Szinnyei's dictionary of dialects and Czuczor–Fogarasi dictionary, as well as the material from the witch trials.

This kind of archaic language creation is always anachronistic and generally unproductive, but it remains the subject of eternal stylistic debates: how historically accurate should a reconstruction of historical events be, especially

when we have no certain knowledge of the events and circumstances? When it comes to linguistic-stylistic assessment, it is customary to say that “signalling” is appropriate. Jókai did the same: he used archaic (partly dialectal) words and expressions to describe, or rather to give a sense of the fictitious, “Árpád-era” language. This is considered by some to be an exaggeration and a “contrived antiquity” (JÖM 1987, 410), but Jókai’s fans are happy to immerse themselves in this sea of language. Linguistically archaising storytelling continues to appear Hungarian literature later (and usually provokes controversy), as seen in the historical novels of Géza Gárdonyi, János Kodolányi, and Zsigmond Móricz.

Some examples of *Levente*’s sometimes truly excessive archaising ambitions:

TARKÓCZ But look, the storm is blowing after her,
The dancing wind bride! Look how it spools!
Her skirt sweeps the ground, her tousled head
Scatters clouds. Isn’t that the wind mother?

APOR Foreign gods do not roam among us.

GÖNCZÖL I’d rather have him among us
That Tarkócz kid, rather than him showing off over there
Among the alirumna [enchanted women]! Those are murmuring [‘dauzsolnak’]
[perhaps susurrating; charming, enchanting],
They give kanatir [love potion] to an enchanted [corrupted] lad,
They bewitch [‘ábrálnak’] [curse] with their eyes, they whisper [‘vahorásznak’]
with their words [perhaps chuckle, cast a spell].

KURUT Well then, brave Hungarian, now you may feast your eyes.
At home you never see such derendóczia [strife].
Lest you see when the geishas [fairies],
Let them do the lapoczkás [dance], who then pull
The kolcz [yarn] from the firogon [flax] on the distaff... (W1)

The name Estilla in the drama was coined by Mór Jókai after Esztella and is a first name that can be used today. Further examples of the revival of ancient Hungarian names:

TIVATULUS The great hero Levente bids you farewell,
 Leaders, lieutenants, comrades in arms,
 Botond, Zoárd, Bulcsú, Csák, Bór, Ugod, Csaba,
 Zombor, Csanád, Keve, Opopofarkas, Ogmánd,
 Kulpon, Bojta, Ösöb, Uzubu, Kadisa. (W1)

The dramatic text contains archaic folk poetry inserts: magic words ("Fog before me, fog behind me," "I flew flying," "I ran the plain running," "I walked with magic reins," "My steed is a red tomcat"), children's songs, Whitsun songs, greetings, and food rhymes. Proverbs and sayings appear in the text: "slowly with the body"; "we borrowed a cat in a bag"; "we have stars kicked" (straw is put between a sleeping person's toes and lit); "breaking fists" ("arm wrestling"); "I hear kisses clapping"; "two strong brothers don't kill but hug"; "the country of seven waters and seven forests", "seven mountains" (Transylvania); "The woman is like mother-of-pearl, if she breaks, there will be another." An apt example of the accumulation of sayings and proverbs from Act One:

TÁLTOS God kept three things for himself:
 The choice of a leader, the birth of a son
 And the triumph to be granted in war.
 If you ask first, he will answer later.

TAS Man's intentions are blessed by a happy God.

SZABOLCS Where God guards, a cobweb protects.

GYULA What God gives, man takes.

KUND God is slow to come, but sure to come.

ÓRS There is no bargaining about God's word.

TÖHÖTÖM Whom God forsaketh, his hope faileth.

VÉRBULCSÚ God can create a man out of dust. (W1)

But above all, it is full of archaic words: "kurittuló" (wanderer), "kerteskő" ("garden stone"; altar), "berzsenytűz" (watchfire), "dinka" ("melon"), "napkő" (sunstone; "diamond"), "hajnalkacagás" (dawn's laughter; "dawn's awakening"), "tyúkverő" (hen-pecking; "end of the wedding"), "szemere" (clever), "koponyavár" (skull castle; "hell"), "alanyár" (gentle), "égedelembeszéd" (swearing), "bibola" (a lock of hair), "abrakcipó" (oat bread), "bábfogat" (pretzel), "bélemler" (a man who eats a lot), "dandalló" (strong, muscular), "derendócia" (discord, feud), "monnó" (both—a word known from *Jókai Codex*). There is a *Jókai Dictionary* (JókSz. 1990), but it does not include the vocabulary of *Levente*.

At times, Jókai's linguistic endeavours were indeed far-fetched. Literary scholars and linguists generally criticise his use of language. Linguist and style specialist Zoltán Szabó is the least critical: "The romantic cult of words is immediately apparent. He delights in unusual and beautiful words. He is not even bothered by the fact that they are not authentic [...]. His use of words is often exaggerated [...]. Contrast is characteristic [...]. The true power of contrasting meanings and contrasting word sounds is best conveyed by his talking names and the strongly contrasting characters" (Szabó 1999, 146–147). The linguist-literary historian Vilmos Tolnai attributes the failure of *Levente* to an exaggerated archaising linguistic endeavour: "He had a special concern to restore not only the original Hungarian mentality in *Levente*, but also the language. He seeks to use ancient words" (Tolnai 1925, 93); "These 'antiquities' are mainly due to Ipolyi's mythology, which is one of Jókai's most enduring and favourite readings" (Tolnai 1925, 90); "rumour has it that *Levente* was not performed on stage because the actors could not learn the strange words" (Tolnai 1925, 90).

Jókai justified his linguistic ambition in the afterword to *Levente*:

"The excellent characteristics of the Hungarian language, its richness in expressions, the adaptability of its words, and the accuracy with which it expresses meaning are the qualities that inspired the conviction in the minds of my fellow poets who were born in the same era, led by Petőfi, János Arany, who believed that the Hungarian vernacular, with its simple, understandable, and powerful expressions, could and indeed should be elevated to the language of literature and poetry, and that its rules should be accepted and applied, to express even the most sublime ideas in simplicity (which is not to be confused with the vulgarisation of literary language),

and at the same time to eliminate all foreign expressions, sentence structures, and even ways of thinking from Hungarian writing, and to especially seek Hungarian humour, in which the Hungarian vernacular, folk life, and spirit are so richly endowed, and to continue on the path trodden before us by Gvadányi, Csokonai, Vörösmarty, Károly Kisfaludy, and Fazekas. —Perhaps we have achieved some success with this.” (W1)

The afterlife of *Levente*

Jókai submitted his dramatic poem *Levente* to the National Theatre in November 1897. It was announced in the press that it would be presented on 15 March 1898, then the presentation was postponed to 11 April, but it did not take place then, nor has it since. Jókai published his work in book form in 1898, and on 31 October 1898, he read the afterword at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, which provoked the displeasure of contemporary linguists, as it openly contradicted the Finno-Ugric language family theory that was gaining strength at the time. But the primary problem with the drama was its length and the large number of archaic linguistic expressions it contained. Jókai allowed the prologue to be deleted and the hundred or so old words to be replaced with “present currency” (JÖM 1987, 391). The revision was completed, the production of the director’s copy began, but for some reason the work was halted (JÖM 1987, 392). However, a musical version of *Levente* was also completed, which can be found in the theatre history collection of the Theatre History and Music Archive of the National Széchényi Library (Jókai n. d.) Jókai himself did not have enough confidence in the success of his dramas. He wrote in a letter addressed to Ignác Krecsányi on 8 September 1896: “I no longer have any confidence in my plays” (JÖM 1897, 383).

The afterword to the drama is part of the afterlife of *Levente*. This longer study (JÖM 1987: 156–178) is an abridged version of Jókai’s text written for a series presenting the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. On 31 October 1898, Mór Jókai read his essay *Mik voltak a magyarok ezer év előtt* (What were the Hungarians a thousand years ago) at MTA. According to the *Vasárnapi Ujság*, “the national theatre is preparing for the poet’s historical play ‘Levente.’ He wrote an afterword to this [...]. He read it at the academy.” The *Budapesti Szemle* responded with a five-page angry review. According to the list of the audience, the author could have been József Szinnyi, Zsigmond Simonyi or Bernát Munkácsi. The afterword contains

statements such as the language of Hungarians has always been Hungarian, and the Hungarian language has no relatives. Jókai first takes a stand against Turkish (language) kinship: "I find it impossible that the Hungarians could have spoken Turkish at the time of Árpád's Conquest." Then against the Finno-Ugric linguistic affinity: "But I find no basis for the arguments put forward by the opponents of Turkish linguistic affinity, the Finno-Ugric linguists either. [...] The inflection itself, the convergence of grammatical rules, does not prove this. Just as little does the often very forced semantic similarity of certain words in the Finnish, Vogul, Ostyak, Votyak, Zyrian, Chuvash, and Cheremis languages with Hungarian words. [...] But I do not deny my poor brothers, and if the infallible scientific world classifies us as one family of peoples, I accept the kinship, but I firmly assert that there is no identical origin between the Hungarian and Finno-Ugric languages, nor has there ever been." After rejecting the Finno-Ugric language family theory, Jókai goes on to demonstrate the extraordinary phenomena of the Hungarian language: the distinction between short and long vowels, the conjugation of "-ik" verbs, and the avoidance of consonant clusters, highlighting children's language and illustrating the unique synonymy of the Hungarian language by using words describing movement. He discusses the greatness of the Hungarian character, the lifestyle of our ancestors, and the glorious battles surrounding the Hungarian Conquest. The *Budapesti Szemle's* critic responds harshly to the writer: "Jókai is the darling of the public and the newspapers, and he believes that he can do whatever he wants. We can understand him exercising this privilege in his novels more than once, but we cannot understand him acting as a judge in a matter about which he is completely uninformed. This reading promises to be the afterword to a drama. Whether this drama will be a success, whether it will be better than Jókai's previous dramas, we do not know, but we would have wished that he had not given this reading; or once he had, painfully, given it, we would at least ask him not to print it" (zegernyei 2015).

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Csaba Galántai

Adaptations of Jókai's novels in the 1910s

Sándor Hevesi's premieres
at the Magyar Theatre

Abstract

This study explores the circumstances surrounding the premieres of Jókai's novels *Az új földesúr* (The New Landlord), *Egy magyar nábob* (A Hungarian Nabob), *Kárpáthy Zoltán* (Zoltán Kárpáthy), *A kőszívű ember fiai* (The Baron's Sons), which were adapted for the stage by Sándor Hevesi and performed at the Magyar Theatre in the 1910s, as well as the critical reception of those performances. In preparation for the management of the Magyar Theatre, László Beöthy announced a triple playwriting competition for which entries were expected from adaptations of Ferenc Herczeg's *Szíriusz* (Sirius), Kálmán Mikszáth's novel *Szent Péter esernyője* (St. Peter's Umbrella), and Jókai's *Az új földesúr*. Hevesi entered the contest with his stage adaptation of *Az új földesúr*, and although it was judged the best, his winning work was not premiered until six years later. And because the audience then received the play with enthusiasm and love, the author began dramatising other works by Jókai, and thus four novels by the romantic writer-prince were staged at the Magyar Theatre between 1913 and 1918.

Keywords: competition prize, playwriting competition, Magyar Theatre, László Beöthy, Sándor Hevesi, Mór Jókai, *Az új földesúr*, *Egy magyar nábob*, *Kárpáthy Zoltán*, *A kőszívű ember fiai*

László Beöthy, who, in addition to managing the Király Theatre, took over the administration of the Magyar Theatre in the autumn of 1907, had already announced a triple playwriting competition in the autumn of the previous year with a view to enriching the repertoire of his future theatre. The competition called for the writing of a play based on Ferenc Herczeg's short story, *Szíriusz*, Kálmán Mikszáth's novel, *Szent Péter esernyője*, and Mór Jókai's novel, *Az új földesúr*. The competition organiser only had one comment: operetta or musical play scripts were excluded from the competition, indicating that the Király Theatre would not be staging the play. A great number of entries were received, seventy-two in total. Thirty-three entries were submitted for *Szent Péter esernyője*, twenty-eight for *Az új földesúr* and sixteen for *Szíriusz*. The committee originally appointed to evaluate the entries underwent some changes¹ and consisted of the following members: László Beöthy, Ferenc Herczeg, Ernő Salgó, Samu Fényes, Béla Vágó, Imre Szirmai and György Szemere. The professional jury judged the submitted works primarily from the perspective of staging, as the theatre planned to present the best ones. Although the promised prize of two thousand koronas for the best entries was not awarded, the committee members felt that each of the three competitions yielded a work that, due to its significantly-higher-than-average quality, was worth staging with certain changes and dramaturgical interventions. László Beöthy finally decided that the theatre would present the three best works, and if the audience responded favourably to them, the authors would receive the prize money. Among the adaptations of Jókai's novels, the highest quality was that of Sándor Hevesi, while the committee awarded the prize for the comedy written by Imre Földes, based on Ferenc Herczeg's short story *Szíriusz*. Among the adaptations of *Szent Péter esernyője*, it was Ferenc Martos's work that won Beöthy's committee's favour. The director started the season with the latter. Kálmán Mikszáth, who was not fond of the theatre, was not particularly pleased that the Magyar Theatre company was staging his *Szent Péter esernyője*. He did not like the fact that his favourite character in the novel, the inconsiderate Gregorics, had been removed from the play, and he also found it strange that the author of the play did not include his own name in the programme. Ferenc Martos was known to the audience of László Beöthy's other theatre, the Király Theatre, as the author

¹ The members of the jury named in the first round were: László Beöthy, Ferenc Herczeg, Károly Bakonyi, József Márkus, Dr. Ernő Salgó, Béla Vágó, and Ákos Ráthonyi. *Budapesti Hírlap*, September 25, 1906, 13.

of librettos for successful Huszka operas (*Bob herceg* [*Prince Bob*], *Aranyvirág* [Golden Flower], *Gül baba*). Martos may not have been confident of the success of the adaptation of Mikszáth's work and felt that it might harm his career as a librettist if his name appeared on the programme for a contest with an uncertain outcome. But it could also be that Beöthy wanted it that way. In any case, the play was not a success. Although all three entries were scheduled to be performed during the 1907/1908 theatre season, the company of the Magyar Theatre did not perform the other commendable entry, the adaptation of Herczeg's *Szíriusz*, until the beginning of the following season, on October 9, and the adaptation titled *Az új földesúr* was not performed until six years later.

Let us see what could have been the reason for these delays. László Beöthy had an excellent eye for talent, recognising which actors and actresses could make his theatre popular and profitable, and he was willing to take risks with young writers he considered talented. One such author was Imre Földes, whose play *A császár katonái* (The Emperor's Soldiers) had been sitting in Beöthy's desk drawer for months. Although the theatre director recognised the value of the work, as the head of the Király Theatre, he could not stage a prose work in the operetta theatre. However, after taking over the management of the Magyar Theatre, he presented *A császár katonái* to the public on 15 February 1908, while postponing the production of Imre Földes's new play, *Szíriusz*, written for the competition, until the beginning of the following season.

In *A császár katonái*, the author professed his belief in the Hungarian national ideals and the efforts to establish an independent Hungarian army. The patriotic production, which strengthened national sentiment, became one of the theatre's most successful plays within a few months. By the time Herczeg's work was premiered, the young author had already been through a series of highly successful performances that attracted large audiences. The 1907/1908 season saw sixty-one performances of Földes's drama, and a further forty-one performances by August 1910.² Beöthy could now hope that the young writer's competition play would also attract audiences. But *Szíriusz* was not nearly as successful. Perhaps it was precisely because of the lack of interest in the two winning entries that the third, an adaptation of Jókai's work, was ultimately postponed.

2 "The most loyal spectator of *A császár katonái* was Mari Jászai, who proclaimed that she had never seen such a good performance on the Hungarian stage." (Kellér 1964, 238.)

