

## Memories of the Ephemeral: *Les Belles-Soeurs* on Hungarian Stages

*Memory fades, must the remembered Perishing be?*  
(Walter de la Mare)

The central motif of this conference draws our attention to a particularly complex area in the fields of theatre and drama. While the play can be analyzed using traditional methods of literary approaches, a performance poses many difficulties: each performance is a unique occasion, each member of the audience sees a different production on the same evening. It is a commonplace experience that theatre performances are ephemeral – even video recordings are unable to document all the details (and signs) of a given performance, usually they neglect the key factor, i.e. the audience, their reaction and the whole atmosphere. Reviewers, critics, and even members of the audience have to rely on their memory to evoke particular moments, a breath-taking scene, a minute of deep silence or the overall impression of a memorable show.

Performing arts, and the theatre in particular, had to wait several decades before the semiotic approach was applied to them – although Czech structuralists in the 1930s pointed in that direction, too, but the big breakthrough did not take place until the 1960s. As the leading theorist, Marco de Marinis puts it, the semiotic approach is concerned mainly with contemporary theatre events with the textual analysis of the performance. (De Marinis, 46). Focusing on signs – and a systematization based on the various modes of expression – makes it easier, and more exact to describe a performance. Interestingly however, even the most recent theories fail to underline the role of memory in this process, while everybody knows that memory is “the ability to remember information, *experiences* and people” (Memory, 885)<sup>1</sup>. When speaking about the tools of analysis, Patrice Pavis mentions verbal description, taking notes, questionnaires, documents like posters, reviews, photos, video recordings (Pavis, Part II): these aids serve

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<sup>1</sup> Italics K.K.

to help the memory but cannot replace it. The aspects of the analysis focus around the work of the actor, his/her gestures, the sound effects, music and rhythm, space, time and plot, costumes, make-up, props and sets, light effects, the text, the mise-en-scène (Pavis, Part II), the space of the actor and of the audience (Cooper et al., Part 3).

In this paper I wish to concentrate on the playbills that help orient the audience before the show and also can serve as aids to their memory after the performance. The other element I wish to analyze briefly is how the famous kitchen-space of rue Fabre was represented in three Hungarian productions of *Les Belles-Soeurs* by Michel Tremblay since this is the only play written in Canada which has been staged in more than one theatre in Hungary. (Mention should be made though of the very important contributions of Peter Szaffko as far as English-Canadian plays are concerned: not only has he staged several of them with his student actors, but in April 1996 the theatre of Debrecen had Morris Panych's *7 Stories* on, the leading radio channel aired parts of *Indian* by G. Ryga in 1987, another one aired *Ireland's Eye* by Michael Cook in 1989 – and he has several translations to his credit).

The Hungarian translation of Tremblay's play was made in the mid-1990s: poet Parti Nagy Lajos (a playwright himself whose *Ibusar* with its grotesque portrayal of the dream-world of a miserable provincial railway ticket office clerk has similarities in the tone with *Les Belles-Soeurs*) made the first version, using the English translation side-by-side with the original text. Then thesis-writing student Alföldi Aliz reworked the text with special regard to joul, finally the two translations were blended into the final text. The root of the problems lay in the socio-cultural differences between Quebec and Hungarian societies. Parti Nagy 'invented' a version of Hungarian, different from the standard version, using working-class argot – based on a male working-class subculture.

The Hungarian premiere of Tremblay's play took place in *Pesti Színház*, one of the most prestigious downtown theatres of Budapest, located in the best-known shopping street, on March 29<sup>th</sup>, 1997 – mise-en-scene by Hegedűs D. Géza – and it was on for over two years, with more than fifty performances. The playbill was a folded version of the poster with a short biography of Michel Tremblay and his photo, a few paragraphs of Tremblay's remarks about the play, a short passage about Tremblay's theatricality, a relatively long one about joul and a short text about the translator and joul by critic

Radnóti Zsuzsa. Obviously, the playbill was meant as a source of information for the audience who was exposed to a play by a so-far unknown writer representing an un-known theatrical culture. All these items, except for the one about the translator and joual, were translated from Canadian and Quebecois handbooks and reviews (actually I was the one to supply these sources to the theatre). Radnóti Zsuzsa first writes about the universal features of the plot, and goes on analysing the translation strategy chosen by Parti Nagy saying that he

created a 'heavenly version' of language distortions, corruptions and vulgarity with an exceptional inspiration: a wonderful poesy out of the decay of language. He manifests an endless poetic fantasy in language games: he creates new words through the malfunction of the speaker's memory with regard to a word or phrase heard or read. Verbs get noun endings, and vice versa, subjects and predicates do not agree, characters use words and notions in the wrong context or match phrases incorrectly. Cliches, commonplaces acquire an ironical tone. Language corruptions [...] are reborn with a unique poetic virtuosity [...] enriching it with the new element of an absurdly obsessive use of English idioms [...] (Zsuzsa Radnóti in the playbill).

