

PhD Dissertation

**THE ROLE OF HUNGARIAN STAGED FOLK DANCES IN HUNGARIAN
THEATRE**

Where cultural policy, theatre structure and dance aesthetics intersect

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Introduction: The purpose and structure of the thesis

This thesis discusses the role of staged folk dances in the Hungarian theatre structure. It attempts to re-construct the history of staging folk dances in Hungarian theatres while revealing the functioning of theatre in society between 1945 and 1989 from the perspective of cultural sociology.

One reason for dealing with this issue is that folk dancing on stage has attracted no real interest in contemporary theatre studies, either in Hungary or in the other countries of the Eastern Bloc since the political changes after 1990. The aim of the present dissertation is to present, for future comparative studies, a basic outline of the functioning of the cultural institutions in this domain based on the soviet cultural models; to show, by staging folk dances in Hungary, how these models were applied along with Hungarian theatrical ideals.

In terms of these objectives, the thesis consists of four parts. The introductory part provides an overview of current research in Hungarian dance and theatre studies. It explains in this context the necessary terms like folk dance and theatre, the methodology and the choice of historical period. The main body of the dissertation, parts 1 and 2, follows the same pattern: after the political and cultural contexts, the functioning of theatre and folk dancing in the given context is described. In part 1 (1945-1956), the relevant institutions behind lay and professional art were nationalised and centralised, and this had a great influence on the field of theatre. Part 2 (1956-1989) will focus on amateur performing activity, since the basic layer of the institutional structure in the field of theatre did not show any essential changes, only the role of amateurs varied. The thesis ends by summarising the research with the help of three models that are introduced in the methodological chapter.

Methodology

The main purpose of the current paper is to describe the relationship between the functioning of theatre and the aesthetic outcomes achieved in the given theatre structure. For that object it was necessary to analyse dance productions in the given periods. I have basically adopted the Laban-kinetographic model, which was mostly used by East-European ethnographic research. (In Hungary, it was developed by Mária Sz. Szentpál [1967, 1969, 1976].) The Labanotation evolved from a system of dance notation to a method of recording all body movement. Hence,

the main aspects of dance analyses were the spatial and temporal relationships, the dynamic quality of the movement, where the direction in which the parts of the body move within space, and the intensity and duration of the movement from beginning to end are represented. Furthermore, Christina Thurner's (2007) approach proved to be very useful in contextualising the result of the kinetographic analysis using the methods of cultural studies. In part 1, the dance analysis focused on the female and male qualities, in part 2, on the dramatic qualities of traditional rural dances.

For a description and analysis of the soviet-type political and cultural system in Hungary it was necessary to refer to other disciplines. Firstly, I used Pierre Bourdieu's term: "field", which provides a theoretical background for analysing the field of theatre in both periods. Bourdieu considers his notion of an autonomous, artistic field as a structure of relations between positions, with the help of different forms of "capital", "doxa" and "habitus". I have considered theatre as a relationship between different positions on the basis of their own habitus.

Further, to examine the relational position, the interdependencies within the wider context of theatre (whether or not the theatre field was autonomous), Katherine Verdery's chapter, 'Theorizing Socialism: A Prologue to the "Transition"' (2002 [1991]) was very useful, as it summarizes different theories on economic, political and cultural features of Eastern Europe. Following Verdery's idea, I discuss the main features of the period dealt with in the field of theatre by setting forth the theoretical model of *first* and *second society* as used in the work of Elemér Hankiss (1991), the Hungarian political scientist whose research fields also include social values. Although Hankiss' static model was quite useful in describing the omnipresence of the state (party) power in the Hungarian system, however it cannot explain changes and alterations. Therefore I was obliged to examine the changes with the help of Jurij Lotman's (in Posner 2003) semiotic model, which explains cultural changes with the alterations of the cultural codes.

Results

During the Soviet period, beside a process of standardising and institutionalising was also imported into Eastern Europe and these two processes were merged, dissolving the rural culture into an institutionalised, hierarchical yet highbrow cultural concept. (Olson 2004: 18) Between 1945 and 1951, parallel to the increasing dominance of folklore shows on stage, in radio and press, several new institutions were set up in Hungary, keeping to Soviet models, like the Red Army's *Alexandrov*, the *Gavrilov*, the *Piatnitzky* Folk Ensemble and *Beryoska*

(Maácz 1962, Jakabné 2009). These large collectives, the equivalents of heavy industry, were reliable institutions under the guidance of the party and were secured to maintain control over the cultural code used in performances. These Soviet ensembles brought polished, professionalised folklore shows to Hungary – a performing style almost entirely opposed to the course laid out by Béla Bartók and his generation.

From 1945-49, besides the new phenomena of professional folk dance ensembles, former clubs and all kinds of social association were merged into one state controlled organisation (Andrássy 1991: 11, Sipos 2006: 22). Since labour time was already strictly controlled by the state (party) following nationalisation at every level, the establishing of institutions similar to the House of Folk Art in the Soviet Union (Hungarian Folk Culture Institute 1946-48, later 'Folk Art Institute' 1951-56, and since 1958 'Folk Education Institute') meant the total control of daily life, including leisure time (White 1990: 57-67). If we disregard the fact of totalitarian oppression and colonising, not just territories but also performing traditions behind the Iron Curtain, the soviet practice of staging folk culture also envisaged a kind of rural enlightenment – an attempt at elevating low brow culture onto the sophisticated level of high culture. Ironically, it went hand in hand with the westernisation of the rich rural heritage in the manner of western show business. (Laura J. Olson gives an account of folklore performances in pre-revolutionary Russia and in the Soviet context. She describes the process of how special training and the mass production of western style orchestral instruments influenced the staging of folk music in western polyphony. Olson 2004: 19) Whilst these tours successfully demolished the negative Cold War image and let Western audiences forget any political intentions, the perception in the native countries of Eastern Europe was determined by the political environment. Since middle class existence suffocated under the pressure of proletarian concepts, (e.g. the rapidly and obligatory growing number of folk dance groups in every possible social form) the overrepresented presence of folk dance generated little interest or acceptance.

This was one reason why the strictly hierarchical structure didn't succeed in repositioning folk art in the existing hierarchy of elite culture.

It was only in the 1970s that the movement towards the ethnographic perspective resulted in new aesthetics and a fresh revival of folk dance. With regard to the new ethnographic studies on the Carpathian Basin, the Hungarian revival positioned itself within the legacy of Bartók as anti-Soviet and anti-ballet aesthetics. In a political context, which preferred passivity, the urban 'dance house' (*tánc ház*) offered active participation – which was generally the main characteristic of experimental lay theatres too. This essential change was only possible on the

periphery of the field of theatre, in lay movements like lay folk dancing. After the uprising in 1956, the Kádár government strictly regulated lay and professional artistic fields and their interconnections. Lay activities were used for locating those ideas that could have been a political threat.

The new choreographic concepts in the folk dance revival required a new dance pedagogy that enabled dancers to use the movements freely as an individual expression and become partners in the choreographic process. Since the new dance education and the choreographic concepts were opposed to Soviet practice, folk dancing offered shelter for many seeking non-patriarchal cultural content (activity instead of passivity), individuality and regional identity that was opposed to the internationality of the Soviet colonies. However, since the 1960s folk dancing developed a cultural code system opposed to the professional one established between 1945 and 1956. In Lotman's sense, folk dance genuinely and gradually changed its position from outsider to countercultural art. This change of position in the system of cultural codes accounts for the differences between the two periods in this thesis.

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