Regarding the postponement of the premiere of *Az új földesúr*, Hevesi recalled in a statement made a decade later that Beöthy was afraid to stage Jókai's novel, and even six years later, it was only through his persuasion that the work was finally staged.³ If Hevesi is right, the director was actually afraid of the theatrical failure of Jókai,⁴ a writer who was highly esteemed by László Beöthy and his family. What could have been in favour of the presentation was the fact that there had been commemorations shortly before on the occasion of the eightieth anniversary of the writer's birth, and the fact that *Az új földesúr* was republished at the end of 1905. In any case, the work was included in the planned theatre season of the Magyar Theatre for 1909/1910. The researcher suspects that there may have been personal reasons behind this decision. When Beöthy took over the Magyar Theatre, he lured several actors away from the Thália Company. This is how Jenő Törzs, Márton Garas, Rózsi Forrai, and after a short detour, Giza Báthory joined his theatre. The future of the Thália was extremely uncertain anyway, and Hevesi, as the *spiritus rector* of the company, did not look with approval on Beöthy's activities in this regard. As is evident from his letter to Lajos Fülep, he did not think much of the Magyar Theatre's programme: "The Thália was almost frozen out by its many enemies. Fortunately, we will still be able to open next week: with Ibsen's *Ghosts*. It is about time—terrible conditions. Beöthy [wants] dramatic theatre: with László Márkus, Viennese obscenities, Sudermann and Rostand. That is literature for him."⁵

Hevesi's indignation is somewhat interpreted by another letter written a year and a half earlier by László Bánóczi to György Lukács (see Török 1988, 116): "You probably know about Beöthy's plan. In the autumn of 1907, he takes over the Magy[ar] Th[eatre] and is going to turn it into a 'literary theatre.' He has not yet negotiated with Hevesi, and he does not think he will. I told him to recommend R[ózsi] F[orgács] to Beöthy."

It can be assumed that Hevesi did indeed expect to play some kind of role at the Magyar Theatre, since it was Beöthy who launched Hevesi's career as a director when he hired him for the National Theatre in 1901.⁶

3 *Magyar Szinpad*, September 24, 1917, 2.

4 László's father, Zsolt Beöthy, was influenced by Jókai in his early writing career, wrote a study of his work, and, as president of the Kisfaludy Society, bid him farewell at the great writer's funeral.

5 Sándor Hevesi to Lajos Fülep, Budapest, December 9, 1907, see Fülep 1990, 93.

6 I have already mentioned this idea in an earlier work, see Galántai 2018, 47–48.

Finally, the premiere of *Az új földesúr* took place on 6 September 1913. Even after a delay of six years, the director did not forget to indicate under the title that the play had been recommended for a prize in László Beöthy's drama competition. Jenő Törzs played the title role, General Ankerschmidt, Ilona Cs. Aczél played the General's eldest daughter, Hermine. Other actors included Béla Vágó, Rózsi Forrai, Mici Haraszti, Mihály Papp and Ernő Tarnay. Mihály Kertész, the film director who later became world famous in America, portrayed Straff, the fake Petőfi. The director and designer of the production was László Márkus, who by then had become a major theatre professional, having directed *L'Aiglon*, *Hamlet*, *Faust*, as well as works by G. B. Shaw, Oscar Wilde and Hungarian authors, including Lajos Bíró's *Sárga liliom* (The Yellow Lily). He was the first to stage Miklós Bánffy's drama *A Nagyúr* (The Great Lord) in Hungary.

Hevesi spoke highly of Jókai, and was rather modest about his own work as a writer:

"*Az új földesúr* is so human, so direct, and with all its colour and warmth, so realistic and psychologically constructed, that when it came to adapting it for the stage, it never occurred to me to rework, reshape, or recast Mór Jókai. I was convinced that, despite all tradition and custom, art and reverence coincided completely on this point, and I could do nothing smarter than to extract or copy the play from Jókai's beautiful novel. There is not a single scene in the dramatized version of *Az új földesúr* that is not taken from Jókai's novel, and wherever I had to add dialogue, I used Jókai's words and sentences. My work was therefore entirely mechanical and scenic, without any literary affectations or pretensions. If Jókai's classic novel appeals to the audience in this form, I have no part in it, because what happens is that the great novelist's magic power has not diminished on stage. But if the audience did not like the dramatised version of *Az új földesúr*, it would be my fault, because in that case it would mean that I was unable to convey Jókai's values on stage."⁷

Jenő Törzs spoke about the possibilities of portraying his role, about how he would like to show the Hungarianisation of Ankerschmidt's character:

⁷ *Magyar Szinpad*, September 6, 1913, 2.

"My tools on stage are words and voice. So, I use these two props to make my Ankerschmidt Hungarian. I speak in a German accent. This is a concession that I am forced to use. In fact, Ankerschmidt's environment is exclusively German and speaks German. In the play, every word spoken by the Ankerschmidt family and their environment is German. If I speak Hungarian correctly, it means that I spoke German correctly. But when the general stands opposite the bailiff, Mr. Kampós, who offers his reapers in rich Hungarian, how can the Ritter's German identity be made apparent in this discourse other than through his German speech? If both of them speak good Hungarian, which of the two is the one who is becoming Hungarianised..."⁸

Some critics considered Jenő Törzs, who was in his mid-twenties, too young for the role. "Törzs played General Ankerschmidt, a rough old officer. However talented an actor Törzs may be, and however much effort he puts into playing these characters who are so far away from his age and physical appearance, such characters of his still make the impression of being half or, let's say, three-quarters of the job. His portrayal of Ankerschmidt also reminds us of when, in the Orpheum, the 'gesangskomiker' appears after all kinds of transformations as an old man with trembling knees, singing a melancholy song. The production is excellent, but one still gets the feeling that this old man is being portrayed by a twenty-five-year-old body. And this feeling becomes conscious when one sees how Törzs attempts to compensate for his imperfect overall impression by accumulating all kinds of movements intended to characterise generals. I repeat, however, that it was still interesting, appealing and effective,"⁹ wrote Zoltán Szász, critic of the *Pesti Hírlap*.

Two days after the premiere, on 8 September, a statue of Jókai was unveiled in Komárom, where Géza Sebestyén mentioned how warmly the audience of the Magyar Theatre had welcomed *Az új földesúr* in its dramatised form.¹⁰ And while the audience enjoyed the show, not all of the post-premiere reviews were pleased with Hevesi's dramatisation:

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *Pesti Hírlap*, September 7, 1913, 10.

¹⁰ Statue of Jókai in Komárom. *Budapesti Hírlap*, September 9, 1913, 6.

"We have long known that it is impossible to adapt a novel for the stage, and Jókai's works are particularly unsuited to this task. In his writings, action is actually nothing more than a framework, a skeleton, which is brought to life by the milieu, the thousands of episodes, and the narration. Sándor Hevesi's work is further proof of this old truth. He worked honestly and conscientiously, even striving to keep the dialogues intact. But how different the novel is! He tried to give a truthful picture and even included excerpts from the episodes, but his undertaking was like that of a boy who wanted to empty the sea with a shell. Jókai's novel is at least ten times as long as this play, yet the novel is full of delight, while the play seems long and tiresome. It was a failed venture. It looks like someone cut out individual figures from a large, very complex painting, then put them together and stitched them into a new frame. Something is missing from the play, the heart, the warm pulsation of blood, the inexplicable magic with which the words of true personalities affect us. We do not feel the poet's unity with his work, we do not feel the sacred immersion in the work, we do not feel what the dialogues planted in the play do so wonderfully, we do not feel the beating of the genius's heart. This is not Sándor Hevesi's fault, but rather that of the genre, if a play adapted from a novel can be described in this way. The actors delivered an excellent performance. Törzs, however, ruined his otherwise magnificent performance by trying to decipher the figure of Ankerschmiedt with intelligence."¹¹

It was common practice for provincial theatres to reproduce the programs of theatres in the capital. Two weeks after the premiere in Pest, the press reported that the play was also being rehearsed in Kolozsvár. On 1 October 1913, the National Theatre of Kolozsvár premiered *Az új földesúr*, directed by Jenő Janovics, about which the reporter wrote, "The novelties from Budapest quickly find their way here with excellent sets and clever technology. That is what all the state subsidies go for. In the production of *Az új földesúr* the thunder, lightning and thunderstorms seen (and heard) through the window were so faithfully imitated that many of us began to wonder how we were going to get home in the rain."¹²

¹¹ *Az Ujság*, September 7, 1913, 17.

¹² *Nagybánya*, November 27, 1913, 2.

On 12 October, the play was performed by János Komjáthy's company at the National Theatre of Kassa, and a year later, Tivadar Abonyi's production was also staged at the Franz Joseph Municipal Theatre of Temesvár.

However, the idea of staging *Az új földesúr* had been mooted before Beöthy's drama competition. The 21 November 1903 issue of the *Miskolczi Napló* mentions that Albert Kövessy, the agile director of the Kecskemét theatre, dramatised Mór Jókai's novel *Az új földesúr*. The great writer had read the play and was very pleased with it, of which he assured the author in writing.¹³ The newspapers also reported Jókai's approval:

"Authorization. Whereby I authorize theatre director Mr. Albert Kövessy, to dramatise and stage my novel 'Új földesúr,' subject to my joint copyright; having carefully read the finished play and found it satisfactory on my part. Yours truly, Dr. Mór Jókai."¹⁴

Kövessy became head of the Kecskemét theatre in 1900. Jókai's letter of support dated 16 January, addressed to József Szeless, the chairman of the theatre committee, may have played a role in his election (Joós 1957, 144–145):

"Dear Mr. President,

I have the courage to recommend to your esteemed patronage Mr. Albert Kövessy, theatre director, who currently manages the Kisfaludy Theatre of Óbuda, and who I believe to be one of the most skilled theatre directors, with a well-organised company to perform drama, comedy, opera, operetta, and folk theatre plays with first-rate artists.

I kindly ask you to promote the theatre director's desire to be awarded the management of the Kecskemét theatre for this season.

With utmost respect,
I remain your loyal supporter,
Dr. Mór Jókai"

¹³ *Miskolczi Napló*, November 21, 1903, 2.

¹⁴ *Magyar Nemzet*, November 20, 1903, 9.

Albert Kövessy's dramatisation of *Az új földesúr* and his promise to stage it can be interpreted as a gesture of gratitude. And indeed, it remained a promise, because he did not stage it then or later, and without knowing the script, we cannot form an opinion on its theatrical quality. But what or who prompted Jókai to support Kövessy? Albert Kövessy rented the Kisfaludy Theatre of Óbuda from the end of October 1898. And as Jókai also points out, the two years he spent there can indeed be considered successful, especially after the failure of the previous director. Lajos Serly, the builder and first director of the theatre, disheartened by a lack of interest from the audience in Óbuda, retained ownership of the theatre and handed over its management in exchange for a rent. That's how Albert Kövessy came to run the theatre. Jókai's knowledge of the theatre's repertoire was no doubt thanks to his future wife, Bella Nagy, who was performing at the Kisfaludy Theatre of Óbuda as a guest in Kövessy's company. We can assume that the young fan of Jókai's got a role in the theatre with the writer's support.¹⁵ That is why it was not a burden for Jókai to write a few lines of support.

In 1917, *Az új földesúr* was performed for the fiftieth time, with a revised cast. At that time, *Egy magyar nábob* was already in production, at the initiative of Hevesi, who, remembering *Az új földesúr*, commented on the newly made adaptations of the novel:

"The show was an unexpected success. Jókai's genius was constantly celebrated by packed houses at the Magyar Theatre. Then another couple of years passed. Three years later, I brought it to Beöthy's attention: now, in wartime, would be the right time to bring Jókai's refreshing personality closer to the Hungarian public. For my part, I suggested the dramatisation of 'Egy az isten' [*Manasseh: A Romance of Transylvania / One is God*], but Beöthy opted for 'Egy magyar nábob.'¹⁶ His decision was vindicated by success. And now there was no other choice but to continue with the natural sequel, 'Kárpáthy Zoltán.' Its production was also a complete success. And since the premiere, I have already done the dramatic version of 'A kőszívű ember fiai,' and because of the huge material, not in one but in two plays,

15 Bella Nagy played the role of Magda in Hermann Sudermann's drama *Heimat (Home)* on 26 November 1898.

16 *Egy magyar nábob* premiered on 1 April 1916 at the Magyar Theatre. Director, set designer, costume designer: László Márkus.

one titled '1848' and the other '1849.' This season, the two plays will be presented as a cycle.—A very big job is now fully completed with this cycle to be presented. 'Egy magyar nábob' brings the twenties of the last century to the stage, 'Kárpáthy Zoltán'¹⁷ the thirties, 'A kőszívű ember fiai'¹⁸ the late forties, and 'Az új földesúr' the fifties. In other words, the four, or rather five, Jókai plays bring to the stage the entire era of Hungary's awakening and national despair, one of the most important phases of Hungarian history, through the genius of Jókai.—As for the continuation, the Magyar Theatre has a contract with Jókai's heirs to stage one dramatised novel by Jókai each year. In the contract, the heirs stipulated that the dramatisation work should be done by me. The contract runs for another nine years, so I have nine novels to dramatise. I am now going to abandon Jókai's historical novels. The great cycle is complete, and now I am going to turn to Jókai's socially oriented, humorous novels."¹⁹

There was no continuation of Jókai's works at the Magyar Theatre. At the end of December 1926, the Magyar Theatre company revived *Az új földesúr* with a new cast, with Jenő Törzs remaining from the old line-up.

In 1917, on the tenth anniversary of László Beöthy's tenure, he summarised the achievements of the Magyar Theatre over the past period. A statistical report from the beginning of October shows that *Egy magyar nábob* was performed sixty-five times, while *Az új földesúr* and *Kárpáthy Zoltán* ran fifty-two times. *A kőszívű ember fiai* was not scheduled to be shown until the following year, in two parts. Beöthy managed to win Jászai Mari for the role of Mrs. Baradlay. Jenő Törzs played two roles: the elderly Kázmér Baradlay and his youngest son, Jenő. The first part of the two-night play is Mrs. Baradlay's fight against her husband's will, in which the mother ultimately wins, as she raises her children to be true, great Hungarian men. The second part is a stand-alone drama about the youngest Baradlay son, Jenő, who sacrifices himself for the lives of his brothers. The story of the novel is thus divided into two separate, organic dramas, and the two plays together form a cycle on the Hungarian War of Independence.

¹⁷ The premiere of *Kárpáthy Zoltán*: December 15, 1916. Director, set designer, costume designer: László Márkus.

¹⁸ The premiere of *A kőszívű ember fiai*: Part I – May 30, 1918, Part II – June 1, 1918. Director, set designer, costume designer: László Márkus.

¹⁹ *Magyar Szinpad*, September 24, 1917, 2.



Picture 1. Egy magyar nábob, costume design by László Márkus, the nábob's costume in Act III, Magyar Theatre, 1916 (OSZMI Scenic Collection, inventory number: 52.337.6.)



Picture 2. Mari Jászai (Mrs. Baradlay) and Jenő Törzs (Jenő Baradlay), *A kőszívű ember fiai*, Magyar Theatre, 1918 (photo by Gyula Jelfy, OSZMI Photo Library, inventory number: 53.6605_B1816.)

Az új földesúr was part of the curriculum at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, and even later in middle schools, commercial schools, and secondary schools. Thus, it quickly became a moderately priced weekend afternoon performance for the youth. Provincial theatres that adopted the play also ran it as an afternoon performance for young people. But other adaptations of Jókai novels also attracted young people. Regarding *A kőszívű ember fiai*, the journalist notes, "At every performance of the Jókai–Hevesi play, there are a large number of schoolgirls and young male students. They are a kind, sincere, enthusiastic audience, a refreshing sight in the theatre at a time when the audience is otherwise distracted by the fidgeting of coughing and cynical price gougers."²⁰

During Hevesi's directorship, the National Theatre presented *Egy magyar nábob*,²¹ in 1925 and *Az új földesúr*, directed by Árpád Horváth, in 1930.²² The 28 September 1930 issue of *Színházi Élet* published *Az új földesúr* as a play supplement, including the cast. The former role of Jenő Törzs, General Ankerschmidt, was played by Gyula Csontos,

²⁰ *Magyar Szinpad*, June 14, 1918, 1.

