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# Political Shakespeare

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## History – Performance – Memory: *Richard III* and the Subversion of Theatre in Hungary, 1955

You have to make real the unrealistic hump on your back,  
in a way that you bend the back of the world in the same way,  
And if this gigantic back also bends, Richard's back follows a giant design,  
In stooped times a stooped man thus can still become a fashion item,  
With itching back we admire him, who recognized the curve of history,  
As King Richard before the end had become for four acts a fashion item.

Géza Bereményi, *Song about the Cunning Shakespeare William*<sup>1</sup>

Totalitarian societies distinguish themselves by their frequent reliance on the theatrical. To demonstrate their dominance in symbolic ways, Socialist regimes used the paraphernalia of the theatre to create a legitimising discourse for themselves.

[With] visual images of socialist propaganda (billboards, slogans, advertisements)[...] with statues, monuments and buildings legitimising the new, Communist regime, as well as by creating new symbols advertising Communist rule [...], those in power wished to remind everybody everywhere that they irreversibly live among new settings, and the changes had implacably reached the least details of the lives as well (Imre, “A diktatúra teátralitása...”).

By organising everyday life as if it were theatre, totalitarian regimes reminded people of their altered circumstances and presented this ongoing performance as if it were the result of a broad social consensus.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Hungarian are mine.

<sup>2</sup> As this consensus was centrally applied to all layers of society, theatricality infiltrated into the everyday lives of people in other ways. They slowly became the actors in this Socialist performance. After awhile many of them learned what they could say or do in public places and accepted the rules as well as the roles those in power thrust upon them.

Using the agencies of theatre for every day political life, Socialist regimes simultaneously recognized the political capacities which lay in the theatre itself, and wished to apply them for propaganda purposes. Behind the Iron Curtain theatres were nationalized<sup>3</sup> and provided with financial aids, but closely monitored and fairly strictly controlled. Their repertoire was set by central cultural authorities and solely included works deemed harmless or socially progressive by the functionaries of the Communist Party.

The generously subsidized theatres followed Soviet guidelines in their repertoires and were expected to contribute to the establishment of a Socialist culture. Shakespeare was one of the classic playwrights who had a stable position in the Socialist theatrical repertoire. New Shakespearean productions were widely advertised and much awaited as events which celebrated the “almost fairy-tale-like wealth” (Márkus 169) of new Socialist theatre culture. Because of his status as the most appreciated playwright in the world, Shakespeare appeared to be the ideal author to reach the widest strata of audience and bridge the gap between Socialist Realist theatre ideals and classical literary traditions. Shakespeare was also a representative of internationalism, an author all Socialist brother countries could embrace, and thus an unquestionable authority which every culture had to acknowledge. He also served as an example for the native ideologically reliable Socialist writers, who after the short period of classical drama production, were expected to take over the stages with their new works.<sup>4</sup>

No wonder, therefore, that the first theatre of Hungary, the National Theatre, also celebrated the liberation of the country after the Second World War with a cycle of Shakespearean drama. Much awaited and state supported, it opened on 13 December 1947 with a production of *Richard III*. The performance lasted for almost six hours and reflected the concept the newly appointed directorate of the theatre advertised as “the complete Shakespeare”. For them this meant the uncut text of the Hungarian Complete Edition. According to official statements this contrasted with the heavily cut play scripts of the pre-Socialist bourgeois theatres which allegedly falsified “Shakespeare’s meaning”. As Tamás Major, Director of the National Theatre repeatedly stated, for a true Shakespearean, “the complete Shakespeare [was] the only acceptable policy” (Antal 1982: 58).

The concept of a monumental, uncut Shakespeare production reverberated in the choice of the director as well. Kálmán Nádasdy, one of the most important directors of the contemporary Hungarian opera scene, was a master of stirring crowd scenes and an advocate of realist directorial concepts. In *Richard III* he manoeuvred more than 50 extras on stage planted in heavy, stylized scenery. Most reviews commented on the repeated appearance of the

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<sup>3</sup> In Hungary this process started in 1947 and ended in the summer of 1949, with the official decree passed on 11 August.

