

THE HUNGARIAN UNIVERSITY OF FINE ARTS, DOCTORAL SCHOOL

The integrated scene – the study of a new vision

An investigation of directorial styles affiliated with Sándor Zsótér
and János Mohácsi through the study of a specific work by each
director:

Bertolt Brecht: The Caucasian Chalk-Circle
Set design: Mária Ambrus, costume: Mari Benedek
Vígszínház, 2003.

Márton Kovács– István Mohácsi– János Mohácsi: Just a Nail
Set design: Zsolt Khell, costume: Edit Szűcs
Kaposvári Csiky Gergely Színház, 2004.

DLA doctoral thesis

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Research topic

The trend leading to the gradual change of stage components within the unity of the performance started in the second half of the 1970s and reached its full potential in our days. Each component has become more relevant and been given equal weight. The performance (within that, theatrical presence) and the relationship between the dramatic text and visual components have all undergone a significant change.

In my paper I shall examine how the component parts creating the overall visual effect have changed through juxtaposition and how, looking at the two examples referred to above, integration has been achieved on stage.

The selected examples demonstrate the ongoing exchange of ideas among directors belonging to the mid generation. As a general rule, their mise en scene does not aim at rationalizing and realistic stage presentation. They avoid conventional rules of characterization; with a certain distancing and replacement of the subject (reinterpretation), they have developed their own aesthetics and theatrical language. In addition to having won professional acclaim, they inspire other theatre people and lay down signposts for the next generation.

The structure of the investigation

1. Following a brief overview of their impact, I take a closer look at the visual worlds of the two performances in their proper context. Primarily, I investigate the role of stage design (dramatic space), costume and light in relation to each other, although I cannot ignore their specific relation to the text and the unity of the scenography with the spirit of staging. Moreover, by presenting selected still images of the performances, I wish to draw attention to specific features of the visual composition.

2. While one finds close philosophical and aesthetic connections in the creative approaches behind the two performances, the two works differ in their visual composition. Based on criteria described under section 1 above, I shall compare the distinct visual concepts of the two pieces to identify their unique qualities. Subsequently, I shall present a brief summary of the comparison.

3. Findings of the summary will be extended to other works by the two directors and references will be made to specific creative solutions. At the same time, emphasizing current tendencies the scope of the research will include some foreign examples and, in conclusion, I will also discuss some of my own works within the context of the examined relationship.¹

¹ See information on the involved pieces under *Analyzed Performances* (pp. 76–79).

Thesis

Thesis 1: stage setting (dramatic space) in a new context

The stage set is the locus of the performance and its visual presentation in close relation to the staging concept. The method of presentation is in synchrony with the theatrical intention.

In the works of recent directors the stage set is not intended to evoke the (described) scene. Instead, establishing a dialogue with the text through a series of associations, it makes references and claims to its 'independence'.

Typically, in the two pieces analyzed and further examples of the present study the integrated space of the set is closely related to the given theatrical space (e.g., it fully integrates the main features of the architectural environment).

In both cases the creative process is defined by irony, fully reflected in visual components. The inclusion of everyday objects from the real world is a common practice.

Examples:

a.) Zsolt Khehl's stage design presents a metaphorical poetic image, where aesthetic quality is created by the simple and generous handling of the material. At the same time, his monumental set adds a sense of the absurd as far as it makes direct reference to the total theatrical space and the way it uses its component parts. The creative concept shot through with irony extends to the matching of props and furnishing.

b.) Mária Ambrus' sets involve a redefinition of interior design and the found space,² which become "attached" to the theatre auditorium. With this reflective gesture, Ambrus "expands" the dramatic space, lends it a wider context and, corresponding to the concept of landscape play³, draws the viewer into the scene of the dramatic action.

Irony, which in respect of the method of mirroring provides the underlying tone of the entire performance, is present in all facets of the scenery: in the geometry of visual compositions (including formations created by the movement of the chorus) as well as in the handling of materials and colours of the set or the glaring banality of accessories.

Thesis 2: the dynamics of the single figure and the crowd

As the connection between the stage pieces are reconceptualized, spatial arrangement created by the figure and the crowd come to play an essential role. In line with the directorial concept, the expression is typically expressive in *Just a Nail* (e.g., the Auschwitz scene) while it is abstract in *The Caucasian Chalk-Circle* (e.g., scenes with the children's choir).

² The concept has been defined by Anna Viebrock in connection to a work with Cristoph Marthaler. See Bettina Masuch's interview with Anna Viebrock. Translated by Mária Szilágyi. *Világszínház* 2001/5–6. p. 20.