²¹ Mór Jókai and Sándor Hevesi: *Egy magyar nábob*. Directed by: Dénes Rádai. National Theatre, January 31, 1925. Revival: January 29, 1927.

²² Premiered by the National Theatre on 5 September 1930.

Eliz by Erzsi Somogyi, Ádám Garamvölgyi by József Kürti, and Aladár by Árpád Lehotay.

At that time, Hevesi's script attracted more critics than it had during its premiere in the Magyar Theatre. Now his entire career as a theatre director was being attacked, and he was under fire from all sides, so one has to search among the personal attacks and malicious criticism to find the reviews that are based on genuine professional observations. Critics raised the fundamental question of whether Jókai's works could be dramatized in such a way as to preserve the charm of his poetry, his rich humour, the vividness of his characters, and how to choose a more dramatic form instead of narrating the essential events, and use his works to address today's audiences through the stage of today.

Károly Sebestyén²³ wrote after the 1918 premiere of *A kőszívű ember fiai*:

"As far as we know, Sándor Hevesi's guiding idea in dramatising Jókai's novels was always to adapt as much of Jókai's work as possible for the stage. This is a beautiful, clever, and selfless idea, one that involves sacrifice, homage to Jókai's genius, and determination to promote the novelist with the powerful instrument of the adapting stage. Perhaps *A kőszívű ember fiai* does not need to be promoted today. Moreover, it is quite certain that Jókai's novel will outlive the Jókai-Hevesi drama by centuries, just as *Keresd a szíved*²⁴ will be outlived by *Fekete gyémántok*. The task of the adapter exceeded his powers here again. But in general, I would not have the heart to dissuade Hevesi from continuing his work in this direction. There cannot be much that we do for Jókai. But it is also true that there are other ways to do something for Jókai."²⁵

There is indeed a way to not only remember, but also to act, as Jókai did in those trying times for the Hungarian people: he revived national sentiment. Our most important task today can be none other than to strengthen our national identity.

23 Károly Sebestyén (1872–1945) was a theatre critic, literary historian, philosophical writer, and literary translator.

24 Jókai's four-act drama *Keresd a szíved* was based on the novel *A kőszívű ember fiai*.

25 *Magyar Figyelő*, July 1, 1918, 43–44.

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Csilla Kollár

Jókai and the national fashion

Dialogue of novel and film in Rudolf Láng's
costume designs

Abstract

In the first part of my study, I deal with the history and spread of national fashion in the 19th century, paying special attention to Mór Jókai, who, as an acclaimed writer and popular public figure, played an important role in fashion throughout his life. As an influencer of the era, Jókai had a great impact with his appearance and his works. In his novels, we often learn about the attire of his characters through detailed descriptions, thus making the reader's impressions more complete. I was very interested in how the clothing outlined in Jókai's novels from the Reform Era, this politically and ideologically complex and culturally rich period, would appear in film adaptations. To what extent did the costume designers remain faithful to the text? To what extent does their work reflect a deep knowledge of the fashion and lifestyle history of the era? In my work, which ultimately focused on the novel *A kőszívű ember fiai* (*The Baron's Sons*) and the film based on it, I was also able to gain insight into the impressive oeuvre of Rudolf Láng.

Keywords: Mór Jókai, *A kőszívű ember fiai* (*The Baron's Sons*), Rudolf Láng, national fashion, díszmagyar (ceremonial Hungarian attire), costume

*"For how can we reach the present
if we do not respect traditions?"¹*

Beyond its obvious necessity and practical purposes, clothing is also a very strong non-verbal signal. Attire is capable of rapid and effective communication without its wearer revealing a single word about themselves. As a concept connected to the past and tradition, clothing is capable of placing a person in space and time, as it allows us to form an idea about the wearer's origin, cultural embeddedness, and belonging to a particular community, and even, in certain eras, their political orientation. Clothing is a telling language, whether we read descriptions of characters' clothes in novels, see them as stage or film costumes, or see them on the street. However, it is important that we possess the knowledge necessary for understanding and decoding.

We can identify general rules and norms that can be adhered to or deviated from in dressing. Adherence to norms and the desire to stand out can therefore be fundamental parts of an individual's personality, although it varies as to which appears more strongly in whom. The fundamental human desire, serving survival, is to fit into a group and to stand out from it. Since the end of the 17th century, following and renewing fashion has been increasingly linked with economic interests. Fashion is much more about wealth and status, while the concept of attire is linked to tradition and timelessness, although these concepts are often used synonymously.

After the suppression of the 1848 Revolution and War of Independence—the national attire, based primarily on the traditions of the ceremonial dress of Hungarian nobility—became a true fashion in our country (for more on the topic, see: Lukács, 2017). But beyond that, it became associated with a movement aiming for ideals and thought, whose goal was to emphasize national unity and achieve self-determination and the rights of freedom. It is not surprising that those with economic interests also joined in the dissemination of national fashion, becoming its main driving forces. Famous tailors from Pest, primarily Ádám Kostyál, Vencel Klasszy, Gáspár Tóth, and Antal Eisele, made great efforts to ensure that the Hungarian garments renewed and made in a varied and high-quality manner by them, would spread widely. Taking advantage of the

1 N., J. 1959. "Láng Rudolf: A jelmeztervezésről." *Film Színház Muzsika*, May 8, 15.



Picture 1. Domokos Perlaszka: Vencel Klasszy's National Suits and the Latest Parisian Salon Dresses, 1843 (MNM KK, Budapest; photo: MNM Historical Gallery)

opportunities offered by the press, they regularly published fashion pictures in increasingly popular fashion magazines.

The aim was to reach and convince the bourgeoisie that the middle class also needed the attire that previously signified national affiliation only in the wardrobe of the aristocracy. It was a desired vision that clothing following national traditions would be not only festive, but also everyday wear. The simplified attire derived from ceremonial noble dress—referred to by the increasingly common term *díszmagyar* (ceremonial Hungarian attire) in the second half of the 19th century—was very diverse. Most often, it consisted of tightly fitted Hungarian trousers and a dolman, which, under the influence of Western fashion, could also be complemented by a waistcoat. The dolman, tailored at the waist, closely fitting the body at the top, and flaring out at the hips, was particularly popular. The name of the famous Hun leader became commonly used for its description,

spelt both as “attila” and “atilla.” All three elements of men’s attire (trousers, waistcoat and dolman) were decorated with braiding, as were the bodices of women’s dresses and the loosely cut cloaks borrowed from men’s wear, matching the wide skirts supported by crinolines since the 1850s. A characteristic element of women’s attire was the bodice, closed by lacing or merely imitating it, and the apron, traditionally worn since the 16th century. It was an important question, and a subject of debate for a long time, whether elements of folk costume could be incorporated into the clothing of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie (Lukács 2017, 54–60, 250–253). During the Reform Era, the idea of national unity gained increasing emphasis. In connection with that, it became increasingly clear that unified thinking prioritising national interests and the preservation of cultural identity were fundamental prerequisites for our national existence in a historical situation where a foreign, oppressive power sought to integrate Hungary into a multi-ethnic empire.

Mór Jókai and the National Fashion

Jókai enthusiastically and often emphasized the significance of national fashion in both verse and prose. Perhaps most clearly, he articulated the role and purpose of Hungarian clothing in his late, little-known novel *Enyim, tied, övé* (Mine, Thine, His), published in 1875:

“This national attire is our only weapon against foreign invasion. Wherever our spurred feet tread, that is Hungary. The world does not wish to hear our truth; therefore, let it see it on us in the form of buttons, braid, and feathers. And finally, let the people know from our clothes that we are equal to them, that we do not want to be masters over them; in America, even a day labourer dresses according to city fashion; in our country, even a magnate wears peasant attire: it makes no difference, and it is good.” (Jókai 1875.)

Celebrities of the era played a leading role in the popularisation of traditional decorative styles and garments that drew from both aristocratic and folk culture. Sándor Petőfi appeared in Hungarian attire on the streets of Pest even before the outbreak of the Revolution and War of Independence. Together with his wife, Júlia Szendrey, known for her eccentricity, they often wore unusual outfits

that differed from bourgeois norms, using them to effectively draw attention to themselves, their literary work, and, at the same time, the importance of the nation's cause. Jókai also mentioned his friend's unusual appearance:

"Petőfi also started new fashions for himself. Once he wore Csokonai's fur-lined coat, to the world's astonishment; another time, he decided to have an attila made of floral atlas, and wore it with a contrived, crooked, yet not overly crooked hat to match, so that Pálffy once said of him: "When this Sándor comes to meet us, there is always something about him that makes one dream about him." But this eccentricity suited him well, because he didn't show off and was not pushy with it: it was his taste, and he didn't force it on anyone else. He was the only man who never wore a top hat, never wore a tailcoat, and never went to the opera." (Jókai 2018, 9.)

As the publisher of *Pesti Divatlap*, Imre Vahot also supported the unconventional appearance of his assistant editor, as he could direct attention to his newspaper with it. According to Jókai's formulation, the Reform Era was still fundamentally a "tailcoat and top hat wearing era" (Jókai 2018, 8).

The true golden age of national attire, its emergence as a real fashion, could only come after the suppression of the Revolution and War of Independence and the difficult years of brutal reprisals. In his novel *Enyim, tied, övé*, the writer also notes that the 1848–1849 Revolution and War of Independence was fought "while maintaining European fashion alongside it, and Hungarian national attire only appeared in its place and on its person as a uniform, ceremonial dress, or folk costume. Now everyone wears spurs: as if no one wants to be an infantryman anymore" (Jókai, 1875).

In the general nature of fashion phenomena, it is particularly important who the fashion dictators were in a given era, whom society looked up to. The celebrities of the era played a significant role in the dissemination of Hungarian fashion. In the 19th century, in addition to the nobility, who always captured and represented the attention of the common people, politicians, actors, and other artists, especially popular writers, could be taste-makers. In the 1850s, Mór Jókai rose among the dominant, trend-setting figures of the era. His immense popularity, stemming from his literary work, was later supplemented by active political and public engagement. His family life, not free from scandals, also provided constant topics for the social public life of the era, always hungry

for gossip. His first wife was no ordinary person, but Róza Laborfalvi, one of Pest's most famous and leading Hungarian actresses. Both were fully aware of the importance of external appearance, and thus of clothing and presentation. Their decisions, choices, and stances left an imprint on the fashion history of the era and the memory of their contemporaries.

Jókai advocated for the importance of national attire at a very early stage, in 1856, and also pointed out that his colleagues and other celebrities who attracted public attention had obligations in this regard.

What happened was that the popular fashion magazine *Hölgyfutár* published portraits of twenty-four writers and actors as a supplement to the newspaper. Jókai praised the initiative, specifically highlighting how beautifully the gentlemen had tied their cravats. However, he reprimanded them because, out of sixteen men, only six had remembered to wear an attila: "The Hungarian writer and actor is first a patriot and only then a writer and actor. Let us overlook the tailcoat on each other in everyday life, as our father Adam wore it, but backwards, but on such an occasion where our pictures are presented to the nation, let us not be ashamed of that buttoned garment" (Jókai 1856, 238). Jókai himself set a good example; numerous photographs bear witness to the fact that until the second half of the 1860s, he was primarily photographed in Hungarian-style braided trousers and a Hungarian-style jacket, and he continued to wear his ceremonial



Picture 2. Antal Simonyi: Jókai Mór, early 1860s (MNM KK, Budapest; photo: MNM Historical Photo Department)

Hungarian attire even after the Compromise—albeit only for representational purposes (E. Csorba 2018, 174–217).

As we will see later, Jókai served the cause of national attire in numerous and varied ways. Among these, his personal example could have had a great impact on his contemporaries.

Emőke Tomsics also emphasises this exemplary, almost dictatorial, fashion influencer role and the significance of photography as a modern, new medium: “The fashion of expressing national belonging through clothing coincided with the mass adoption of photography. We can reasonably assume that the sight of figures wearing everyday or festive Hungarian attire in albums and behind shop windows, including prominent politicians, artists, and aristocrats, had a considerable impact on the formation and strengthening of national sentiment” (Tomsics 2005, 50).

Mór Jókai’s niece, Jolán Jókay, wife of Sándor Hegedűs, was raised in the writer’s home and witnessed the daily lives and family life of her uncle and Róza Laborfalvi. Her memoirs, which were later published in book form, corroborate the image preserved in photographs. “In the early 1960s, when Hungarian dress was in fashion, Uncle Mór also wore Hungarian clothes. I remember how beautiful the fox-throat coat looked on his tall, slender figure, made of grenade-coloured cloth, with silver filigree buttons and trimmed with fox fur, a curly hat on his head, with a crane feather beside it” (Hegedűsné 1927, 136–137). His actress wife also did not relinquish her role as a fashion dictator; the same text states that “Aunt Róza also had a fox-throat coat; cornflower-blue cloth, also with silver buttons, trimmed with fox fur; instead of a hat, she wore a Hungarian headscarf; when she went out, she put a veil over the headscarf. I will never forget how beautiful they looked together.” Another eyewitness and memoirist, Mari Váli, a close relative as well, directly attributed the spread of national fashion to the couple, stating that “when one day he dressed in a carnelian-buttoned attila and a simple, braided cloth cloak thrown over his shoulder and took his pretty and beautiful wife wearing a silver-buckled bodice, a small velvet coat, and a gold-laced Hungarian headscarf for a walk, within a few days, as if by magic, the streets of Pest were teeming with figures in picturesque Hungarian attire” (Váli 1955, 218).

Not only family members, but also Mikszáth, a colleague who compiled Jókai’s biography, emphasized Jókai’s role in popularizing national attire: “Jókai was among the first to revive national attire. He praised it in verse and prose

in *Üstökös*. [] Initially, it was worn only at ceremonies, but when some young noblemen, Count Béla Keglevich, István Esterházy, the young Balassa barons, took it to the streets, Jókai himself put on an attila and tight trousers, and Mrs. Jókai appeared on Váci Street in her Melinda bodice, in which ‘every woman was a hundred times more beautiful’ (Mikszáth 1907, 24).

Jókai’s poem *Az a szegény frakk* (That Poor Tailcoat), written under the pseudonym Kakas Márton, appeared on the cover of the 27 September 1862 issue of the newspaper. In his mocking, satirical poem, he condemned rapidly changing fashions and the abandonment of national elements.

His poem *Magyar divat* (Hungarian Fashion), written in 1859, is a more direct message and strong encouragement for the revival of national attire:

Again, again, let us wear
That coat, that dress,
Which our ancestors wore;
Old dolman, old hat
And those who lived and died for the homeland,
Will rise again.
Though to see, the frivolous
Here and there burst into laughter...
Let them laugh, they will soon stop:
Hungarians, do not be ashamed of yourselves!

Do not be ashamed of the attire,
In which your father could get by
And reached a happy old age.
Who knows from this happy time,
When the clothes turn around
The better year will also return!
Let him who denies a better future,
Turn his face away in a grimace.
You ask for it and believe that it will come.
Hungarians, do not be ashamed of yourselves.

Whose spurs jingle on his feet,
You know that he is not a coward,

Even if the gawker laughs.
 The assassin and the coward
 Do not wear spurs on their heels;
 —He runs away, or lies in ambush.
 You face them, you speak the truth,
 Even if your heart bursts.
 This is your old character:
 Hungarians, do not be ashamed of yourselves.

In a golden-laced coif,
 The female sex is so enchanting,
 Like fairy women.
 A virgin crown, not just worn,
 But also deserved,
 Shines on the forehead.
 Miraculous times are upon us!
 The heart of man swells.
 Every woman is twice as beautiful:
 Hungarians, do not be ashamed of yourselves.