<sup>4</sup> The lamentation about the lack of such a socially conscious native theatrical and literary canon was often sounded in Hungarian sources. See Antal 1983: 58.

funeral processions marching through the stage in full array, leaving a decisive mark on the whole production (Bihari 7, Goda 23–25, Somlyó typescript).

From surviving pictures and contemporary descriptions we can reconstruct a traditional show which in reviews, however, was received as highly topical. As György Somlyó, essayist and literary critic, stated:

The works of art are transmitted through the history of mankind as short wave signals through the air. A never-ending “fading” changes their latitudes, thus sometimes we can receive them clearly, but at other times they creak annoyingly. At certain moments they lose their voice completely. We cannot believe that there has ever been a better time for receiving *Richard III* this clearly than it is now when Europe slowly recovers from the horrors of fascism (Somlyó).

Most of the critics shared Somlyó’s opinion sensing that for the contemporary Hungarian audience of the late 1940s, Richard was no longer a dusty historical figure from the distant past or a “creature of the exalted poetic imagination” (Bihari 7) but an embodiment of the horrors they all experienced in the recent past. The monthly magazine *Asszonyok* [Women] even likened the women of the play to figures from recent history: Elizabeth was compared to a mother whose sons were torn away from her in the war, Lady Anne to a traitor who fell for the “broad-shouldered, bred and trained SS soldiers who marched through Hungarian villages” (Izsáky 4), and the two royal households to families which had been torn apart in the turmoil of the war.

For the critics, the war proved that neither of the adversaries was right, for “one grew out of the other – as fascism grew out of capitalism – and they were not even antagonistic, only hostile to each other” (Somlyó). Such argumentation could only have one end: a new system was needed to bring about a new age, an era of humanism and equality. For many reviewers, the applause which welcomed Richmond at the end of the production, appearing all in white as the saviour of the country, was also seen as welcoming the new political system of the country (Somlyó, Goda 23–25).

Such an understanding of the intentions of the performance would probably have pleased Tamás Major, who played Richard. In the theatre business since the 1930s, Major had become an institution in the Hungarian theatre world. An ardent Communist, who during the war took part in the antifascist lecture series called “Vigadó Nights”, he was rewarded for his services in 1945 by being named the Director of the National Theatre, a position he kept for seventeen years. He was famous and infamous for putting his hands on Shakespeare from very early in his career, monopolizing him for his own purposes,<sup>5</sup> by introducing what he called “progressive Socialist Shakespeare” (Antal 1982: 74). An advocate of the political theatre he repeatedly professed that “the text does not make an effect for its own sake, but it exists in a certain social situation

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<sup>5</sup> For further details see Molnár Gál 1977: 274–300.

and aims at creating real social bonds when uttered by the characters”. (Theatre Programme 1983) In an interview before the 1947-*Richard*, he indirectly compared Gloucester to Hitler by calling the murder of Clarence’s children “Richard’s Stalingrad” (Molnár Gál 1972: 35). In his portrayal, however, he never directly linked the two characters, neither through make-up nor gestures. Still, cultural memory retained that parallel so much so that in October 1951 József Révai, the almighty cultural guru of the Party, criticized Major, claiming that Major had equated Richard with Hitler, (Molnár Gál 1972: 34) and thus oversimplified the great playwright’s complex intentions for characterisation.