³ The term is used by Anna Viebrock in connection to Gertrude Stein. See Bettina Masuch's interview with Anna Viebrock, *ibid.* (the term was first used in G. Stein: *Lectures in America*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1957, p. 125)

With the emphasis of the compositional role of the figure the novel presentation of the crowd (e.g., the choir) deserves special attention. Within the context of the directorial concept, the stage designer handles the crowd as a compositional element that forms a special visual union with the set. The designer's language may range from individuation to block-like composition through abstraction. See *The Crucible* (costume: Edit Szűcs) and *The Dwarf, Orpheus and Eurydice* (costume: Mari Benedek).

Thesis 3: the shifting meaning of the costume

Just as the stage design does not aim at illustrating a specific milieu, one sees similar changes when looking at costumes that most characteristically give a new meaning to dramatic presentation.

Adhering closely to the text of the play, traditional portrayal builds up the psychological features of the protagonists through several filters of the presented period, i.e., their social and economic status and age. The costume establishes the relationship between dramatic personae and, closely following the dramaturgy of the play, it follows and illustrates the destiny of the dramatic characters.

Clearly, the special handling of the text results in a new relationship between the actor and the role: the role is created in an interplay with the actor's personality. The costume becomes a reflection of that new relationship.

Examples:

a.) In the works of Edit Szűcs (including the costumes for *Just a Nail*) one sees the playful interpretation of this relationship. The novelty of her costumes lies in the reference system established by collage-like components.

The component parts of some costumes have a strong reference to current trends, and their surreal mixing and matching result in the ingenious interplay with period dresses. Simultaneously, she complements surreal design with contemporary references and these form a whole in relation to the rest of the composition (e.g., *Tom Paine, The Caucasian Chalk-Circle*).

Thanks to the handling of costume as an assemblage it is also a source of humour, where one recognises an affinity with the restructured texts so typical in Mohácsi productions. In its material form the costume is also concrete, specific to the creative person; it does not become an abstract sign. Instead of using colour to mark, it makes subtle references to character (e.g., *The Caucasian Chalk-Circle*, the grand duchesse [Olga Varjú] and the colour composition of costumes for kolkhoz members). The use of special materials and the rich mixing of various qualities serve a painterly effect (e.g., dresses worn by the "Georgians" in *The Caucasian Chalk-Circle*).

The specific context and the system of related semantic content define the production, as well as the aesthetic preferences and world view of its creators.

b.) Looking at the system of references used by Mari Benedek, one arrives at the following conclusions concerning her formal solutions, her use of colour and materials: the reformulation of the relationship between the role and the actor's personality goes as far as the inversion of gender (e.g., *The Caucasian Chalk-Circle*). The costume

represents in relation to the face and the body: it provides counterpoint and emphasis. (For an example for the counterpoint to the face, see the contemporary faces of actors in *Csongor és Tünde* and their Baroque costume.)

A geometric formal play with the silhouette is a typical practice; in many instances, the form is established as to change the actor's movements as well.

The costume is intimately connected to the actor's body; in a formal sense it can emphasize, hide or counterpoint its characteristic features. The form can work at different levels of abstraction: from expressing frailty and defencelessness (e.g., *Top Dogs*, Anita Tóth) through a play with scale that, with changing the figure's proportions, can go as far as distortion (e.g., soldiers in *Gyévuska*) or with the painting of the naked body points in the direction of pure abstraction (e.g., *Getting Horny*, Judit Rezes). The latter production is also an example where the designer, by mixing abstraction with the quotidian, simultaneously creates distancing and irony. (While colouring takes the actors' bodies towards abstraction, the period swimsuit they wear evokes the aura of the 1960s.)

In respect to materials, it plays on the contrast of textures, i.e., the associative meaning of fabrics overlap: e.g., *Peer Gynt*, the actor's skin and artificial fur (*Bori Péterfy*). Plastics are among the most favoured materials. This preference is seen in stage sets as well for the material makes a clear distinction between the artificial and real, one of the key issues of the world of theatre.

In respect to colour, conceptual thinking is typical: colour serves the abstracted (sign-like) formulation of the character (e.g., *Master and Margarita*, Márta Szabó). The patterns of various printed materials become an integral part of the costume's reference system (e.g., *Peer Gynt*, the tiny sailing ships printed on [József Gyabronka's] shirt may generate a series of associations in the viewer.) At the same time, their decorative function is also important.

Mari Benedek's costumes are characterized by a combination of abstract and specific forms. The aesthetic qualities of her costumes correspond to that of the stage design.

Based on the analysis of the above examples we come to the conclusion that the aesthetic principle formulated by Roland Barthes whereby the costume must remain indivisible ("the costume must be seen but not looked at"),⁴ has essentially been reversed: with its hidden system of references the formal presentation of the costume lends its own meaning through visual means: form also becomes content.

⁴ Roland Barthes: The Disease of Costume, *Theatron*, winter 1998 (I./2.), p. 45