Let Europe mourn
 In sackcloth, in mourning frock coats
 Its lost hopes.
 If life is beautiful for us,
 Who can judge us for that?
 God is good, He will help!
 Self-respect, patriotism
 Let them be, if necessary, 'fashionable,'
 Whatever the world may say about it,
 ...Hungarians, do not be ashamed of yourselves!

Both poems were well known at the time, often recited in salons, amateur performances, and in front of smaller or larger audiences ("Doppler testvérek hangversenye", 1861, 54). *Magyar divat* was one of Jókai's most popular poems in the 1860s.

National fashion, which also served as political expression and was well-connected to the concept of passive resistance, began in Budapest in 1860,

according to Jókai's memoirs; he said that "from then on, for a few years, one could see all the specificities of folk costumes learned from various regions in every street, in every salon: the ruffled, fluttering headscarves, the pearl headbands, the lace aprons, the puffed shirt shoulders, the laced bodices for ladies; the attilas, coats, cloaks, spurred boots for men; the crane-feathered hats, the ornate szűr (a folklore coat), the shaggy guba (mantle) found their way into salons, and with them, the Hungarian words also, both written, spoken, and sung. During this time, Budapest, in all its social strata, displayed a truly Eastern national character. This lasted for four or five years; then it passed. It was long for fashion, short for national enthusiasm! Now, in the Hungarian capital, every class dresses as people in other European capitals do. We see national folk costumes only as a rarity" (Jókai 1893, 121). Indeed, after the coronation in 1867, adorned with the splendour of Hungarian ceremonial attire, the nation reconciled itself with its fate and its ruler. National fashion became outdated, as there was no longer anything to rebel against. Ceremonial attire remained as a spectacular costume for holidays, and both ladies and gentlemen returned to following Western fashion.

The National Fashion and costumes of the film *A kőszívű ember fiai (The Baron's Sons)*

An important element of Jókai's novels and, in connection with them, their film adaptations, is the concept of national uplift, the ideal of homeland and progress. The conflict between selfless and pure-hearted patriots and schemers who prioritize their own interests and acquired feudal privileges over the common good is the main motif of stories set in the mid-19th century. Costumes play a significant role in characterizing the figures, as they can reflect wealth and social status, personality, religious and national affiliation, and in many cases, political commitment.

The costume designer for Zoltán Várkonyi's film *A kőszívű ember fiai (The Baron's Sons)* released in 1965, was Rudolf Láng,² who had already worked successfully with the director in theatre. We know the life story of the artist, who fought for recognition his whole life, from his wife's writings (Avar 1994).

² Zsazsa Lázár is also credited alongside Rudolf Láng in the film's credits.

Láng, who originally intended to become a painter, was born in Nagyszénás in 1904, as the fifth child of an intellectual family. His creations received mixed reactions, but in the difficult years following World War II, he had no opportunity to establish himself as an artist. Éva Ruttkai and Miklós Gábor, who lived in the same house, suggested he try to find employment in the National Theatre's set painting workshop. In 1949, he received permission to enter the theatre's studio without pay, where he was soon made a permanent employee and received a salary. It was here that he met his wife, who also worked as a set painter. In 1951, Endre Gellért invited him to the National Theatre as a scenographer. With his expertise in various stylistic periods and his exceptional and broad knowledge, he became an indispensable advisor to the theatre, where he not only gave art history lectures but also provided advice on cultural history and etiquette to the actors. His actual costume design career blossomed at the Vígszínház, where he drew nearly ten thousand figurines³ over twenty years. It was at this theatre that he first worked with Zoltán Várkonyi, and as a further step in their fruitful collaboration, in 1965, he created costume designs for the director's grand film, *A kőszívű ember fiai*. Their collaboration continued in Várkonyi's other Jókai adaptations and in *Egri csillagok (Stars of Eger)*. A small exhibition of Láng's costume designs was held in 1965 at the Május 1. cinema, in connection with which *Magyar Nemzet* praised the character-forming power of his costumes: "His artistic imagination is enriched by vast knowledge, sure taste, and refined understanding of people" (S. M. 1965, 10). A picture of a true artist emerges before us, whom posterity remembers as both a painter and a graphic artist. He spoke about his costume design working method in an interview, unfortunately, only very briefly. "I dive into the script. I look for where the text 'gives away' something. Then the colour experience is born in me, and I try to put the figure I see onto paper with a few lines and splashes of colour" (S. M. 1965, 10).

The costume designs for the *A kőszívű ember fiai* are preserved in the Set and Costume Design Archive of the Nemzeti Filmintézet (National Film Institute). For the purposes of our topic, the drawings made for Tibor Bitskey, who played Ödön Baradlay, are the most interesting.

Of the three brothers, Richard is only seen in uniform except for the final scenes, while the youngest brother, Jenő, wears the fashionable men's attire of the era: a tailcoat, waistcoat, and top hat. He is the one who only definitively

³ Several of these are preserved by the OSZK (National Széchényi Library).



Picture 3. Rudolf Láng: Ödön's Costumes for *A kőszívű ember fiai* (*The Baron's Sons*), 1964 (NFI Film Archives, Set and Costume Design Archive; HUNGART © 2025)

commits to loyalty to the nation at the end of the story, and his attire throughout reflects the appearance of a fashionable Viennese gentleman. The surviving costume design presents us with four easily recognizable costumes for Ödön. The tailcoat, richly embroidered with metallic thread, which he wore in the Russian scenes at the beginning of the film, is omitted. The original garment, undoubtedly, was once worn by a secret councillor of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy on the occasion of representative court ceremonies. The MNM Textile Collection⁴ preserves the same type, but some pieces may have ended up with

⁴ MNM New Age Textile Collection, inventory number: 1953.34., as well as the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Monturdepot, inventory number: Monturdepot, U 979. Examples of diplomatic tailcoats include: Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Monturdepot, inventory number: Monturdepot, U 977.

the Costume Rental Company, as well as theatre and film costume warehouses. Although the uniforms of diplomats were very similar, the metallic thread embroidery on the tailcoat seen in the film clearly places it in the wardrobe of secret councillors.

The first outfit shown on the design also belongs to the scenes set in Russian territories. The depicted fur hat and fur coat bear a closer resemblance to the costume worn by Colonel Leonin, Ödön's friend, played by István Bujtor, during his journey in the harsh Russian winter. Here too, it is easy to imagine that the actors were dressed from the Costume Rental Company.⁵

The uniform worn during the siege of Buda Castle could also be from the costume wardrobe, as it does not precisely follow the direction specified by the costume designer. The novel states precisely, though somewhat tersely, why and what uniform the character wore: "Ödön was as usual; neither more cheerful nor more gloomy. This time he wore his National Guard uniform. This could be explained by the fact that the soldiers were reluctant to look at civilian clothing walking among them. They believed that anyone who did not wear a sword at such times was a wimp." The costume design shows that Rudolf Láng knew precisely that as a Captain, Ödön could not wear the regimental silver braid, only the simpler black one.⁶ In the film, the uniform was further enhanced with a braided belt evoking national colours, which is also clearly identifiable in 19th-century depictions.

The black and grey outfit in the costume design is also a prime example of the 19th-century national fashion worn, sung about, and enthusiastically supported by Jókai. Although the film's plot is set during the revolution, the inclusion of Hungarian attire is justified and corresponds to the established image of the era and audience expectations.

Costume history research already highlighted that the issue of national fashion was important during the Reform Era and part of public discourse, but it did not yet fundamentally define the streetscape. Hungarian attire existed before the 1850s but was not yet widespread. It only became a true fashion from 1859 onwards. In the film, it appears most often in the case of Bence Rideghváry and his entourage, indicating their belonging to the Hungarian nobility, even if their spirit is more loyal to the emperor. The great conspirator only wears the braided

⁵ According to the film's credits, the costumes were made in the workshops of the Costume Rental Company.

⁶ Thanks to Dr. Tamás Bacsoni for his help.



Picture 4. János Vidéky: Hungarian National Guardsmen, around 1849
(MNM KK, Budapest; photo: MNM Historical Gallery)

Hungarian attire in his county; when he is in Vienna, he does not present himself in national dress but rather wears the fashionable tailcoat and top hat, adhering to local customs.

With Rideghváry and his circle, we see that traditional attire does not signify political commitment on this occasion, but it can signify differences between nations. This is clearly visible when comparing the designs of the attire of the jurates and the Viennese citizens. Rudolf Láng designed national attire for the young Hungarians, while Western-style urban clothing for the Austrians. In scenes involving multiple characters, or many extras, it is particularly important for the viewer to be able to visually distinguish who belongs to which nationality and who is allied with whom.

Returning to the character of Ödön, the two Hungarian outfits on the design sheet clearly reflect the character's spirit and commitment to the cause of the homeland. Of his siblings, he is the first and most steadfast to stand by his

mother's value set. He is a stable, active personality who finds strong ideological support in both his wife and his father-in-law (they also usually appear in Hungarian attire). Both outfits, in line with the 19th-century fashion, combine Western and Hungarian elements. Rudolf Láng designed black boots with curved tops for the tight Hungarian trousers. The braided dolmans and attilas are emblematic parts of Hungarian attire modernized during the Reform Era. The tie only appeared in Hungarian gentlemen's attire in the 18th century, influenced by French fashion. By the 19th century, a special elongated form developed, usually cut from black silk and decorated with gold tassels at the ends. The shirt and waistcoat clearly show Western influence. Among the garments that are similar in cut but differ in colour and fabric, the grey one represented everyday wear, while the black one represented formal wear. The black set is seen when it becomes clear to the Hungarian gentlemen that the head of the Baradlay family will not be the emperor-loyal Rideghváry, but Ödön, the eldest son who inherited his mother's rebellious blood. His elegant and ceremonial Hungarian attire, in which he accompanies his bride dressed in white, also complied with the rules of mourning. The wedding is held six weeks after the funeral. The young husband soon sets off to free his imprisoned father-in-law, arriving at the county assembly three days after the wedding.

At the scandalous assembly, which included violence, many extras wore noble ceremonial attire, known in the latter half of the 19th century as *díszmagyar* (ceremonial Hungarian attire). Most of these were original garments from heirs and illegal traders that had ended up at the Costume Rental Company. Ödön should also have appeared in a ceremonial Hungarian attire that emphasized his nobility but also complied with the mourning rules of the time. The writer also envisioned the scene this way (Jókai, n. d.): "It was Ödön Baradlay. In full ceremonial attire, which was also a mourning robe, a black velvet dolman, a dark grenade-coloured mantle, with blue fox fur, the same hat pushed onto his head, with a black heron feather, all buckles, clasps, and belt chains on his attire made of dark blue oxidized silver; his wide ceremonial sword with its belt in his right hand; he was in a hurry, he didn't have time to fasten his sword." In the film scene, Ödön rushed into the county assembly hall in his everyday grey attire, giving the impression that he didn't even have time to change his travel clothes in his haste.

The analysis of Rudolf Láng's costume design clearly shows that the designer had a thorough knowledge of the customs, lifestyle, and attire of the era.

His works do not lack insight, the ability to paint psychological characters, nor aesthetics and decorativeness. As a costume designer for a historical film striving for realism, he performed precise, refined work, made possible by his observational skills and thorough knowledge of the subject matter. Over a decade of theatre practice and knowledge of objects could have been supplemented with research into visual inspirations. Unfortunately, we know very little about collaborations between museums and filmmakers, but it is certain that sometimes they sought the help of museologists, primarily on matters of warfare and weaponry. A thorough knowledge of the past provided a solid foundation for the designer, with which he could intelligently approach the novel to be adapted, thereby creating a connection between past and present that is also significant for the future.

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Balázs Lázár

Keresd a szíved (*Search Your Heart*),

or the story of the first theatrical
production of Mór Jókai's novel
A kőszívű ember fiai (*The Baron's Sons*)

Abstract

Mór Jókai (1825–1904) was not only closely connected with the theatre as a private man, through his two wives, but he also wrote the stage versions of eleven of his own short stories and novels. His novel adaptations had already achieved great success at the National Theatre when, on 16 May 1886, he submitted his play *Keresd a szíved* (*Search Your Heart*), based on *A kőszívű ember fiai* (*The Baron's Sons*), to the review committee. However, the premiere did not take place until 25 April 1896, at the Budai Nyári Színkör (Buda Summer Theatre Group), which was then called the Fővárosi Nyári Színház (Capital City Summer Theatre) and was led by Ignác Krecsányi. What had happened in those ten years? Why was the first stage version of one of the best known and most popular Hungarian novels not staged at the National Theatre and why did it take so long? This is strange, given that Jókai had long enjoyed great popularity internationally. I seek answers to the above questions by studying contemporary documents and works on theatre history, examining the reasons behind the choice of title and the dramaturgy of the stage version. In addition, I discuss the venue of the premiere, the Budai Nyári Színkör, and its director, Ignác Krecsányi, in more detail.

Keywords: Mór Jókai, *A kőszívű ember fiai*, novel adaptation, National Theatre, Budai Nyári Színkör

Introduction

The title *Keresd a szíved* (Search Your Heart), which sounds like something from a tabloid, is not the name of a modern South American soap opera or a new dating service, nor does it refer to the unexpected infatuation of the seventy-two-year-old Mór Jókai (1825–1904) with Bella Nagy, the eighteen-year-old actress who later became his second wife, but rather the first stage adaptation of the literary giant's novel *A kőszívű ember fiai*. Jókai made the stage version himself, which isn't surprising: besides his personal connections—his wives, actresses Róza Laborfalvi and Bella Nagy—it is worth mentioning that as a young writer, he lived with the Szigligetis; he adapted eleven of his own works, short stories and novels, for the stage (Szalisznyó 2023b, 68), but during his lifetime, several others also adapted his stage works (for example, Ede Szigligeti) (see Szilágyi 2023, 8, in the preface).

The premieres of his novels usually took place at the National Theatre (he rewrote his short stories for theatres that staged more entertaining performances, which shows the theatrical diversity of Budapest, which had grown into a cosmopolitan city at the time), yet the premiere of *Keresd a szíved* took place at the Budai Nyári Színkör (Buda Summer Theatre Group) in Krisztinaváros, a seasonal theatre, on 25 April 1896, after a ten-year wait (Szalisznyó 2023a, 694).



Picture 1. The programme of *Keresd a szíved*, 1896 (OSZMI Theatrical Posters and Small Prints Archive)

How is it possible that the internationally renowned Hungarian writer of the era, whom Crown Prince Rudolf considered a friend, who was received by Bismarck, the “Iron Chancellor” during his visit to Berlin (and what is more, Jókai even interviewed him—to which the contemporary satirical magazine *Borsszem Jankó* responded with a caricature, and events related to the prince of writers, such as his marriage to Bella Nagy, were regularly reported in major international newspapers such as *The New York Times*), who was a creative partner of Ferenc Liszt, Ferenc Erkel, and Richard Strauss (*A cigánybáró* [*The Gypsy Baron*], premiered in 1885, is still a popular operetta on international stages; see Hansági 2020, 51–54) could not get into the National Theatre with the stage version of *A kőszívű ember fiai*?

The cancelled premiere at the National Theatre

This is particularly interesting in light of the fact that Jókai began the adaptation of his 1869 novel around the time when the adaptation of *Fekete gyémántok* (Black Diamonds) began playing at the National Theatre on 9 October 1885, and *Az arany ember* (*The Man with the Golden Touch*), which premiered there on December 3, 1884, had already achieved overwhelming success by then (Szalisznyó 2023a, 691). Moreover, the National Theatre had already staged ten other works by Jókai before *Az arany ember* (Szalisznyó 2023b, 71). In any case, it can be concluded theatrical performances of the author’s works greatly contributed to the success of the “Jókai phenomenon” at the time.

