

LÓRÁNT KABDEBÓ AS THEATRE CRITIC: HIS REVIEWS OF PRODUCTIONS IN THE NATIONAL THEATRE OF MISKOLC FROM 1960 TO 1970

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The late outstanding literary scholar, Lóránt Kabdebó's name has been strongly intertwined with the study of the Hungarian modernist poet, Lőrinc Szabó, whose work he researched in its historical and cultural context and wrote several books about from 1970 on, earning the name of the most prominent and prolific Hungarian scholar of Szabó's oeuvre. Guided by the bibliography of hundreds of his writings and exploring his scholarly achievement from the beginnings, the late 1950s, one can see that the then secondary school teacher Kabdebó regularly contributed to the daily and weekly papers published in Miskolc extensively, for more than a decade. He became and remained editor-in-chief of the Miskolc weekly paper *Napjaink* (Our Days) between 1962 and 1984. In his reports he offered his views about new books, volumes of poetry and critical studies primarily, but also on various cultural events such as concerts, exhibitions, conferences, the celebration of notable anniversaries and other cultural programs. Besides, he penned several theatre reviews, part of which discuss premieres and guest performances in the National Theatre of Miskolc, while others comment on theatrical events taking place elsewhere or broadcast by the Hungarian television. Should anyone venture to collect them together under the same cover, the result would be a both informative and inspiring, compact booklet. Browsing these articles the reader gets to know a forgotten part of Kabdebó's critical work and the often strikingly original thoughts and observations Kabdebó presents in them, and will realize how much they enrich the history of the National Theatre of Miskolc and that of theatre criticism in our country more generally. The present article sets out to survey, underscore, contextualize and interpret the most important ideas in Kabdebó's reviews of noteworthy productions mounted by the National Theatre of Miskolc up to 1970, when he got a new job in Budapest and left Miskolc for the capital, to be back in the 1990s.

Kabdebó's first theatre reviews saw the light in the weekly paper *Diósgyőri Munkás* (Diósgyőr Worker). In May 1960, Konstantin Andreyevich Trenyov's *On Neva Banks* (На берегу Невы, 1937) had its Hungarian premier in the National Theatre of Miskolc. Kabdebó's review of the production begins with an upbeat: after the widely known *Lyubov Jarovaya* (Любовь Яровая, 1926), a play about the Russian Civil War which had been staged in Budapest with considerable success earlier, Miskolc now ventures the performance of a less known historical drama by the same author and earns similar appreciation. The successful production of *On*

Neva Banks, according to Kabdebó, proved to be a test for the theatre to show its performative powers by staging a play which has an intricate structure and a sizable range of different characters coming from different layers of the society. Importantly, the critic states that the National Theatre of Miskolc created an artifact that came into being from the playtext and the work of the theatre ensemble jointly. By this idea he highlighted a complex relationship and interaction, in a sense anticipating new outlooks in the study of performances critics of our country started to pursue years later. The challenge of producing *On Neva Banks*, Kabdebó's review points out, lies in keeping up the dynamic movement throughout the altogether twelve scenes (in three acts) of the play, each of which is a complete miniature drama focusing on individual lives as influenced by the massive and rapid changes the characters confront during the 1917 October Revolution in Russia. Evaluating the director, István Horvai's work, Kabdebó emphasizes that the success of the production was mostly due to the accomplished utilization of Brechtian techniques.¹

The other notable theatre event Kabdebó wrote about for *Diósgyőri Munkás* was a guest performance of singers and musicians from Csokonai Theatre Debrecen, who played Beethoven's opera, *Fidelio* to the audience in Miskolc. As a critic ardently interested in and concerned about the development and future of cultural life in his home town, Kabdebó opens this review by lamenting the fact that Miskolc has no opera company, while Szeged and Pécs have one, beside that of Debrecen. At the same time, he quotes some officials who maintain, without further reasoning to verify the point, that in an industrial town like Miskolc there is hardly any audience for opera performances. Kabdebó convincingly argues that this is the wrong path to take and this narrow-minded logic should be turned on its head: in want of an opera company, how to educate people to enjoy and appreciate the Hungarian and international gems of that musical genre? The fame of Miskolc as a cultural centre could by all means benefit from staging homemade opera productions which then may be invited to tour the country, the critic adds. That said, Kabdebó is, however, not at all unjust to the guest artists from Debrecen, whose achievement he praises in high terms, with special emphasis on the unified style and sustained concentration of their *Fidelio*. In his brief discussion of how the best singers enlivened the roles they were incarnating, Kabdebó refers to a few memorable details of the production.