These items of useful and necessary information concerning the playwright, his cultural and language background and the play itself are illustrated with photos taken in the course of rehearsals and the back page of the playbill contains the list of actresses, the metteur-en-scène, the set and costume designer. All these fulfill the expectations the audience has towards the playbill and help them remember details of the play and of the performance.

The acting space has the kitchen (indoors) in the foreground while behind it we can see the fire-escapes and balconies of the neighbouring building (outdoors). Set-designer Csanádi Judit created an authentic image of Montreal East of Blvd. St. Laurent (she regularly teaches at the academy of acting in Montreal, so she has ample first-hand knowledge). The kitchen was dominated by a cheap red plastic covered corner unit, which could remind the audience of the design in the 1960s. The individual set items, as well as the props referred to shopping at the Hungarian equivalent of Honest Ed's: everything was definitely a mass product and as such these objects functioned really well on the semiotic level, too.

The Studio Theatre in Békéscsaba, a small provincial town in the most backward South-Eastern region played *Les Belles-Soeurs* in April 1999,

mise-en-scène by Konter László. Below the title of the play, the playbill has a sentence in brackets, saying that it is a PG comedy with obscenities. The playbill contains the same information about Tremblay, his comments about the play, about joul and the translator as we could see in the case of Pesti Színház. The black-and-white photos show the cast and some scenes from rehearsals. Among the actresses there were some with nationwide popularity, while others were still studying at the academy or were supernumerary at the company of Jókai Színház. Still, they produced an excellent team-work, focusing on the spirit of the play and establishing links with the audience. Being a studio production, the number of the audience must have been around 120 – and seated on the stage! As we all know, the theatre, and more particularly, the stage is a highly symbolical space where borderlines are heavily loaded with meaning: great avant-garde theatre practitioners of the 1920s (like Max Reinhardt or Antonin Artaud) introduced revolutionary ideas like blurring these traditional borderlines and inviting the audience to enter the iconic space of the performance. As a consequence, there may be spectators on the stage – or actors in the rows of the audience.

In Békéscsaba, the U-shaped rows of chairs for the audience surrounded the acting space without any visible division line. The props of Tremblay's fictional kitchen were furniture (battered sofas, chairs) and a fridge like in a Salvation Army shop and huge cardboard boxes with the stamps. The choice of the director that actors and audience should share the same small space underlines a usually neglected factor of theatrical analyses, namely proximity. These women with their ordinary life-stories and obscene or vulgar language were in most cases just an arm's length from us, spectators – that is they were one of us, or to put it another way, we were one of them. Konter's concept worked very well in the course of the performance: the viewers were not hidden in darkness, therefore all through the performance no member of the audience could avoid having other members of the audience in their range of vision together with the actresses. The shared space could successfully bring together the imaginary kitchen of rue Fabre and actresses and audience members in Békéscsaba. No wonder that all through the performance there was live contact between players and viewers – the actresses voiced the problems and miseries from our life experiences. *Sógornők* was very well received by this small town audience and the reviews confirmed this impression<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> About the productions in Budapest and Békéscsaba see my review in *JEU* (Kürtösi, 169-173).

The third Hungarian staging of *Les Belles-Sœurs* was in Szeged in December 2002, mise-en-scène by Székelyi József. The location of the performance was unusual: since the so-called chamber theatre of the town was being renovated, some plays were shown at a temporary theatre facility which used to be a small cinema. The arrangement of the acting space and the space of the audience was therefore limited to about 16 rows facing the stage which was divided into three parts: to our left was a kitchen counter with some stools, in the middle the table surrounded by the women and to the right we could see a settee, the overall impression was that of a slightly overcrowded area with pieces of furniture that did not match either in style or in colour. Székelyi highlighted the monologues – I prefer to call them ‘arias’ – of the women by seating them on the stool which was lifted above the other characters for the duration of their life-story, and the respective actress was in the spotlight while the others stayed in the shade. This kind of accentuation elevated the given character out of ordinary life, at least for the time of her talk.