On 10 October 1885, the pro-government political newspaper *Nemzet* reported that Mór Jókai was “working on a new play. The title of the play is ‘Keresd a szíved,’ and the author will submit it to the National Theatre later this season. In his new play, Jókai has intended the two leading female roles for Prielle Kornélia and P. Márkus Emilia.”¹

The writer finally submitted the adaptation to the “committee deciding on stage suitability” on 16 May 1886. In June, the four reviewers, Károly Vadnay, József Szigeti, Gergely Csiky and Béla Bercsényi, together with director Ede Paulay, recommended the play for performance by secret ballot with a vote of 3 to 2 (Szalisznyó 2023a, 692). Preparations for the premiere, however, did not begin, as the intendant, Count István Keglevich, a loyal aristocrat, did not

¹ *Pesti Hírlap*, October 11, 1885, 10–11.

dare to take on the premiere for political reasons, and after more than a year of procrastination, he informed Jókai of his decision in a private letter dated 28 August 1887. This was reported by several daily newspapers in the first half of September 1887—probably on the initiative of Jókai, who was also the editor of the *Nemzet* (Szalisznyó 2023a, 692): “I regret to tell you frankly that I cannot perform the play ‘Keresd a szíved’ at the National; I do not consider it timely to stage a play about Austro-Hungarian conflicts as long as the generation that is always ready to protest is alive and as long as the same person by whose orders those things happened still reigns. I would not wish ever to be in a position where I should be obliged to ask the king, if he should happen to feel like going to the National, not to do so. I am sorry that I cannot grant your wish, but I cannot act against my convictions” (quoted in Győrfy [ed.] 2004, 143).

It is sad to note that nearly forty years after the War of Independence and twenty years after the Compromise, it was still not possible to talk about the events of 1848/1849 from a “Hungarian perspective,” or at least without the threat of censorship, even for Mór Jókai. This delicate theatrical episode highlights that the “ostensible freedom” of the dualist “forced marriage” raised many dilemmas and fundamentally limited the consolidation of a healthy and unified national identity, and it is no coincidence that the Compromise is still controversial today. (Unfortunately, Lajos Kossuth’s *Cassandra-levél* [Cassandra Letter] foreshadowed many things.)

But let us return to *Keresd a szíved*. Count Keglevich was strongly criticised by Mikszáth Kálmán under the pseudonym Scarron for his rejection of the play (Szalisznyó 2023a, 693), and the contemporary satirical papers almost pilloried the Intendant of the National Theatre, as can be seen in the “Intendant’s Correspondence” published in the 11 September 1887 issue of the contemporary satirical paper *Borsszem Jankó*: “Intendant’s correspondence. I. To Mr. Mór Jókai, locally. Your play ‘Keresd a szíved,’ which was accepted by the Drama Assessing Committee, can be made into a pickle. I don’t need it. The title is absurd, the content is rebellious. There’s no ballet in it either. As Imperial and Royal Intendant, I therefore order you to take back this dramatic riddle and study natural history for a year at a public school so that you may learn where the human heart lies. Yours truly, Count Keglevich.” Later, József Katona was addressed in the same style by Count Borsszem Jankó Keglevich, Lunatic Imperial and Royal Theatre Intendant: Listen, sir, how dare you write that bloody-mouthed play called ‘Bánk bán?!,’ then Mr. Victor Hugo was mentioned as a “dangerous agitator,

swashbuckler, atheist," and Mr. Friedrich Schiller, who, regarding *Don Carlos*, should "Get a grip [...] and better himself. Take back your play and rework it in a legal sense...", and finally, in the context of his regicides, William Shakespeare was also mentioned: "...stop, you rascal! At 11 tomorrow morning, report to my office, where the wooden horse will be waiting for you. Twenty-five to the appropriate place, burning the works you spat—that will be your punishment. From now on, I will write the plays for the national theatre myself. That will be quite something! Keglevich etc. etc."²

In response to the media scandal that erupted, the Count-intendant of the National Theatre agreed to the premiere with an ambivalent decision, but did not commit to a date (Szalisznyó 2023a, 694). Surprisingly, the 11 January 1888 issue of the *Pesti Napló* reports, "We have been informed that Mór Jókai himself is currently opposed to the performance of the play *Keresd a szíved*, as the antecedents of this play could still link the production of the play to political interpretations, which are not appropriate in the current circumstances, given the state of war." As regards the war situation at that time, Jókai may have been referring to the clashes between the Monarchy and the Russian Empire in Galicia (Szalisznyó 2023a, 694).

We know from a letter written by Jókai in 1887 (Győrffy 2004, 154, 208) that Lajos Evva, director of the Népszínház Theatre in the capital, offered to stage *Keresd a szíved*, but no further reference to this can be found later, nor is there any other documentation of interest from other theatres at that time. An interesting side note related to our topic is Jókai's occasional play, *Jószívű ember* (The Kind-Hearted Man), which was performed by the National Theatre on 31 May 1889, as part of the celebrations of the Kind-Hearted Movement, but was never staged again (Győrffy 2004, 510).

The ten years that passed before the play appeared on stage were probably spent searching for a favourable social climate and a suitable theatre venue, an opportunity that was created by the millennium.

² Borsszem Jankó, September 11, 1887, 2.

The stage version

What does drama history say about Jókai's self-adaptation? "The four-act play *Keresd a szíved* was adapted from *A kőszívű ember fiai*. [...] The adaptation from the novel was quite successful in this case as well. Although it retained some epic character, it generally became a fresh and lively stage work. [...] The main value of the play is its sharp dialogue, which works so well on stage," we learn from Sándor Galamb's work *A magyar dráma története 1867-től 1896-ig* (The History of Hungarian Drama from 1867 to 1896), which, among works dealing with the theme of 1848, places the play in the category of "historical works with serious literary intent" alongside Ede Szigligeti's *Az üldözött honvéd* (The Persecuted Soldier) and Miklós Komoróczy's *Márciusnak idusa* (The Ides of March), as opposed to "spectacles intended purely for entertainment" (Szalisznyó 2023a, 691). Berta Vnutskó, in her 1914 book on Jókai's dramatic work, however, argued that the adaptation "[did] not provide the same harmonious effect as the novel. It lacks the powerful underpinnings that makes *A kőszívű ember fiai* such an excellent work, despite its excesses" (Vnutskó 1914, 56).

It may seem to us that the "complex political situation" of the time may have finally manifested itself in a kind of voluntary, internal censorship in *Keresd a szíved*. This may also be indicated by the fact that in the "freedom fighter" plays of the period the identity of the enemy facing the defenders is often uncertain (Szalisznyó 2023a, 696). And while the novel was written in 1869, amid the political struggles following the Compromise, and clearly advocated independence, the adaptation ends with a happy ending: Hugó Palvicz survives and marries Alice Plankenhurst at the end of the play. Yes, Hugó, because this name change catches our eye on the poster for the performance, and Jókai even changed the Baradlay family to Baranghy and Hugó Mausmann to Adolf (Szalisznyó 2023a, 695).

And although it may seem surprising, the name change was one of the author's adaptation techniques. The reason may be that in the course of dramatisation "a character's function, fate, and identity change, the new name helps to better distinguish between the characters in the novel and those on stage" (Szalisznyó 2023a, 695).

The programme, which I found in the programme archive of the Hungarian Theatre History Museum and Institute, reveals that the story takes place in three locations: in the Plankenhurst House in Vienna, in the cemetery of Hernals and in the Királyerdő forest near Isaszeg. The play has a total of twenty-one

speaking characters, with extras including nurses, stretcher-bearers, surgeons, hussars, soldiers, national guardsmen, sappers, gunners, and aulists. This is therefore a large-scale production, although little is revealed about the family in the play, with only the mother appearing on stage apart from Richárd.

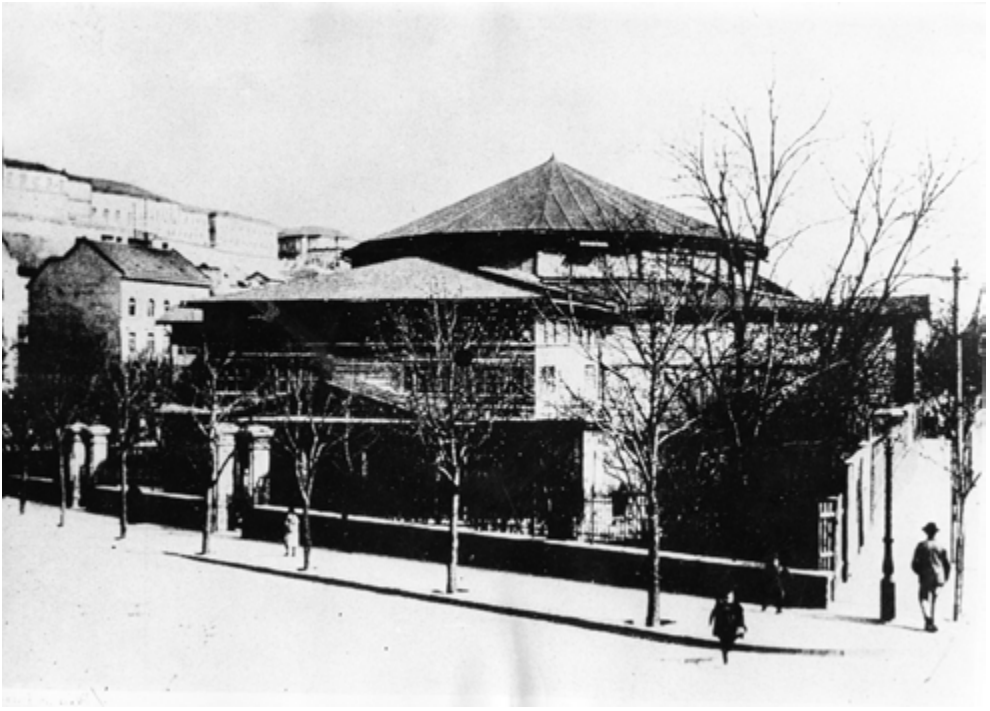
Thus, by highlighting the heroic figure of the hussar captain Richárd Baranghy, the spirit of the Hungarian War of Independence is strongly present in the stage version, even symbolically, while the audience is presented with a much more rounded story than in the original novel.

For me, Tallérossy Zebulon—who interestingly appears in Jókai's play *Barangok* (The Barangs), written for the opening performance of the Vígyszínház (May 1, 1896)—is conspicuously absent from the stage adaptation of Jókai's self-adaptation, and so do the humorous elements, the author's linguistic playfulness that permeates the novel, as well as the other minor characters, such as Ádám Mindenváró, Gergő Boksa, and Mihály Szalmás. It seems to me that the "guiding spirit" of the original story, Mrs. Baradlay, or Mrs. Baranghy, is less central to the play. And although at the end of the novel there is a palpable desire on the part of the author to turn the national and family catastrophe into a story with a happy ending, the performance of *Keresd a szíved* presumably retained little of the angst- and fear-filled world vision of *A kőszívű ember fiai*, thus bringing it closer to a romance (Nyilasy 2003, 68), which may also explain the choice of title.

The premiere

The premiere took place on 25 April 1896, as the opening performance of the season at the Budai Nyári Színpad (Buda Summer Theatre Group), which operated seasonally in Krisztinaváros from April to November. According to letters written by the author to the theatre director, Ignác Krecsányi, he participated in the finalisation of the stage texts and the adaptation of the play for the stage (Szalisznyó 2023a, 694). And from Krecsányi's letter to the author at the end of the year (OSZK, Manuscript Archives, Correspondence Repository) we can learn how much he liked the choice of title, "'Keresd a szíved'! How much poetry there is in the title itself! And then he gets into the play!"

Jókai appeared at the premiere as usual, then complained in a letter to the theatre director the next day that he had caught a cold, even though he had been wearing a winter coat and hat. In this letter of 26 April 1896 (preserved in the Letter Repository of the Manuscript Collection of National Széchényi Library,



Picture 2. Budai Nyári Színpódium (Buda Summer Theatre Group), end of the 1800s (OSZMI Photo Library)

OSZK), we also learn that he expressed his gratitude to the artists for their “high-standard excellence” in the show. “Let nothing harm them in this cold theatre, which is warmed only by the enthusiasm of the audience!” On the evening of April 25, it may have still been cool for such a long outdoor production, but as we can read at the bottom of the programme, “The performance will be held even in inclement weather.”

Another interesting detail on the programme is that Baroness Plankenhorst Alfonsine was played by Mrs. Krecsányi, i.e. the director was biased towards casting his actress-wife.

In connection with the rehearsal process, we can mention as a novelty and unusual event at the time, quoting the contemporary press, “that the theatre company held a dress rehearsal in front of a small circle of people.”³

³ *Pesti Napló*, April 25, 1896, 7.

The Budai Nyári Színikör (The Buda Summer Theatre Group)

Where is the Budai Nyári Színikör located and what role did it play in Hungarian theatre history? The management of the theatre company, created in 1838 by the German theatre director Philip Nötzl from Timișoara and Sibiu, together with Ignác Huber, erected a wooden building for the theatre in 1843 in the Horváth Kert in Krisztinaváros (Székely [ed.] 1994). The Horváth Garden, in the area bounded by today's Alagút Street—Krisztina Boulevard—Attila Street, was owned by a land-owner named Horváth in the 18th century, hence the name (Németh 1930, 104). Until 1870, they played in German in the 1,200-seat arena designed by Ferenc Ságody, called the 'Ofner Tagstheater in der Christinenstadt.' Between 1895 and 1915, the theatre operated under the name 'Fővárosi Nyári Színikör' ('Capital City Summer Theatre Group'), and between 1915 and 1937, it was known as 'Budai Színikör' ('Buda Theatrical Circle'; Székely [ed.] 1994). The building was demolished in 1937 and Miklós Ligeti's statue of *Déryné* (Mrs. Déry) was erected in its place.

Among the many theatre companies and theatre people who worked there, György Molnár stands out, having experimented with Hungarian performances as early as 1861. In 1868, he included the mortars of Gellért Hill and Hungarian army veterans in his large-scale spectacle entitled *Bem apó* (Father Bem; Saly 2005, 162).

One of the most important theatre makers was the aforementioned Ignác Krecsányi, who worked as an excellent director in several theatres. He began his acting career with György Molnár and "will be credited with the Hungarianisation of the audience in Krisztinaváros" (Schöpflin 1929–1931, I. 245), as the population of the district was still predominantly German-speaking at that time. He managed the seasonal venue twice, in 1883 and from 1888 to 1915, while also serving audiences in Arad and Timișoara with his company. The premiere of *Keresd a szíved* took place during his second term as director, in 1896.

The talented director began to consistently develop an increasingly valuable dramatic programme, and the repertoire, which consisted predominantly of folk plays and operettas, was supplemented with classical and contemporary Hungarian and foreign plays such as *Csongor és Tünde* (Csongor and Tünde), Jókai's adaptation of *Fekete gyémántok* and a series of Shakespearean productions. And it was there that Mari Jászai performed "Medea," and that Rostand's

Cyrano de Bergerac, Gorky's *The Lower Depths*, and Ibsen's *Nora* were first performed in Budapest. The repertoire also included opera performances (Székely [ed.] 1994, 118–119).

From 1915, Géza Sebestyén took over the position of his renowned predecessors. In 1925, he completely renovated the theatre at his own expense, which then became a permanent theatre under the name Buda Theatre Group (Budai Színkör), meaning that performances could also be held in the building during the winter (Schöpflin 1929–1931, I, 245). Under his direction, the summer productions consisted of revue operettas centred around individual stars, while contemporary Hungarian plays made up the rest of the repertoire, from Sándor Bródy to Menyhért Lengyel and Dezső Szomory. One of the most popular actresses at the summer theatre, among the many popular prima donnas, was Mici Haraszti, who even had a liqueur named after her at the Philadelphia Café opposite the theatre.