In the paper *Napjaink* Kabdebó published a review of the Miskolc premiere of Jenő Heltai's *A néma levente* (The Silent Knight, 1936), directed by Péter Léner. Tracing the genealogy of the story back to Renaissance times, Kabdebó displays his wide-ranging erudition by invoking literary and dramatic works which have similar roots, including Edmond Rostand's drama *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897) and Charles Baudelaire's poem *L'Albatros* (1859). Heltai's romantic, fable-like story places a mundane protagonist in the centre, who tries to escape from the surrounding inhumanity and the whole of the play suggests the belief that life is beautiful. According to the reviewer, what the theatre should do with a drama like this is to

¹ KABDEBÓ 1960/a, 2.

present it in such a way that its playful freshness become smoothly transmitted. However, the staging of the play in Miskolc did not fully mobilize this potential because the director employed actors and actresses who were known as outstanding ones in productions of serious drama, Kabdebó claims: for instance a fine interpreter of Shakespeare's Hamlet can hardly act a role demanding lightness really well. It may sound like a Shavian paradox at first sight, but the critic suggests that a mixture of styles can spoil the effect in certain cases, and *The Silent Knight* is that kind of drama, no matter how seriously all contributors take their roles and the instructions they have been told to follow in the actual production. The director, Kabdebó continues, attempted to counterbalance this problem by introducing gestures and devices which, unfortunately, might have struck the audience as somewhat forced in their ambitious intended impact. Nevertheless, his conclusion is that the stage setting formed an outstanding part of the undeniably noteworthy of *The Silent Knight*.²

Kabdebó's implication that "serious" drama is a distinct form with its own conventions might remind the reader of our time that defining the nature of the "serious" play is still an issue genre theories tend to identify and pay attention to. In a recently published book on the contemporary political play with examples from the British theatre, the author devotes a whole chapter to the subject and maintains: "Serious drama came into being in the late-nineteenth century in opposition to melodrama, which then dominated theatre stages." The history of modern serious drama dates back to G. B. Shaw, its main features being "an effective vehicle of [such] political and social change" as well as realist dramaturgy, Sarah Grochala explains.³ Heltai's *The Silent Knight* can be seen as a reformed melodrama, the difference of which from serious drama is also suggested by Kabdebó's review. Fortunately, he did not view serious drama and stage realism narrowly: in 1960 Kabdebó commemorated the 10th anniversary of G. B. Shaw's death in an article by acknowledging not only the playwright's social criticism as explored by other critics at that time but also highlighted the presence of uncanny and grotesque scenes in the Shavian dramatic oeuvre. Supposedly, here Kabdebó means the variety of style and technique in such plays as *Man and Superman* (1903), *Heartbreak House* (1919) or *Back to Methuselah* (1921), to mention just a few of Shaw's most experimental plays across his oeuvre. In Kabdebó's opinion, it was just this kind of stylistic variety that made Shaw one of the most realistic realists.⁴

In 1964, the four hundred years' anniversary of Shakespeare's birth was celebrated by the National Theatre of Miskolc, too. Kabdebó wrote enthusiastic "lyrical notes" as he, a scholar of poetry in the first place, called his article about the anniversary production of the theatre, which he first wanted to attend out of respect to the master, yet found that what he received was an exceptionally well selected, directed and acted program. In his introductory words he raises the pertinent question whether it is possible to show something really essential (and appetizing, one

² KABDEBÓ 1962, 8.

³ GROCHALA 2017, 46–47, 55.

⁴ KABDEBÓ 1960/b, 5.

should add, thinking of the following years' Shakespeare performances) about the English Bard in twice 45 minutes to a Hungarian audience. For Kabdebó, thanks to the reverential work of the Miskolc theatre makers, the program did just that: by selecting parts of representative scenes from both comedies and tragedies it underscored the unique and inimitable variety in the Shakespearian heritage. Beside the texts, translated by the greatest Hungarian writers and poets, selections from musical pieces inspired by Shakespeare across the centuries added to the overall effect, and his contemporary, Ben Jonson's appreciation of Shakespeare was also quoted, Kabdebó comments. The reviewer's praise of ending the program with the artisan's comic and metatheatrical, humorously self-revealing scene from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can also be understood as homage to the fact that in Miskolc, an industrialized city, hundreds of manual workers formed a considerable part of the audience. In this regard, Kabdebó finds it important to refer to the showing of the anniversary program in other places, notably in Kazincbarcika,⁵ a town close to Miskolc, which was famous for being an important centre of metallurgical production in Hungary, a "land of iron and steel" as so aggressively envisioned by the socialist leaders and causing so many economic problems, during the 1950s and 1960s.⁶