The playbill describes the play as “using the tongue in two parts” – and warns the audience about the indecent language verbally (“Attention! Foul-mouthed comedy!”) and using the sign of PG films in TV programmes: in our case 12 in a circle. This playbill is much smaller in scale, actually a folded, colourful page with the reduced-size poster on the front, the cast on the back (mentioning, of course, the sponsors of the theatre) and in the inside Tremblay’s photo is in a stamp-like frame (this is the only picture in the stagebill), his updated short biography and a short message to the audience by metteur-en-scène Székelyi who addresses them very politely and formally, before apologizing for the vulgar language of the play but emphasizing immediately that it is about “love, solidarity, human rights and the apotheosis of women”. He compares this situation to that of Thersites, the ‘deformed character’ in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*. “In this play, i.e. in *Sógornők*, more than a dozen different Madame Thersiteses with a subtle differentiation scream into the 21<sup>st</sup> century pleading that grandmothers, mothers, lovers and daughters should not have such a deplorable fate. The poesy, the beauty and the humanism of the play call for tenderness. [...] Ladies and gentlemen, excuse our language – we use it for the beautiful, the more beautiful and the most beautiful” (Székelyi in the playbill). About Tremblay’s plays in general we can read that “his characters are usually in the middle of their menopause and unable to escape from the prisons they themselves had created or from the ties of their earlier lives. They are able to become independent, self-confident people when they start

to question the necessity of the masks they had used, that of the borrowed heroes and of the corrupted myths. (We can notice a similarity with Quebec's efforts to have their difference acknowledged within Canada, as well as with Canada, to establish an identity of their own in North America.)" (Székelyi in the playbill).

The review in the local paper underlines the absurd elements in the play and in the language, mentioning that the actress playing the role of Rheaune used a typical local dialect to draw the audience's attention to the big difference from standard Hungarian. Metteur-en-scène Székelyi – who at present is the managing director of National Theatre, Szeged – in a personal interview underlined the parallels between the state of North American consumer society and its negative features repeated in the Central European region after the political changes around 1990 which are very noticeable in television culture and the decay of language. As an aside, he noted how absurd this aping of American culture is – while many people in North America are eager to manifest life-models considered typically European. The reviewer said that in this play Tremblay "showed the bizarre carantene of a group of people who have long ago left Europe, still are unable to leave it" (Hollósi 2001c).

Tremblay's play, the director says, is a precious stone for the metteur-en-scène and for most companies since it offers fifteen leading roles for actresses who in most cases are more or less redundant – too old for the attractive young lady role and too young for grandmother roles. Tremblay's dramaturgy at the same time means a special challenge both for the metteur-en-scène and for the actresses: at various points of the play each of them is in the spotlight, while the rest of the time they are just members of a choir – it is not easy to orchestrate them and to create a balance of the two extremes. As the actress playing the role of Angeline said, this play is a "strange tragicomedy offering extreme acting possibilities for fifteen actresses: it is the kind of extreme theatre that I like the most – at one moment the audience is stunned by its brutality, the next moment they feel like crying or laughing" (Hollósi 2002b). Székelyi himself, however, was most interested in the underground poesy of *Les Belles Soeurs* – he regards it as an emblematic play for Quebec culture with universal values. He was particularly interested in it since it is not easy to find good contemporary comedies which hide serious issues below the surface.



To sum up, these remarks hopefully convince the reader that memory plays an important role in evoking theatre experiences and also that remembering, evaluating, documenting the performances of our days – with the help of playbill or reviews, among other possibilities – are absolutely necessary not only for an accurate picture of the culture of our days, but also for future researchers. Looking at the Hungarian fortune of Michel Tremblay's *Les Belles-Sœurs* showed how a previously unknown theatre culture, i.e. that of Quebec, within five years could be seen in three different parts of the country. This play assumed a pioneering role for other plays from Quebec: in February 2003 a studio theatre in Budapest showed Carol Fréchette's *Simon's Life ... In Case Anyone is Interested* (Merlin Theatre, mise-en-scène by Kurucz Pál), a bitter comedy from Québec.

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