The Millennium Season

Let us examine the Millennium season of 1896 of the Buda Summer Theatre Group (Budai Nyári Színkör), then known as the Capital City Summer Theatre (Fővárosi Nyári Színház), which opened on 25 April with Mór Jókai's play *Keresd a szíved*. According to the programme, the operetta *La Duchesse de Ferrare* was staged on 29 May, and on 22 June Lujza Blaha made her first guest appearance in the award-winning folk play *Télen* (In Winter), written by József Bokor Jr. The poster of the performance tells us that "the nation's nightingale" appeared in *Szólimondó asszonyosság* (*Madame Sans-Gêne*) the following day. On 13 July 1896 the French four-act play *A vasgyáros* (*The Iron Master*) was performed, followed by Feydeau's comedy *Csak párosan* (*L'Hôtel du libre échange*) on July 28, and then the now forgotten popular theatre prima donna, Ilka Pálmai, performed Offenbach's operetta *Szép Heléna* (*La Belle Hélène*). As we can see, the aim was primarily entertainment this summer, too, and only Jókai's "romanticised" play was performed as a "serious" Hungarian work reflecting on the Millennium, the thousand years of national history.

Afterlife

Keresd a szíved did not have a great stage career. It was performed ten more times that season at the Budai Nyári Színkör, and although Ignác Krecsányi was enthusiastic about the play and also staged it in Timișoara in 1896, where he was also the director, it was not produced again in the capital and was rarely performed in provincial theatres. However, Director Krecsányi wrote about the reception in Timișoara in a letter to Mór Jókai dated 16 December 1896 (OSZK Kézirattár, Levelestár – Manuscript Archives, Correspondence Repository): “...no drama in Temesvár [Timișoara] has enjoyed such widespread success and enthusiasm for many years as ‘Keresd a szíved.’ May God grant that Your Grace enrich our literature with at least twenty more such excellent plays!” It is worth noting here that in their correspondence that year they repeatedly referred to the possibility of further collaboration and even planned to stage Jókai’s novel *Tégy jót* (*Do Good*).

Even in the 20th century, *Keresd a szíved* was not included among the permanent Hungarian repertoire pieces (Szalisznyó 2023a, 697–698).

Various adaptations of *A kőszívű ember fiai* can still be seen on Hungarian stages today, posing a constant and noble challenge to dramaturgs and playwrights. And although the 1965 film adaptation, made exactly sixty years ago, may still be the most vivid in our cultural memory today, I trust that my writing has provided some inspiration for the creation of new and successful stage adaptations of Jókai’s novel.

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Zoltán Bódi

Linguistic devices expressing national identity

Identity in Mór Jókai's play *Olympi verseny*

Abstract

Mór Jókai's play, *Olympi verseny* (Olympic Competition), was written to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the National Theatre and was staged in 1887. The play presents the role of the past and the present in theatre through a debate between Past and Present, but it also transcends this: it compares the significance of historical past and present symbols of national identity. My aim in this study is to present general approaches to the concept of identity and the layers of identity, focusing primarily on the means of expression of national and linguistic identity. In my research, I examine the lexical, rhetorical, stylistic, and semiotic linguistic devices used by Jókai in his play *Olympi verseny* to represent elements of national identity. Based on this, I attempt to outline what kind of national image and identity Jókai could have envisioned in this play.

Keywords: identity, linguistic identity, national identity, rhetoric, stylistics, semiotics

Introduction

The aim of this case study is to show what national identity concept may be drawn from Mór Jókai's play *Olympi verseny* (Jókai 1893). The subtitle of the play is *Ábrándkép a budapesti Nemzeti Színház ötven éves fennállásának ünnepére* (A Vision for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the National Theatre in Budapest), commemorating an institution that became a key organisation in the process of Enlightenment, nation building, and Language Reform—that is, the formation of national identity—in the 19th century.

The idea of revitalisation of Hungarian drama and theatre also appeared in discourses introducing the Reform Era and the Language Reform. The creation of Hungarian literature, translations, and original Hungarian dramas, comedies, and other literary works was already advocated by György Bessenyei in his programme. In his pamphlet *Magyarság* (Hungarianness), he wrote that plays written in Hungarian were needed to raise the level of education and knowledge:

“Why should a nation not be able to write in its own language for its own amusement? And why would it not be nice to make one's country laugh with a comedy or a Pontyi? Let everyone go where they can go. Now is the time to raise the Hungarian nation. Why should the great university of Buda not be able to affiliate itself with Hungarians who know the language of their homeland, on an honorary basis, without pay? It would be good to create a new dictionary, in which new Hungarian words would be defined. The university could take it upon itself to examine and print good Hungarian books. It could have Cicero, Epictetus, Seneca, Rollin, Milott, Hübner, etc. translated into Hungarian. Let it also be possible to study in Hungarian; such works would be bought, and thus the university would have money and the nation would have Hungarian books.” (Bessenyei 1778, 16.)

In 1832, István Széchenyi proposed the construction of a permanent Hungarian-language theatre in his work titled *Magyar játékszínről* (On Hungarian Theatre). “He published it at the invitation of the committee sent from the county to spread the Hungarian language, which contained his thoughts on the revival of the theatre” (Gárdonyi 1941, 8).

According to Széchenyi, the National Theatre project was off to a difficult start: “In Hungary, the establishment of a permanent Hungarian theatre is an objective

that is sensitively desired by many; countless sacrifices have already been made, but Hungarians have yet to achieve any success in this, as in so many other matters. [...] The goal is nothing less and nothing else than to allow our homeland to enjoy the pleasures and benefits of theatre in general" (Széchenyi 1832, 5–7).

And why is it important to create a National Theatre with a permanent company? Because it develops and disseminates the Hungarian language, shapes taste, educates the Hungarian-speaking audience, and—last but not least—entertains them: "First and foremost, the joy of contributing to the development, refinement, and ennoblement of the national language, taste, and customs in the most effective way possible; and then, the pleasant pastime that flows directly from a well-organised theatre to the audience" (Széchenyi 1832, 9–10).

He also had a concrete idea of the location of the National Theatre: "...no general theatrical success—and this is what we need—will ever develop to any degree of perfection, either in Kassa, or in Miskolc, or in Pécs, or in any other notable place



Picture 1. The building of the National Theatre between 1880–1890 (Fortepan / Budapest City Archives. Archive number: HU.BFL.XV.19.d.1.05.083. Year: 1900. Picture number: 82138.)

in the country, no matter how many centuries pass until a proper, indestructible theatre is erected in Buda-pest” (Széchenyi 1832, 17–18).” Széchenyi originally envisioned the building on the bank of the Danube, but it was eventually built elsewhere.

The location of the National Theatre was fatefully uncertain from the moment it was founded. Finally, after some delay, construction of the first building began in 1835 in Kerepesi út (now Rákóczi út 3), and opened on August 22, 1837, under the name Pesti Magyar Színház (Hungarian Theatre of Pest), then from 1940 it operated as the National Theatre.

The building was intended to be temporary from the outset, and following extensions and renovations, fifteen years after the publication of Jókai’s play, the company finally moved out in 1908 for fire safety reasons. It was then that the state rented the iconic building of the People’s Theatre on Blaha Lujza Square for the purposes of the National Theatre, also on a temporary basis, but that is a story for another time (see National Theatre, n. d.).

On identity

Our identity is a layered, complex system with many components, ranging from the personal to the group and the national, which manifests itself in both the physical and the virtual space. “Identity is a uniquely organised cognitive structure that develops during the process of social integration, growing into one’s environment, or, in technical terms, socialisation. Language is part of a person’s cognitive equipment, and as a result, all of our mental activity, including the formation of identity, takes place through language and the mediation of language” (Kiss 2017, 806). Also: “A sense of identity is one of the fundamental conditions of human existence, and one of the most characteristic forms of collective identity is national identity...” (Bitskey 2007 cited by: Péntek 2010, 161). The Hungarian language has symbolic value in the formation of Hungarian national identity (Péntek 2010, 161–162).

According to my interpretation, identity is a set of answers to the question “Who am I?”, a fundamental part of our self-identification, a complex, multi-factorial concept in which language plays a crucial role (Bódi 2020, 10). Hungarian-language theatre plays a central role in the dissemination of culture, and through the use and dissemination of the Hungarian language it makes a fundamental contribution to the development of national identity.

Structures associated with identity

In Mór Jókai's play *Olympi verseny*, the past and the present are two personified ideals appearing in a national context, i.e., theoretical categories, basic concepts that serve as orienting models, that is, part of the system of norms. In addition to the present, the past is also a natural element of the identity of the individual and the community, therefore in my analysis I will highlight the components of the ideals of Past and Present, personified by Jókai, along with the concepts and expressions that refer to these ideals. I organise the descriptions in the play that are related to the concept of identity into thematic groups. The thematic groups are:

- tradition and fashion,
- passive and active elements,
- opposition and belonging,
- ideal and enjoyment,
- eternal values: immortality and eternal youth;
- the historical past, the unreal/idealised/ideal past and the realistic present;
- symbolic elements: the capital and the buildings that define the national identity of the capital;
- the national language,
- the arts,
- the national character.

Tradition and fashion

The description of the set design indicates that the past is based on classical traditions (Roman clothing), while the present is fashionable. Traditions based on classical values are therefore just as much a part of defining our identity as the currently popular, temporary phenomenon of fashion.

"On either side of the stage, in the foreground, stand two Ideals: Past and Present, female figures. One is dressed in ancient Roman attire, the other in contemporary fashion." (Jókai 1893, 373.)

It becomes apparent in the presentation of Past and Present, which embody the characteristics of tradition and fashion, and throughout the play that these two phenomena are opposites and yet inseparably connected:

“Siblings and enemies, born of each other, inseparable and not existing together, the names of these twin companions are ‘Past’ and ‘Present.’” (Jókai 1893, 374.)

Our identity is just as multifaceted: a combination of elements that are distant and close, but which are in any case interconnected.

Passive and active elements

It is noteworthy that both personified female figures emit light, i.e., illuminate: the past passively (reflecting), the present actively (holding a torch in her hand). A mirror held in the hand of the past reflects light in the direction it is turned, and it is in the mirror of the past that we see ourselves, i.e., it is the past that makes the present visible and understandable. And the present holds a magic torch, i.e., enchants with its light and has active creative power. Identity also consists of passive, stable, and permanent values, and an equally important part of it is the value system that actively and creatively shapes our character and self-definition.

“Past holds a magic mirror in her hand, with which she sheds light in the direction it turns. Present has a magic torch in her hand.” (Jókai 1893, 373.)

If we wish to draw conclusions about Jókai’s concept of national identity based on the above, we can conclude that it is the sum of the past, based on classical traditions, and the fashionable present, which together are necessary for (self-) interpretation. Identity includes a passive, solid value system and an active, creative force of reinterpretation.

Opposition and belonging

The past and the present are opposed to each other, but they appear together on stage, both being necessary elements of self-interpretation. Symbolic

opposites emerge, such as darkness and light, sibling and adversary. Identity is a similarly multi-layered system with many different components.

ORACLE Who are you?

PAST Siblings and opponents.

PRESENT Twins, born from each other.

PAST Never together; but inseparable.

My name is: transparent darkness,

In which all that was is seen.

PRESENT Mine is the gloom woven from rays of light,

Through which none of what will be is seen.

(Jókai 1893, 373.)

Our existence is therefore the relation between the past and the present. The present is unintelligible without the past; and while the past and the present are sharply divided, they cannot exist without each other. This is also a rhetorical device: it uses opposition and contrast to reinforce the interaction, since the opposing factors cannot be interpreted without each other (cf. Adamikné 2010, 307–309).

Ideal and enjoyment

The ideal is rooted in the past, and these are the basis of the present system of purpose, i.e. life, heart (emotion) and passion. The most characteristic symbols and concepts of the ideal rooted in the past in Jókai's play include classical arts, ancient theatre (cothurnus), lofty, full of pathos, strong in battle, tough in body and soul. "This is the flower, the foliage and the fruit of our trunk" (Jókai 1893, 382.)

And the momentary nature of the present is illustrated by Jókai with such symbols and concepts as clichés, patterns picked up here and there, the crazy whims of demons, sentimental nonsense, lamentation, false pathos, exaggeration, whining, man fallen from his pedestal, real, complete, understandable, ordinary man with his faults and virtues; the world of the heart, desires, vanity, passion.

What transpires from Jókai's symbolism continues to be relevant today: our self-definition is not only based on the fleeting, momentary, emotional, and pleasurable values of the present, but must also include a system of norms rooted in the past and passed down through generations.

PRESENT And who is this pale figure? This sad Hungarian?
 PAST This is your ancestor, the wandering minstrel,
 A poet and actor in one,
 With the whole orchestra in his hands,
 That cobza—here they are, the three of them together;
 The poet, the lute, and the storm in the sky
 Travel the country and sing
 Of days gone by, of heroes, of the glorious;
 And of their long suffering.
 (Jókai 1893, 379.)

Eternal values: immortality and eternal youth

The past is immortal, but the present is forever young. In Jókai's play, viewed from the present, the past is underdeveloped, outdated, and ridiculous, but from the perspective of the past, the present is not of better quality, but only clichéd, overly earthbound, and worldly, because those in the present do not act according to normative ideals, but live for the moment, are not pathetic, but follow the patterns of present life, and are superficial and shallow. In rhetorical terms, therefore, Jókai's portrayal of the present lacks both *ethos* and *pathos*, whereas both of these are found in the past. Without *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*, persuasion and argumentation are not valid, credible and effective (see Adamikné-Adamik-Aczél 2004, 267). Just as our past and the value system rooted in it are an essential part of our identity.

The values of the past are solid, serving as eternal points of reference, and norms only crystallise in the perspective of time—this is the connection Jókai depicts in one of the utterances of Past:

"I saw this hall come into being.—
 When the first foundations were laid
 For the humblest of dwellings
 By great men—their fame was small,
 But their deeds were great.
 They are gone, forgotten,
 But the stone they built lives on!"
 (Jókai 1893, 380.)

The idealised historical past and the realistic present

The Hungarian national past is combative, serious, and unplayful, strong in body and soul. Among the many misfortunes, Jókai highlights the Turkish occupation, and these misfortunes are useful because through them we learnt what pain was. The role of art is to convey all this in an authentic way. In Jókai's play, Sebestyén Tinódi Lantos, who authentically represented the past, is the iconic figure of the artist who lay the foundations of national identity.

From today's perspective, however, our past, full of misfortunes, is too sad, and the Turkish occupation does not need to become part of our national identity, as it is foreign.

The memories of the past are kept alive by artists who depict our historical events, and who may be interpreted as the ancestors of present-day theatre: thus, the values of the present grow out of the memories of the past.

According to the rhetorical counterpoint, however, from the present perspective all this is just a fairy tale that can and must be forgotten; from the present perspective the past is incomprehensible, but the present is understandable and real.

Jókai alludes to the relativity of the truthfulness of the past and the present when he emphasises that the present embellishes the past: the past is not as glorious and beautiful as we think today. The foundations of our identity are therefore relative.

Jókai's foresight and logical reasoning are demonstrated by the fact that, somewhat surprisingly, he also articulates one of the most important dilemmas of a very modern, 21st-century interpretation of identity:

"The faster pulse of national life
Opened up new horizons for the poet,
And with it a new path for the artist.
And no longer is our beautiful country locked around:
We are now part of the wider world,
In the past, only in the heart of our country
Did we compete with educated foreigners!
Now our competitor is the whole world."
(Jókai 1893, 387.)

So, in terms of identity interpretation, there is a contrast between the dominance of national elements and competition between the world's nations, i.e., international competitiveness.

Symbolic elements of the capital

Jókai places particular emphasis on Budapest, the nation's capital, which is the "heart of the Hungarian homeland," but the memories of past losses only weaken the self-identity of those living in the present.

"What a heartbreaking sight this is?
A cemetery covered with Turkish tombs.
Dark bastion ruins, rotten palisades,
Which are perishing in the thicket. There, the pale
Sky is pierced by Turkish mosques.—
Why do you call this the land of my cradle?"
(Jókai 1893, 378.)