The 1966 premiere of a new, loose adaptation of G. B. Shaw's classical *Saint Joan* (1923) titled *Johanna éjszakája* (The Night of Johanna) written by Miklós Gyárfás in the National Theatre of Miskolc, again inspired Kabdebó to review it for the daily paper *Észak-Magyarország*. In the new article Kabdebó assumes that Johanna's story is known by the readers, supposedly from Shaw's *Saint Joan*, which harvested a number of good Hungarian productions by that time. Interestingly, while the premiere of *Johanna éjszakája* proved successful as a theatrical event, in Kabdebó's view this could not conceal the shortcomings of the play itself. Gyárfás's main addition to the original story is the use of an autobiographical frame, which leads the audience back to the political trials in Hungary in 1949. In spite of the excellent work of most of the actors, Kabdebó thinks that *Johanna éjszakája* as drama does not present clear ideas of vanity and heroism, which Gyárfás posits as central issues. What kind of vanity, the merely egoistic type or the one more like a self-assured ambition to serve the common good, Kabdebó asks in his review, one of the first critical responses to the new play. He also wonders about the possible implications of having a bastard youngster in the drama who hears voices too, although antithetical to those heard by Johanna; the duality does not make sense for the critic unless imposing some interpretation not organic to the text. For the reader the question arises, how an intellectually unsatisfying play can really serve as material for the creation of a meaningful whole on the stage, which conveys thoughts the audience can take with them and ponder further about. As if in reply, Kabdebó convincingly argues that the direction of Ferenc Lendvay managed to unify the production: the well chosen cast played their roles with great

⁵ KABDEBÓ 1964, 11.

⁶ KONTLER 1999, 418.

élan, thus filling the gaps on the level of ideas. Kabdebó especially praises the achievement of Agi Margittay, whose Johanna radiated a far wider scale of feelings than just ambitious vanity and obsession with a cause.⁷

Among Kabdebó's theatre reviews of the mid-sixties the most outstanding ones are about two productions of László Németh's plays at Miskolc National Theatre. Németh was one of the few contemporary prose writers (the others being Magda Szabó, Miklós Szentkuthy and Győző Határ) Kabdebó greatly admired and remained concerned with as well as published several articles on throughout his life. The earliest of these came out in 1964, in which Kabdebó assesses Németh's career under the title *A kísérletező ember* (The Experimenting Man), borrowing the title of a 1963 volume of essays by Németh. In further articles Kabdebó gives a vivid account of the writer's visits to Miskolc and on Németh's death in 1975, he undertook the sad task of writing and publishing an obituary in *Napjaink*. His reviews of two respective productions of plays by Németh which premiered in the National Theatre of Miskolc, demonstrate that their author has an exceptional familiarity with the whole oeuvre of Németh, fiction, essay and drama together, and between them Kabdebó finds correlations. Németh's protagonists, as Kabdebó observes them, are notable by their relentless pursuit of what they regard as the truth. First he published a review about the production of *A Nagy család* (The Big Family, 1962) by Németh, in which he emphasizes the sensitive portrayal of psychologically complex situations. The characters here, in Kabdebó's view, represent particular social types and their coping with the various challenges posed by living in a big city at that time, therefore it was an excellent choice to project the montage of a vast cityscape as background to the family apartment in which the action takes place. Similarly, this kind of setting is frequently used in the staging of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), to highlight the smallness and vulnerability of individuals and their futile struggle against the working of oppressive social forces above them.

In the play *A Nagy család*, as often in the Németh oeuvre, Kabdebó argues, the referential context to the plot is the crisis of a marriage which has reached a breaking point. The critic gives his review the title "A kis család bomlása" (The Breaking up of the Small Family), mobilizing the idea that Németh's Big family is also a "small family" in that this generic term can be applied to it despite what the actual name implies. In Kabdebó's view, Németh weaves the theme of marital breakdown into the dramatization of a clash between two kinds of moral attitude: self-centered individualism versus its opposite, unconditional love and feeling responsibility for others. While the marriage proves irreparable, moral truth is shown victorious, and the "small family" becomes a "big family", its triumph being based on solidarity and strong communal feelings, although at the cost of pain and suffering. Marxist critics tend to identify some aspects of Németh's work as problematic, Kabdebó continues, yet the writer's highlighting the sense of social devotedness in certain characters might reassure all about the potentially positive and forward-looking impact of his

⁷ KABDEBÓ 1966/a, 4.

dramaturgy on the audience. The change in the family, Kabdebó seems to suggest, might work as a model for the dynamic of social change. László Jurka, the young director of the production deserved appreciation according to Kabdebó, because he excelled in clearly interpreting the moral and emotional complexity of the drama. Assessing the actors' work Kabdebó calls attention to the notably successful impersonation of an angry young man character, which inspires the critic to see it as evidence of the necessity to recognize the difference between the mode of telling the truth on stage and the ways in which it can be expressed in real life.⁸ With this Kabdebó, perhaps unconsciously, contributes to emphasizing an important quality of dramatic representation versus everyday language use as discussed by many theorists of the drama, dating back to Aristotle. For instance, renowned theatre studies professor Bert O. States implies a similar notion when speaking about the playwright's power of creating a theatrical image (and not merely a sign) which "detains, arrests" by its expressive density⁹ – remaining necessarily different from everyday language use and habitual gestures.