Révai never liked topical theatre productions, as he was completely aware of their subversive capacities, so when in 1955 the National Theatre revived the successful *Richard III* production he warned Major in advance not to change the concept of the performance and to avoid political undertones. Indeed, the cast remained almost the same, with minor changes in smaller roles. Nádasdy retained the original directorial concept, but the scenery was simplified to make the changes of scenes easier. Although the elements of the production remained thus more or less unchanged on the stage, the shift in the circumstances of the offstage world modified their effect. By 1955 the Communists, who had come to power by manipulating the 1947 elections, had strengthened their grip on the country. Hungary also had its share in the personality cult of the Socialist states of Eastern Europe: with domestic terrorism, deportations, political trials, famine and intimidation, on the one hand, and hurrah-optimism, winning propaganda and perpetual self-adoration, on the other. “A maniac of power, an ingenious villain” as Richard was described in one review (Illés 11), would have been frightfully familiar to the members of the audience. For this reason, all reviews – in line with the argument laid down in the epilogue of the Complete Hungarian Edition, which also appeared in 1955 – tactfully located the play in the Middle Ages.

Reviewers deflated any possible parallels to current events or figures. For them the drama was simply a portrayal of the anarchic wars of medieval England (Kéry 10, Gyárfás 13), exemplifying “the most dangerous and most destructive characteristics of fading feudalism” (Lutter 9–12) and “representing a decaying feudal society” (Keszi 7). In this reading of the play Richard became the embodiment of a historical example “through whose deeds one can be taught what feudal anarchy looked like” (Illés 11), “the cruellest tyrant of 15<sup>th</sup>-century England” (Simon 11) and “the last, almost symbolic figure of hated feudal anarchy” (Kéry 10). Critics claimed that contemporary audiences had far more difficulties to comprehend the motives of Richard’s actions than Elizabethan London theatre-goers, who “still sensed the bloody events of the recent past” (Molnár 10) and could relate to them. Miklós Gyárfás sums it up: “In 1947 the historical environment simplified Richard’s tyrannous journey and equated him with Hitler. Even Major stressed the otherwise incomprehensible

inner parallels. This revival, however, remains in England of the 15th century [...] in an age of aimless greed for power” (Gyárfás 13).

The ideological basis thus set, with possibly harmful edges of the play neutralized, the critics celebrated the popular production as “a success of our cultural revolution, a noteworthy event of our modern Socialist-realist theatre” (Lutter 9–12). Many reviewers praised the courting of Lady Anne over her husband’s coffin as one of the highlights, as it showed the seductive force of a menacing power its best (Fekete 258–262, Gyárfás13, Illés 11). They also praised the scenes with the three London citizens (2.2 and 3.5), who realistically voiced the “common abjection and collective fear” (Fekete 259) which had infiltrated Richard’s England.

Had we only have these reviews at hand, we would be left with the image of a mediocre production which would go down into Hungarian theatre history as a revival of minor significance. Later recollections of the actors reveal a radically different production. From these we can reconstruct the 1955-*Richard III* as a production which exemplifies that all it takes to make a play political is a social context in need of a political change, and even a performance that was not intended to be subversive could become one. Tamás Major, who played Richard in the revival as well, relates in a retrospective volume how the performances of the otherwise neutral production suddenly turned into political events, despite the warnings of József Révai:

What really happened was that a lot of people came together in the audience, among others many intellectuals, who were active before and after 1956,<sup>6</sup> or left the country in 1956. After the first lines [...]: ‘More pity that the eagle should be mew’d, / While kites and buzzards prey at liberty’, the performance had to be stopped, and we couldn’t go on for minutes, as the crowd was cheering so loud. This was right at the beginning of the play, so we all sensed that this was going to be a very risky production. And so it happened. Whenever the audience felt that the words could have a current double meaning, they literally ‘pulled down the house’, particularly at that moment when Elemér Baló, the scribe, came in with the prefabricated verdicts. We all feared that this would be the end; it was received with a standing ovation. This just shows that Shakespeare does not need to be made current, he makes himself current. (Koltai 77).

Although never stressed at any time in the performance, the audience instantly recognised the offstage parallels: the fact that “in [their] veins and in the reality there is a Richard living among them, who could do with us as he pleases” (Antal, 1983: 316) as Ferenc Bessenyei, Buckingham in the production, later recalled. Thus a seemingly harmless show about turmoil in medieval England became a roaring success, in which the flow of the performance had to be interrupted each time the scrivener or the citizens came on stage, because the members of the audience “cried and shouted” for minutes (Kocsis 83).