In the following author's instruction, it is worth noting that Jókai highlights a set of iconic sites and buildings that symbolise Hungarian identity:

"...there is a bird's-eye view of Budapest as it is today, with the National Theatre, the Opera House, and the People's Theatre in the foreground; Buda with the completed Royal Palace and with Matthias Church in the background, and the bright daylight behind." (Jókai 1893, 380.)

The national language

One of the most important components and symbols of Hungarian national identity, the Hungarian language (Péntek 2010, 165) and its most important medium, the national theatre, come to the fore. In the past, the performing arts developed in a sophisticated language, which is one of the most important factors shaping national consciousness. The basic ideas of the Enlightenment, the Reform Era, and Language Reform resonate here: the creation of the Hungarian literary language, the revitalisation of Hungarian-language drama, the establishment of a national theatre, and we are right here, because this play

was also created specifically for the anniversary of the National Theatre. It is a fair conclusion that the National Theatre is one of the most important and central symbols of Hungarian national identity.

About a sophisticated national language, Jókai remarks that it should be understandable to both the patrician and the citizen. This idea may be a precursor of the need for intelligibility, which is a central focus of the current language strategy and still a major problem (Bódi 2023, 45). Moreover, it is also part of the European and even American language strategy programmes (EUHWC 2015, FPLG 2011, Bódi-Katona 2025).

“But they had to eradicate from themselves
That which was incompatible with the spirit of the nation:
The antiquated customs,
The sentimental whining and lamenting.
The cloud-bursting pseudo-pathos, exaggeration,
The half-hearted, whining, false emotions fashionable
In the travelling troupes’ tarpaulin tents,
And instead create anew
Manners, movements, recitations
Derived from the ancient truth, the nature of the nation.”
(Jókai 1893, 382.)

Part of Jókai’s concept of the national language is that it is in our language that we truly know ourselves, and that it is therefore what truly defines our identity. This is in line with the theories of today’s researchers cited above.

The arts

We also gain insight into the identity-forming power of art. According to Jókai, art is rooted in the national past and portrays the glorious figures of the past—those living in the present recognise themselves in the glorious characters of the past.

“The poet arrived and opened up
New regions for national art,
Bringing to life the powerful, glorious figures

Of our 'great' history,
Into whom the artist breathed his flame,
Like two demi-gods, who merged into one,
The poet and artist became creators."
(Jókai 1893, 382.)

If we move onto the aesthetic plane, then from today's perspective, art is no longer a tool, and therefore no longer a means of defining identity, but exists only for its own sake: "Today art is an end in itself" (Jókai 1893, 385). It is constantly pointed out that the past is the world of ideals, while the present is the world of reality, and that the theatre of the present must represent modern man, not the ideals formed in the past. At the same time, it is becoming increasingly clear that the reality of the present grows out of and is based on the ideals of the past, without which it is unintelligible.

"Today the concept of a people is a world.
Different people, new class, new company."
(Jókai 1893, 386.)

"We are now part of the wider world.
In the past, only in the heart of our country
Did we compete with educated foreigners!
Now, our competitors are the whole world:
And we must reach the same level
As the ancient art of great families of people."
(Jókai 1893, 387.)

The national character

Returning to the nation-building power of art, theatre and literature, Jókai believed that the national characteristics of Hungarian identity were as follows: the Hungarian people live on plains of mirage, dwell in thatched huts and revel in taverns: "This is the flower, the foliage and the fruit of our trunk" (Jókai 1893, 382).

The role of art is to present identity to the nation, to reinforce it, and it is through art that the nation recognises itself. Folk songs, Hungarian music and Hungarian theatre are important elements of national identity.

The rhetorical structure of the work

For the sake of interpretability and illustration of the theme, and not least for the sake of theatrical presentation, Jókai personifies the past and the present in the form of two female characters. The author therefore employs the tool of metaphorisation, and, more specifically, anthropomorphism.

“On either side of the stage, in the foreground, stand two Ideals: Past and Present, female figures. One is dressed in ancient Roman attire, the other in contemporary fashion.—Past holds a magic mirror in her hand, with which she sheds light in the direction it turns. Present has a magic torch in her hand.—In the center, on a tripod is a large bust with a mask; the messenger of the Oracle of Delphi, with a flame burning on the altar in front of her.” (Jókai 1893, 373.)

The text takes us through the dialogue between the personified Past and Present, which is personal but does not become personal. So, Jókai is not manipulating, he merely makes something that is abstract and theoretical understandable and worldly. The concrete embodiment and interpretative framework of the abstract and theoretical concept of identity is the past and the present. This is true not only in Jókai's play, but also in general.

Jókai introduces the past and the present as ideals of equal rank, neither one superior to the other, with the two personified figures participating in the dialogue as equals: “On either side of the stage, in the foreground, stand two Ideals: Past and Present, female figures” (Jókai 1893, 373).

The unity of *ethos*, *pathos*, *logos* is beautifully delineated in the play. Ethical principles are relative in terms of the rhetorical structure of the work, because viewed from the present, the past is underdeveloped, outdated, and ridiculous. But the present, from the perspective of the past, is not of better quality, it is clichéd, too earthbound, because people today do not act according to classical values, but live for today, and the patterns of present life are superficial and shallow compared to those of the past.

The *pathos*, or the elevated tone appropriate to the situation, is in fact associated with the past in the rhetorical structure of the work: Roman attire, the heroism evident in our historical traditions, and the mission of art to describe a glorious historical past. The comprehensibility of literature and

its appropriateness to the situation and audience are fundamental requirements.

"But they had to eradicate from themselves
That which was incompatible with the spirit of the nation:
The antiquated customs,
The sentimental whining and lamenting.
The cloud-bursting pseudo-pathos, exaggeration,
The half-hearted, whining, false emotions fashionable
In the travelling troupes' tarpaulin tents,
And instead create anew
Manners, movements, recitations
Derived from the ancient truth, the nature of the nation."
(Jókai 1893, 382.)

Finally, *logos* may be observed in the rhetorical structure of the entire work. The main rhetorical device is juxtaposition, contrast, which is not contradiction. Thus, two opposing characters, ideas, or conceptual categories are juxtaposed from many aspects, and the conclusion reveals the weighing (Adamikné 2010, 307-309). And the conclusion is based on compromise. According to Jókai, the ideals (norms) of the present can be interpreted from the perspective of the past. The present also appreciates the glory of the past, the great authors of the past, the beauty of language, and from this comes the value system of the present.

ORACLE The contest is over. My verdict:
'The laurel is precious which the happy living
Place from their forehead upon the head of the departed.'
PRESENT Let your word be followed, O goddess!
'The laurel is precious which the happy living
Place from their forehead upon the head of the departed.'
(Jókai 1893, 388.)

If we evaluate the Oracle's verdict from the perspective of national identity, which is the focus of our inquiry, we see that our national identity is based on our national past, history, and traditions, and that all of this is conveyed through the arts, literature, and theatre through the national language.

The conclusion is indeed a compromise, because in the last monologue of Present, we read that the glory of the present is based on the traditions of the past, and the Oracle's logical conclusion after this is that the metaphor of glory, the laurel wreath, is placed on the head of the Past.

"A glorious heritage! This is undeniable!
But none of it has been wasted:
We have lost nothing of our traditions..."
(Jókai 1893, 387.)

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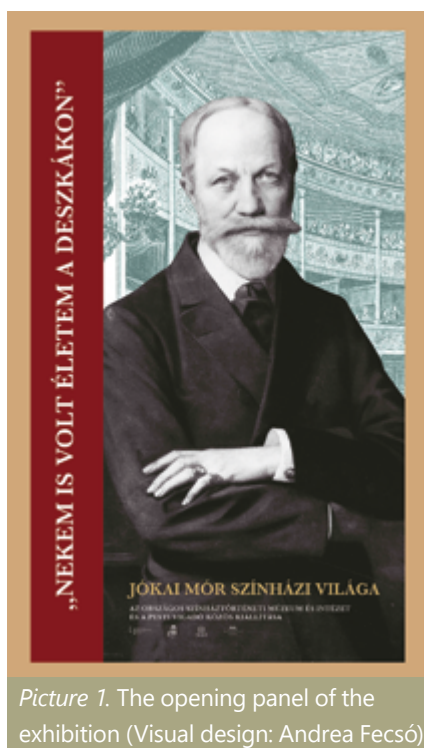
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Beáta Huber – Erika Zsuzsanna Kiss

The theatrical world of Mór Jókai

**“I too had a life on the boards” – An exhibition
by the OSZMI (Hungarian Theatre Museum
and Institute): the curators’ perspective**



Picture 1. The opening panel of the exhibition (Visual design: Andrea Fecső)

Many people know Mór Jókai, the great storyteller of Hungarian literature, for his novels, but few know that his oeuvre was linked to the world of theatre in many ways. The Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute (Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet, hereinafter referred to as OSZMI) presented this unique segment of his oeuvre in an exhibition prepared for the 200th anniversary of the birth of the Prince of Writers.

Looking back on Jókai's stage career, we can probably agree with Kálmán Mikszáth, who believed that the writer “[a]lways longed for stage success more than anything else. He loved noisy triumphs. The appreciation sown in the wake of narrative works grows slowly and unnoticed, like aloe, and only blossoms at the end of life. A drama matures into a leafy palm tree in an hour, and it bears its dates already there in the lights.” Between

1853 and 1894, Jókai wrote the stage adaptations of eleven of his short stories and novels, which were eagerly included in the repertoires of theatre companies in the capital and the countryside. In addition to the plays that filled an entire evening, his occasional plays and poems written for theatre anniversaries and the inauguration of newly built theatres also gave the writer the opportunity to experience the audience's appreciation firsthand. Writing theatre reviews for the *Vasárnapi Ujság* under the pseudonym Márton Kakas, he also indirectly educated and recruited an audience for the National Theatre. His personal life was also interwoven with the theatre, as he married an actress on both occasions. As the Prince of Writers and a public figure, he spent almost his entire life on the "public stage."

In our exhibition we have explored these themes. When compiling the tables, we considered it important that in addition to biographical details, events, and performances related to Jókai in the 19th century, later 20th-century performances of Jókai's plays should also be included, since, according to contemporary reports, many of our great actors gave memorable performances in them. The rich source material preserved in the collections of OSZMI provided us with the opportunity to illustrate this extensive period appropriately. The works of art, lithographs, photographs, theatre programmes, manuscripts and moving image excerpts featured in the exhibition are accompanied by quotations from Jókai and excerpts from the writings of his contemporaries, which together—as our concept envisions—evoke Jókai's theatrical world for visitors.

In the short texts below, we have summarised the background material of the thematic units in the exhibition, each illustrated with a typical photo.

Historical tragedies

During his career, Jókai tried his hand at almost every theatrical genre. His first two plays, *Két gyám* [Two Guardians] (1846) and *A földönfutó* (The Wanderer; 1850), belonged to the genre of popular folk plays that were popular at the time, but were dropped from the repertoire after their premiere. The historical tragedies written between 1850 and 1860 had a greater resonance with the public (*Dalma*, 1852; *Manlius Sinister*, 1853; *Könyves Kálmán* [Coloman the Learned], 1855; *Dózsa György* [György Dózsa], 1857; *A szigetvári vértanúk* [The Martyrs of Szigetvár], 1860). The audience, disheartened by the failure of the lost War of Independence and the oppression, watched with enthusiasm the wonderful



Picture 2. Béla Bercsényi as Zrínyi in the stage adaptation of Mór Jókai's *A szigetvári vértanúk* (The Martyrs of Szigetvár), National Theatre, January 5, 1894. (Photo: Strelisky)

stories of self-sacrificing heroes fighting for the happiness of the nation. Although critics have on several occasions accused Jókai of violating the strict laws of tragedy in his plays, audiences of the time were not concerned. The unlikely twists of the plot, expressive acting, and poetic language rich in imagery proved sufficient for resounding success. The role portraits that have come down to us from that era testify to the fact that ornate, elaborate costumes were considered the main tools for creating theatrical effect.

Of all the historical dramas, *A szigetvári vértanúk* had the longest stage career, being performed until the end of the 19th century. However,

as political circumstances changed, Jókai's historical tragedies slowly lost their relevance and, with it, their stage.

The theatre insider and the theatre critic

Jókai was well acquainted with the inner workings and relations of the National Theatre, as well as the behind-the-scenes secrets through his wife, Róza Laborfalvi. He collected these experiences in his book *A hajdani Nemzeti Színházról* (About the former National Theatre). The anecdotes do not only reveal interesting facts such as "the site on which the National Theatre was built was once a Turkish cemetery,"¹

¹ Jókai, Mór. 1900. *A hajdani Nemzeti Színházról*. Published by Magyar Elektronikus Könyvtár (Hungarian Electronic Library).



Picture 3. The Griff Inn and the National Theatre in the 19th century (OSZMI Topographical Collection)

Picture 4. Gábor Egressy as Lajos Gritti in Ede Szigligeti's *Gritti*, National Theatre, April 19, 1845 (drawing by Miklós Barabás, 1845)



but also give us an insight into the interior design of the theatre, the theatre-going habits of the time, the composition of the audience, and the acting of Hungarian and foreign actors performing at the National Theatre.

Jókai saw the primary purpose of the theatre—being on the side of liberal theatre politics—in the dissemination of national language and culture. He sought to serve this purpose with his theatre reviews, which appeared in the widely read *Vasárnapi Ujság* newspaper from 1856 onwards, in which he, assuming the persona of Márton Kakas,

a villager, viewed all elements of the theatrical performance with naive amazement. The resulting humorous insights and explanations were intended to familiarise the public with the theatre genres and actors, and to stimulate interest in theatre. “Opera is, my Christian brothers, when a man utters this short phrase, ‘Bring me a bottle of wine!’ in this manner: ‘Bri-i-i-ing me-e-e- a-a-a bo-o-o-ttle o-o-of wi-i-i-i-i-ne.’”²

Although humour often took the edge off criticism, critical remarks about programming policies that favoured opera over drama or the lack of professional management were serious issues that Jókai had to address.

The premiere of *Az arany ember* (*The Man with the Golden Touch*) at the National Theatre

“I must admit that for me, this is my favourite novel. [...] I also wrote a play based on it, and it is my only play that has remained in the repertoire for twenty years.”³ Although Jókai in his reminiscences considered more than one of his novels to be his “favourite,” *Az arany ember* occupies a distinguished place in his oeuvre in several respects. The adventurous story of the Danube boatman was “brought to life” on the stage of the National Theatre in 1884. The spectacular sets, made based on the author’s direction, evoked the world of the novel. The stage version retained the main characters and plot of the story, and director Ede Paulay also participated in the finalisation of the script. Thanks to his theatrical experience, the performance became more fast-paced and had an effective ending: Timár, returning in Turkish disguise, removes all obstacles from Timea’s path to complete happiness.

The premiere was a huge success. The audience received the performance with great enthusiasm: Jókai was applauded nineteen times in front of the curtain and the actors were also celebrated with a huge ovation.

The legendary success of the show was not forgotten. *Az arany ember* remained in the National Theatre’s repertoire for more than fifty years.

2 Márton Kakas at the theatre, Letter IV: *William Tell*, opera by Rossini. *Vasárnapi Ujság*, June 22, 1856.

3 Jókai, Mór. 1895. *Színművek*. Published by Magyar Elektronikus Könyvtár (Hungarian Electronic Library).



Picture 5. Szeréna Fáy as Timea in the stage adaptation of Mór Jókai's novel *Az arany ember* (*The Man with the Golden Touch*), National Theatre, December 3, 1884. (Photo: István Goszleth)

Picture 6. Emília Márkus as Noémi in the stage adaptation of Mór Jókai's novel *Az arany ember* (*The Man with the Golden Touch*), National Theatre, December 3, 1884. (Photo: István Goszleth)

Occasional poems and plays

As a mark of respect for the Prince of Writers, Jókai was often asked to write occasional poems, i.e., prologues, or plays, for theatre anniversaries and opening ceremonies. Their theme and style were more in line with the conventions that had developed up to that point, with little room for the writer's ingenuity. In most of the prologues, the theatre is presented as a sacred place where vivid images of the glorious past inspire patriotic spirit and national culture.