A year later, in 1966 Kabdebó published a review of the production of Németh's *Csapda* (Trap, 1966), a not so widely known work by its author. The play dramatizes the last weeks of Alexander Pushkin's life, a period in which he felt unjustly treated by the society and abandoned by his colleagues and friends. In Kabdebó's view, relying on his intimate knowledge of the writer, Németh was inspired to stage the painful experiences of historical characters such as István Széchenyi, Galileo Galilei and János Apáczai Csere because they embodied an uncompromising insistence on what they believed to be true and valuable – a kind of attitude similar to Németh's own. A few years later Kabdebó published a review of a performance of Németh's *Széchenyi* (1946) broadcast on television, in which he seems to continue the above train of thought concerning how the author can treat historical material even more clearly. Kabdebó states that, as great dramatists frequently do in his opinion, Németh created the play not out of the ambition to write about Széchenyi, but chose his figure through whom he could give voice to certain problems also plaguing himself.¹⁰

Reviewing the play about Pushkin in the production of the Miskolc National Theatre, Kabdebó considers its protagonist as having kinship with the internal development of another truth-seeking character in Németh's novel *Irgalom* (Mercy, 1964), yet he stresses that they embody two extremes in representing the fate of exceptional personalities. About the premiere of *Csapda* in Miskolc Kabdebó writes that the scenes were composed in a way to emphasize theatricality, an example of this ambition being that due to his individual difference, the figure of Pushkin was isolated from the rest of the characters: he was staying in one corner of the stage as if placed in a cage there. In his survey of the actors' work Kabdebó praises the subtle rendering of Dolgorukov's paradoxical situation, most meaning-

⁸ KABDEBÓ 1965, 4.

⁹ STATES 1985, n. p.

¹⁰ KABDEBÓ 1970, 2.

fully revealed in the scene where this petty, Iago-like figure narrates the death of Pushkin, suggesting that he admired the poet for his uncompromising tenacity and attacked him only out of sheer envy.¹¹ The Othello-Iago pair, two characters as foils of each other, must have appeared immensely expressive to Kabdebó although leading to a contentious idea in the above quoted review of Németh's *Széchenyi* where he calls the doctor character, Goldmark the Iago of the psychologically tormented protagonist, *Széchenyi*.¹²

It is, no doubt, a relevant question to ask how far Kabdebó's reviewing activity fitted into the socio-cultural milieu of 1960s Hungary, ruled as it was by Marxist ideology. The best possible answer is to compare his critical stance with that of another critic, a contemporary of his, through a concrete example. The Miskolc premiere of Németh's play about Pushkin was also reviewed by Pál Pándi, a representative and very influential ideologue of socialist literary politics at that time. He was a very good lecturer and stylist, in which respect his review published in the communist party's newspaper, *Népszabadság* (People's Freedom), was a finely composed one. Undeniably, in this piece Pándi throws a lot of light on the social and political background of Russia during Pushkin's life. However, quite unexpectedly, as if fulfilling a prescribed duty, Pándi begins to criticize Németh's literary career in the 1960s, speaking about his inability to make a progressive turn under the new circumstances when all power was already in the hands of the working classes in a people's republic.¹³ In contrast, not being a Marxist critic and an advocate of socialist realism, Kabdebó's review explores the complex, sensitive representation of human values and their contextualized vicissitudes in the work of Németh, free from narrow-minded ideological considerations even throughout the 1960s.

As I have tried to show in this study, Kabdebó's reviews of productions in the National Theatre of Miskolc are based on and tuned by his thorough knowledge of the respective playwrights and their works, testified also by his references to historical contexts and literary parallels beside aspects of the actual staging. All the reviews, overtly or covertly imply general issues about dramatic representation and theoretical approaches to theatre, which the reader might feel tempted to ponder about and perhaps use as a starting or focal point in other scholarly pursuits. American theatre critic Jonathan Kalb's notions that theatre critics (those who do their job endowed with both knowledge and enthusiasm, let me add) use "themselves as examples of how the audience responds" and in our time it is them, "to whom the classic Horatian directive to teach and delight applies".¹⁴ The same can surely be applied to the young philologist Kabdebó's activity of publishing theatre criticisms too. In spite of the fact that these writings date back to the 1960s, they evidence that his was a responsible, humanist approach to sharing expert observations and intuitive insights with others, the countless number of people who read the Miskolc papers in those years.

¹¹ KABDEBÓ 1966/b, 6.

¹² KABDEBÓ 1970, 2.

¹³ PÁNDI 1966, 8.

¹⁴ KALB 2003, 34.

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