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<sup>6</sup> The date of the Hungarian revolution which aimed at the liberation of the country from the occupying Soviet forces.

News spread quickly, people went to the theatre to wait for those few, previously unnoticed lines they felt relevant, those about counterfeit indictments and about the bad news circulating in the “troubled world” (2.3.5). Thus the 1955-*Richard III* is one of the first Hungarian examples of subversive reading-between-the-lines Shakespeare productions through which the masses expressed their discontentment with the Communist regime as they did one year later with the outbreak of the revolution in 1956.

Thus far I have tried to demonstrate how altered historical circumstances could change the meaning and the cultural status of a production as well as to suggest that many of the contemporary documents we have at hand can prove to be unreliable sources. The story of the 1955-*Richard III* has, however, a third turn. Later recollections of the actors and especially of Tamás Major, which I used as a major source in the previous section in an attempt to redefine our knowledge of the production, are not only important as historical documents, but also indicative of what the political refashionings Hungarian theatre history went through after the suppressed revolution of 1956. To demonstrate this let me digress a bit and discuss the phenomenon of Tamás Major.

Although he was the former favourite of the Communist Party, Major’s position weakened around 1950. He became involved in the political trial of László Rajk, former Home Secretary, and was punished by being sent to a Party school for five months. In 1953 the company of the National Theatre also turned against him, and called a meeting at which they demanded his removal. In 1956 he became involved in the revolution at first but then he had to flee and hide from all those whose existences he had ruined during the 1950s as the almighty director of the nation’s first theatre. In 1962 he was finally demoted, but after his dismissal, he still remained the chief director of the theatre, a career unprecedented in Hungary. During these years he directed twenty Shakespeare plays and acted in many more, an achievement unsurpassed by any of his colleagues.

In the 1960s a generation of young actors, directors and critics grew up who saw him not as the political figure, but as the Master (“a Mester”) who taught them at the Theatrical Academy. For the general public he became the popular figure of films, TV shows and cabaret, a living classic and an authority in matters Shakespearean. When after the 1956 revolution he was removed from the managing position of the National Theatre, for many it seemed as if he had withdrawn from politics as well. We should never forget, however, that though openly he was no longer a constant part of the political system, he remained one of the intimates of the new heads of the Cultural Ministry. In an interview he compared the role of theatre people to that of a court jester: “[those in power] have always feared the theatre, they always feared the court jester a little as well – but they always needed him” (Antal 1983: 304). This sentence seems almost self-referential. From a historical perspective we can

say that in Hungarian theatrical circles, Major held the highly controversial position of a modern time court jester, not only an officially tolerated but clearly supported critic of the regime. With his Shakespeare productions he paved the way for others, legitimising possible critical comments with his own authority, with his reforms he brought many new foreign trends onto the stages of the country. By relying on his political importance, he authorized Shakespeare on Hungarian Socialist stages, and the playwright's name, in turn, elevated and even cleansed Major's figure of possible blemishes in his past.

Katalin Róna described him as “an actor ready for the worst, a thinking director and a cunning political mind: wicked and fatherly, a wire puller and a judge, immoral yet ethical, a scoundrel and a hero” (qtd. in Kocsis 43). Major, the great survivor, passing through regimes and revolutions unharmed, created narratives he retold again and again, in which he refashioned his own political identity according to the requirements of the new circumstances. The 1955-*Richard III* production was one of his famous anecdotes. Thus with time the production became connected to his name, the actor-director who was famous for his political productions and was known not to be easily frightened. This shed a favourable light on his dubious political manoeuvres in the 1950s, indicating that he was already trying to dismantle the system back then. Ironically, therefore, the subversive spontaneous protests of the audience in 1955, in turn, served to strengthen the position of one of the most fervent supporters of the regime, giving an extra turn to the strange eventful history of *Richard III* on the Hungarian stages.

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