Picture 7. The opening performance of the Vígszínház – Mór Jókai: *A Barangok, vagy a peoniai vojvoda* (The Barangs, or the Voivoda of Peonia), May 1, 1896. (OSZMI Theatre Programme and Small Print Library)

The reality, however, was often different from this ideal. The light-hearted, entertaining shows put on by the commercially oriented provincial companies did not always serve higher cultural and moral goals. Jókai expressed his disappointment through a reference made to this perverse situation in his prologues for the opening of the theatres in Pápa and Pozsony.

Jókai, the “oldest festive prologue-cobbler,” deviated twice from the tradition of occasional playwriting, but neither of his attempts was successful; tradition proved stronger. His play for the centenary of professional Hungarian theatre acting, titled *Thespis kordéja* (Thespis’ Cart), was not performed because it revealed with excessive honesty “all the miseries of the first troupe of actors, their struggle with poverty and shame.”⁴ In his three-act comedy, *A Barangok* (The Barangs), presented at the opening ceremony of

the Vígszínház, he drew a satirical portrait of the Millennial Hungarian nation, but the celebrating genteel audience did not want to recognise themselves in the mocking reflection, so the play was taken off the programme after a few performances.

4 Quoted by István Fried, see the relevant description at <https://irodalmiszemle.sk/2021/04/fried-istvan-kassa-irodalma-az-irodalmi-kassa-marai-sandor-irasaiban> (last visited: October 30, 2025).

Novel adaptations

In the last third of the 19th century, Jókai's stage works, based on his novels and short stories, were aimed at a large audience that liked spectacular and entertaining plays. However, none of them matched the success of *Az arany ember*. Of his novel *A kőszívű ember fiai* (*The Baron's Sons*), only his play titled *Keresd a szíved*, which highlights the storyline of Richard Baradlay, received significant acclaim at the Buda Theatre Circle in 1896.

With Jókai's death, his dramatisations also slowly faded into oblivion. In the period between the two world wars, Sándor Hevesi's reworkings enjoyed considerable public success. For example, his play based on Jókai's novel *Az új földesúr* (*The New Landlord*) reached its fiftieth performance at the Hungarian Theatre in 1916. According to the description in *Színház és Divat*, Hevesi's method



Picture 8. Éva Vass (Edith Liedenwall) and Jenő Pataky (Richárd Baradlay), Ifjúsági Színház (Youth Theatre), December 10, 1953 (Photo: Magyar Fotó – Éva Keleti)

consisted of nothing more than “condensing Jókai’s magnificent characters and explosive scenes into concise, unified stage images, leaving out, of course, everything that fell outside the spatial and temporal limitations of the stage.”⁵

Following nationalisation, various versions of Jókai’s novels have been performed on Hungarian stages, often side by side, right up to the present day. Most of them retold Jókai’s works, which have become classics, adapting them to the tastes of contemporary audiences, so that in addition to prose adaptations, Jókai’s stories also conquered the musical stage. We also find examples where adaptations were created for a narrower audience, such as young people, or where the profile of a particular theatre became decisive in the dramaturgical work. For example, the State Déryné Theatre, which travels around villages performing public education functions, has brought almost all of Jókai’s major novels to life in the form of live theatrical picture books.

Mór Jókai’s social engagement



Picture 9. Portrait of Mór Jókai (etching by J. Axmann after Miklós Barabás, 1858)

Although Jókai took up the pen instead of the sword and did not lose his life on the battlefield, he became a symbol of the 1848–1849 Revolution and War of Independence as one of the Youths of March. He recorded his memories of this period in his volumes *Forradalmi és csataképek* (Revolutionary and Battle Pictures; 1850) and *Egy bujdosó naplója* (Diary of a Fugitive; 1850).

One of the most famous moments of 15 March took place at the National Theatre, where the play *Bánk bán* was performed that evening. On the stage, Jókai gave an impromptu speech, and then Róza Laborfalvi, dressed as Gertrudis, stepped forward and pinned a national cockade to his chest.

⁵ *Színház és Divat*, December 10, 1916.



Picture 10. Greeting Mór Jókai at the Vigadó (drawing by Nelli H. Hirsch on the front page of the January 14, 1894 issue of the *Vasárnapi Ujság*)

One of the most important institutions of the second half of the 19th century was the newly opened Pesti Vigadó in 1865. Jókai attended many of its events, including balls, and concerts, sometimes even as an organiser. One of the tableaux of the exhibition, *Jókai Mór írói jubileuma a Vigadóban* (Mór Jókai's

Literary Jubilee at the Vigadó), shows the large-scale celebration organised in honour of Jókai in January 1894. The *Vasárnapi Ujság* newspaper reported that “everyone was there, from the government, public figures, scientists, artists, representatives of Hungarian women, to children.”⁶

Mór Jókai's wives

Jókai was also closely connected to the theatre in his private life. He married twice, and both times he married an actress: In 1848, Róza Laborfalvi, the celebrated star of the time, and in 1899, Bella Nagy, who was just starting her career. On stage, the actresses played leading roles in Jókai's plays, and we can also recognise them in important female characters in several of his novels. Róza, for example, inspired Erzsike in *A tengerszemű hölgy* (Eyes like the Sea) and actress Judit Hargitay in *Politikai divatok* (Political Fashions), while Bella's qualities can be discovered in the character of Eszta in *Öreg ember nem vén ember* (An Old Man is No Fool).

The acting career of the young Róza Laborfalvi took off in 1837, and after the events of 1848, when she married Jókai, their names became forever linked. Their marriage lasted until the actress's death in 1886.

In 1899, Mór Jókai married Bella Nagy, who was fifty-four years younger than him, and whom he had met while she was a pupil of Szidi Rákosi. A mentor-student relationship developed between the writer and the girl, which eventually blossomed into love and culminated in a happy marriage. Bella remained faithful to her spouse even after Jókai's death, and although she was very young, she never remarried.

Kálmán Mikszáth, in his essay *Jókai Mórok* (Mór Jókais), written for the writer's 50th anniversary, listed the areas in which Jókai excelled. About Jókai, the writer, editor, politician, winemaker, and astronomer, he tried to unravel the mystery of how one person could fit so many roles into his life. And in his monograph on Jókai, Mikszáth pondered whether theatricality—the ability to play roles—had become part of Jókai's nature. Of his enigmatic personality, the author wrote, “it was almost astounding that he did not seem to notice his own glory. Many people thought it was a pretence, a theatrical mannerism to hide his true nature. It seemed likely, but if he was putting on an act, he played it so well that

⁶ *Vasárnapi Ujság*, June 14, 1894.



Picture 11. Mór Jókai and Róza Laborfalvi at Balatonfüred (Photo by Samu Lengyel, 1873; source: Jókai 200 szabadon, MNMKK)



Picture 12. Mór Jókai and Bella Nagy in Naples (Photo by Studio Sante Avati, 1899; source: Jókai 200 szabadon, MNMKK)

it must be taken as true, because if the cat is never out of the bag while the bag lasts, it must be assumed that there was no cat in it.”⁷ We hope that our exhibition has served to deepen the question.

“I too had a life on the boards” – The theatrical world of Mór Jókai

Opening: Pesti Vigadó, May 15, 2025.

Curators: Beáta Huber and Erika Zsuzsanna Kiss

Visual designer: Andrea Fecsó

⁷ Kálmán Mikszáth, 1894, in Kálmán Mikszáth. 1907. *Jókai Mór élete és kora*. Published by Magyar Elektronikus Könyvtár (Hungarian Electronic Library).

SZFE's autumn publications

Béatrice Picon-Vallin: *Théâtre du Soleil – Ariane Mnouchkine Napszínházának első fél évszázada* (Théâtre du Soleil – The first half century of Ariane Mnouchkine's Theatre of the Sun)

Béatrice Picon-Vallin's beautifully illustrated book presents the work of the Théâtre du Soleil (The Theatre of the Sun), founded more than five decades ago by Ariane Mnouchkine and still active today, hallmarked by the long history and global impact of its company, and the unique artistic quality of its productions. The book was first published by Actes Sud in November 2014 and won the "best book on theatre" award in France in 2015. Now Hungarian readers interested in the subject can also hold in their hands the album-monograph published by the University of Theatre and Film Arts, translated by Zsófia Rideg.

Ariane Mnouchkine's company, founded in 1964, redefined the concept of collective theatre, establishing a horizontal structure in which creation and community functioning form an inseparable unit. The volume provides a detailed analysis of the artistic and social aspects of this democratic model: joint decision-making and long community rehearsal processes that define Soleil's unique creative language. Mnouchkine's *ars poetica* becomes the theatre's moral and artistic axis: "I believe that theatre exists to tell the story of the world, to illuminate it for us, and to empower us to understand it—and thereby to change it. I can't imagine this art without such a connection to the world."

The Hungarian edition, published in autumn, is, in the words of series editor Enikő Sepsi, "a milestone in theatre history," as it makes the essence of Mnouchkine's collective theatre practice available to the Hungarian public. The special value of the book lies in the fact that it is also a reflection based on personal experiences: Béatrice Picon-Vallin also incorporated testimonies from Soleil artists into her text, thus allowing the work to reflect both the researcher's and the artist's perspectives.

Translated by: Zsófia Rideg

Edited by: Judit Helfrich

A summary of the sold-out premiere, with the participation of the author, Béatrice Picon-Vallin, and two actors from Soleil, Judit Jancsó and Duccio Bellugi-Vannuccini, is available here:

<https://szfe.hu/hirek/konyvbemutato-napszinhaz>

The book is available for purchase at the L'Harmattan Publishing House webshop:

<https://www.harmattan.hu/theatre-du-soleil-3473?keyword=soleil>

***Médialexikon* (Media Encyclopaedia)**

Two decades after the first edition, in October 2025, the University of Theatre and Film Arts published *Médialexikon* in a renewed form, as a webbook. The aim of this electronic publication is to present the knowledge and contexts that are essential for conscious media use and critical thinking. The 2025 edition, which is a continuation of the previous printed versions from 2005 and 2016, has been expanded by the authors to include the perspectives of the age of online knowledge sharing and artificial intelligence, thus combining human expertise with the possibilities offered by AI in a unique way—while firmly maintaining the idea that the foundation of good media literacy remains knowledge, experience and critical acumen. Without knowledge and awareness, the use of artificial intelligence may easily lead to a trap situation where there is an increased risk of misinterpreting information and becoming a victim of manipulation.

This is precisely where *Médialexikon* aims to help: by revealing connections, defining precise concepts, and offering a systematic approach, it contributes to conscious use of media and an understanding of the new technological environment.

“We believe it is important that *Médialexikon* should not only provide guidance for media researchers, communication professionals, journalists and decision-makers, but also become a comprehensive handbook for the media profession. We want to provide readers with a reference work that will serve as a compass in the rapidly changing media world. We have also sought to make the content of the volume accessible to a wider audience: we recommend it primarily to students participating in media education, university and college students, teachers, researchers, communication and political experts, as well as

parents, who play a key role in the digital age in educating their children to be conscious, critical media consumers,” wrote editor Zsolt Antal in the foreword to *Médialexikon*.

The encyclopedia will be expanded and updated annually, and its content will be reviewed by a wide range of national and international experts to ensure that it is always up-to-date and reliable for students, teachers, parents, media professionals, and all conscious media users.

Authors of the 2025 edition: Zsolt Antal, Géza Balázs, Nándor Birher, György Cserey, Eszter Ozsváth, Loretta Tóth

This volume was compiled using entries from the following publications and authors:

2005 edition: Zsolt Antal, Tibor Gazsó, Tamás Kubínyi

2015 edition: Zsolt Antal, Tibor Gazsó, Tamás Kubínyi, Veronika Pelle

Photos: Barbara Baska, Eszter Ozsváth, János Vecsernyés

Edited by: Zsolt Antal

News on the launch of *Médialexikon* on 15 October 2025 can be read here:

<https://szfe.hu/hirek/paros-konyvbemutato-az-uraniaban-az-szfe-konyvek-sorozat-uj-kotetei>

How to access *Médialexikon*: <https://medialexikon.szfe.hu>

Patrick Nash: Rövidfilmesek kézikönyve – Forgatókönyvírás lépésről lépésre (Short Films – Writing the Screenplay)

Multi-award-winning film and short film screenwriter and film specialist Patrick Nash has put his experience as a member of the selection panel for the Oscar-qualifying Foyle Film Festival in Derry City, Northern Ireland, into this long-needed volume, which is also well suited for use in education and provides useful advice for novice, aspiring, and advanced screenwriters alike.

“Although Patrick Nash’s book was published in 2012, it is more relevant today than ever. On the one hand, thanks to online platforms, short feature films are more accessible, which has led to a significant increase in their popularity. On the other hand, technological advances over the past decade or so have made filmmaking much easier. Not only have cameras become cheaper, but their sensitivity has also increased, meaning that high-quality moving images can be recorded even in poor lighting conditions, without the need for large

lighting equipment or a large crew as was previously the case. The price of sound recording equipment has also fallen, and these devices have become smaller and lighter. The post-production process has also undergone significant changes, as the supporting software has become accessible to almost everyone. So it's no wonder that more and more people are getting involved in making low-budget short feature films. However, the modest budget still does not allow for the creation of large-scale spectacles, so works of this type must focus on the story.

Although a good screenplay is no guarantee of a good film, it is a prerequisite for one. And therein lies the secret of the timeliness of this long-needed volume: the author provides advice on how to write a screenplay of the right quality in a professional manner. It provides assistance in how to find a topic, develop a story structure, decide on the format of the screenplay, write good dialogue, bring characters to life, avoid clichés, and evoke emotions in the viewer with our short feature film. In other words, he shares with us the proven recipe for a successful short film script," wrote writer, director, and professional reviewer János Vecsernyés in the book's blurb, adding that the book is not only a guide for short film productions.

Nash's fundamental belief is that short films are the best learning ground for filmmaking, which is why he uses practical examples to explain the writing process from idea to screenplay, emphasizing every element. In addition to one of the author's own works, the volume also includes the screenplays of two Oscar-nominated short films, *The Door* (Juanita Wilson) and *The Crush* (Michael Creagh), which help readers gain a better understanding of the structure of screenplays.

Translated by: János Regős and Eszter Ozsváth

Edited by: Judit Helfrich

News on the launch of the manual on 15 October 2025 can be read here:

<https://szfe.hu/hirek/paros-konyvbemutato-az-uraniaban-az-szfe-konyvek-sorozat-uj-kotetei>

The book is available for purchase at the L'Harmattan Publishing House webshop:

<https://www.harmattan.hu/rovidfilmek-kezikonyve-3429?keyword=r%C3%B6vidfilm>

About our Authors

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"Idősebb Kemény Henrik utolsó levele" ("Henrik Kemény the Elder's last letter"; *Szcenárium*, 2021); "Énekes madár születik" ("A singing bird is born"; *Magyar Művészet*, 2022); "Tamási Áron a bábszínházban" ("Áron Tamási in the puppet theatre"; *Hitel*, 2022).

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Art historian, museologist of the Modern Textile Collection of the Hungarian National Museum since 2011. Her collection-oriented academic research focuses on the history of clothing and lifestyles in the 19th century. She is the curator and contributor of successful exhibitions both in Hungary and abroad. She strives to share her knowledge of applied arts and fashion history in a variety of ways. As a university lecturer, she is affiliated with SZFE (University of Theatre and Film Arts), ELTE BTK (Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Humanities), and MKE (Hungarian University of Fine Arts), where she is involved in training visual designers, museologists, and restorers, but she has also been involved in the education of fashion experts and art appraisers.

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