THE HUNGARIAN NATIONAL THEATRE IN KOLOZSVÁR 150 YEARS OLD

BY

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For the first time, on 11th November 1792, Hungarian was heard on the stage in Kolozsvár, when a farce entitled *„A titkos ellenkezés vagy Kölcséri"* (Secret enmity or Kölcséri) was performed. Little more than this bare fact is known about that first performance. The play itself and the programme are lost. We know the premises where the first Hungarian play was performed. In Jokai Street stands the Rhédei House in the ballroom of wich the performance was held. Now when Kolozsvár and all Hungary is celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Hungarian theatre in Kolozsvár, these data seem very poor and meagre, but we must be content with them. We guess rather than know the great interest and enthusiasm felt by the people of Kolozsvár at the time. This was not the first theatrical performance in the town. Written traces of German companies' performances exist, but they must have been troupes of mountebanks playing in the marketplace to entertain the common people.

What took place in the Rhédei House on 11th November 1792 was something quite different, something that stirred the whole town, the aristocracy as well as the citizens. The students, who at that time too were in the front line of the struggle for "national improvement", were wild with enthusiasm, the whole movement having been sponsored by them. How great the success of the company was we do not know, but from that time on the Hungarian theatre had taken root in Kolozsvár. *While poor, dreaming Ladislas*

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Kelemen, destitute and starving in German Pest—Buda, hopelessly tried to scale the wall of indifference only to succumb, in Kolozsvár the hearts of the people were touched. What Kelemen attempted in Pest was the determined, heaven-storming enterprise of one man; in Kolozsvár the nobility and citizens of Transylvania made the question of the Hungarian theatre their own affair, supporting it not only with words, but also with money.

In the whole history of the theatre it would be hard to find so strange and inspiring a tale as the story of how the Hungarian theatre in Kolozsvár came into being. Amost everywhere in Europe the art of the theatre had its origin in popular plays performed in the marketplace. *The Harlequins, Pulcinellas, Dottors, Capitans and Polillas gradually ceased to be mere laughter-making clowns and became artistic performers, and then all they had to wait for were the poets. Goldoni, Shakespeare, Molliére* and a host of their lesser statellites gave drama its final form. Since then we have the modern European theatre, drama and histrionic art.

Hungary had no part in this organic development. While Shakespeare's genius sparkled at the court of Good Queen Bess, while Puck chuckled, Othello suffered and Hamlet muttered his famous monologue, Hungary, without a friend, breathlessly struggled for her very existence. While Paris was thrilled by Mollière's bitter humor and the Sun King sat enthroned in silks and velvet, Magyar blood was flowing in torrents. And if now and then the students of some college in the mood for play-acting staged a performance, the exuberant high spirits of the youth were frowned upon by their professors.

Shakespeare and Molière were long dead, in Germany *Goethe* and *Schiller* sang when life began to pulse again in Hungary. Tremors began to run through the tortured

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moribund body of the nation. In Vienna this was supposed to be merely the reflex twitchings of a corpse, but at home there were people who believed that beneath the cold and rigid exterior there was life, strong luxuriantly budding life. They set to work to revive the seeming dead. Every means to that end was considered expedient, but the best of all were intellectual means. The Magyars must be awakened from their torpor and made great by raising their intellectual standard. The chief aim was "national improvement".

"We must have a theatre!" This decision began to crystallize in Transylvanian public opinion. *George Aranka writes letters, Baron Naláczi, Lord Lieutenant of County Hunyad, the Bethlens, and Bánffy, the Governor, make plan after plan.* The aristocracy discusses the theatre as a necessary institution and weighs the methods by which it might be created. The atmosphere is favourable and a warm welcome is assured the actors. All that is now needed is an enterprising troupe of pioneers. This is soon found. On 1st October 1792 an application was submitted to the Governor by John, Stephen and Rozalia *Fejér*, Joseph *Örményszékesi Kontz*, John *Gyulai Sáska*, Paul *Gidófalvi Jancsó*, Michael *Verestói*, Theresa *Kis* and Theresa *Keszegh*. The Royal Superintendent's Council decides that "they may play in this country in order to improve the knowledge of the Hungarian language and the morals of the young people", and on 2nd October at a Diet of the States the motion was carried.

What is most important in the whole document issuing the licence is that it clearly reveals that for Transylvania the theatre was considered a national task. It was not devised to be a source of entertainment, like mountebanks and dancing bears, but a national educational institution to improve morals and develop the language. The decision of the Estates, the élite of the nation, proves that opinion was united. One feels that an old well-considered idea took shape in that document.

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Kótsi Patkó creates the theatre.

The movement lacked a leader, a real actor-manager. It was particularly fortunate for the Kolozsvár theatre that like a *deus ex machina* the man best fitted for this role appeared, as it were, from the blue. *This was John Kótsi Patkó, a landowner of the Mezőség, a retired soldier who had been a cadet in Sényi's infantry regiment. With this regiment he had wandered and fought in Italy, Germany and France, but while his fellow-officers had spent their leisure in taverns and running after women of the West, Cadet John Kótsi Patkó bought books and visited the museums.* With an unquenchable thirst he drank in all the culture of the West. It was at this time that the great critic Lessing laid down his aesthetic principles, and Kótsi immediately absorbed his teachings. It cannot be doubted that this soldier with a thirst for culture was a regular theatre-goer. Perhaps even then he dreamed of a time when his own backward country would possess one. Ill-health made him leave the army and retire to his estate in Transylvania. Then came the great Maecenas' of the theatre, Wesselényi who decided that he should be leader of the actors. Wesselényi knew his man. Without a moment's hesitation Kótsi Patkó turned his back on the peaceful life of a land owner and set out first for Zsibó, then for Kolozsvár. When he took his place among the actors rehearsing for their first performance, there was no question but that he was the first among them. *Patkó with his great culture and ripe artistic views became the manager of the company.* He was the nucleus around which the theatre in Transylvania crystallized. The first two decades of the theatre in Kolozsvár, in fact the Hungarian theatre as such, is identified with Kótsi Patkó.

He was certainly not a dreamer. He knew quite well what he wanted and would not allow himself to be turned away from it. When necessary he stood up against the magistrate of Kolozsvár, and had no scruples about using

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force to discipline recalcitrant members of his company. He was often at loggerheads with the actors, but Nicholas Wesselényi, that great Maecenas and passionate lover of the theatre, was always on his side, so that he could work undisturbed. He trained actors and collected a repertoire. *He was the first, not only in Kolozsvár, but also in the whole of Hungary, to stage Shakespeare. „Hamlet" was played in the ballroom of Samuel Pataki's house in the marketplace in 1789.*

The inestimable service rendered by John Kótsi Patkó was that his extraordinary culture and sure artistic taste led him to link up the Kolozsvár theatre with theatrical art. The plays of Lessing, Shakespeare, and many other foreign playwrights were part of his repertoire. Kótsi Patkó's undertaking was a success that once and for all decided the fate of the Hungarian theatre. People stopped saying that the Hungarian language was uncouth and unfit for the theatre and that it would never attract an audience. Patkó proved the contrary to be true. *The Kolozsvár theatre grew in strength and sent out branches in every direction* that preached *and practised the principles laid down by their master Patkó.* He was the sun, and the torch he lighted continued to burn steadily in the hands of succeeding generations. After the death of his wife, he retired broken-hearted, but by that time the future of the Hungarian theatre was safe. New priests and adherents of Thalia arose to preach the tenets of histronic art. When in 1842 John Kósi Patkó died in Kolozsvár he knew that the Hungarian theatre would live for ever.

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