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KOVÁCS, ORS LEVENTE: HUNGARIAN ELEKTRA – THE CHOREOGRAPHER AND THE DANCER MAKE MAGIC TOGETHER

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Absztrakt

A balkáni lánctánckultúra különleges helyet foglal el a tradíciót kiváló művészi tehetséggel feldolgozó, iskolaalapító koreográfusok életművében. Ennek egyik legszebb példája Novák Ferenc Magyar Elektra című filmalkotása. A Magyar Elektra kivételes lehetőséget biztosított Fülöp Viktornak, a kivételes balett-táncosnak. A szerepet megtestesítő Fülöp Viktor a mű leglényegesebb aspektusát később figyelemre méltó tisztasággal fogalmazta meg: "A folklór számomra olyan, mint egy gyönyörű terebélyes fa, amelynek a gyökere jó mélyen a földben található, s ami onnan kinő, az is földszagú, tehát maga az élet. Ugyanakkor az ágakra leszállnak a madarak – és ez már költészet. A Magyar Elektra azért jó táncmű, mert »földszagú«, ugyanakkor sokkal több az egyszerű néptáncnál. Az egész fa képviselve van benne: megkomponált dráma, érzelmileg és gondolatilag erősen ható színház született, de nem szakadt ki a földből." A cikk a tradíció feldolgozásának színházelmléleti kérdéseit vizsgálja.

#lanctanckultura #magyarelektra #fulopviktor #magyarkoreografusok #novakferenc

Abstract

The Balkan chain dance culture has a special place in the oeuvre of school-founding choreographers who have worked with the tradition with outstanding artistic talent. One of the best examples of this is Ferenc Novák's film work Hungarian Elektra. Hungarian Elektra provided an extraordinary opportunity for Viktor Fülöp, an exceptional ballet dancer. Viktor Fülöp, who embodied the role, later expressed the most important aspect of the work with remarkable clarity: "For me, folklore is like a beautiful tree with a large canopy, whose roots are deep in the earth, and what grows out of it smells of earth, that is, of life itself. At the same time, birds land on its branches - and that is poetry. Hungarian Elektra is a good dance piece because it smells of earth, but it is also much more than a simple folk dance. The whole tree is represented: it is a composed drama, a theatre that is emotionally and intellectually powerful, but not torn out of the ground". The article explores the issue of adapting tradition from the perspective of theatre theory.

#chaindanceculture #hungarianelectra #viktorfulop #hungarianchoreographers #ferencnovak

In memoriam Tata Novák

Remembering Viktor Fülöp

Viktor Fülöp, born on 9 February 1929 and died on 13 July 1997, was one of the most influential ballet artists in 20th century Hungarian dance.

His outstanding choreographic work has become an ever-lasting part of Hungarian ballet and dance art. Novák's excellent sense for the role of Agamemnon "changed the atmosphere of the ballet stage."

¹ Maácz László. "Fülöp Viktor halálára." *Tánctudományi Tanulmányok*, (1998–1999): 26-27.

According to music historian Balázs Szabó, Viktor Fülöp's art reached the pinnacle of ballet art, as he was able to live with his mere presence and was extraordinarily capable of reflecting the inner state with the body. Viktor Fülöp was an extraordinary artistic personality who excelled for decades in roles that demanded cool, classical elegance, dramatic suggestiveness and humour.²

Hungarian Elektra was an extraordinary opportunity for Viktor Fülöp, who later expressed the most important virtue of the work with genius plasticity: "For me, folklore is like a beautiful tree with a large canopy, whose roots are deep in the earth, and what grows out of it smells of earth, that is, of life itself. At the same time, birds land on its branches - and that is poetry. Hungarian Elektra is a good dance piece because it smells of earth, but it is also much more than a simple folk dance. The whole tree is represented: it is a composed drama, a theatre that is emotionally and intellectually powerful, but not torn out of the ground."³

According to Ferenc Novák, works classified as "from the pure source" are those whose message deals with political, social, and extreme individual conflicts, and is distanced from folk tradition. Novák emphasises that their dramaturgical roots are very far from peasant culture. However, what links them to folk dance is the fact that the movement language of their creators bears, albeit distantly, the traces of folk dance. Hungarian Elektra, staged in 1984, can be included in this group as the creator's connection to folk culture is indicated by the use of folk music motifs or by the rhythmic world that is only valid for folk music.

Ferenc Novák's Hungarian Elektra differs from Sophocles' original play in several ways. In Bornemisza's tragedy, the story begins with the murder of King Agamemnon, whereas in Sophocles' drama, the story begins sixteen years after Agamemnon's death. The plot is concise: King Agamemnon returns home victorious, the people celebrate him, but he is murdered by Queen Clytemnestra and her lover Aegistus.

Soldiers beat back the rebellious people who have lost their king. Years later, Elektra and Orestes, now grown up and guarding their father's memory, take revenge on their mother, Clytemnestra and Aegistus for the murder.

The diversity of folk dance forms and their various realisations play a decisive role in the dramaturgy. The choreographer-director employs a gypsy baton to portray the aggression of the soldiers and the Gyimes round dance to demonstrate the solidarity of the people. Upon his return home, the king performs a ceremonial Hungarian verbunk, a dance that later reappears in the dance of Orestes, who avenges his father's death. Among the couples' dances, the rotating dance is performed, during which the queen selects her future lover. The regicide, the death of Agamemnon, is presented with artistic poetry. Clytemnestra pretends to love him, embraces him, covers him with her white cloak, and they walk their chair lute, tightly clasped together. When Aegistus approaches

² Szabó Balázs. "A szamuráj." In *A kiválasztott – A magyar tánckultúra Nizsinszkij-öröksége*, edited by Anna Maria Bólya, Ákos Windhager, 87-96. Budapest: Magyar Művészeti Akadémia Művészetelméleti és Módszertani Kutatóintézet, 2022.

³ Zorándi Mária: *A Magyar Iskola. DLA Disszertáció*. Budapest: Színház- és Filmművészeti Egyetem, 2009, 87.

them, Agamemnon falls to the ground from the queen's body with a jerk of the embracing arms from under the cloak. In addition to shaping the dramaturgy and characters, the world of movement plays a significant role. Gestures and body language are also important.

Novák utilised a polyphonic structure, enabling him to present events on multiple levels. The dramatic moments were intended to project the inner psychological processes of the characters. Agamemnon is an archaic character, radiating strength, ancientness, austerity and goodness, with the traits of our ancestors.

The choreographer-director emphasised the selection of characters, visual techniques, including choreography, visual design, and gesture systems. Béla Götz provided the stage sets. The Hungarian Electra explores the natural history of individual and social revenge, with the composer's intention to convey a universal message. Ferenc Novák's interpretation suggests that his Elektra is a distinct work in its own right, rather than simply a dance version of Sophocles' original. As such, it can be considered a Hungarian Elektra, with its own unique characteristics.

The piece represents a continuation of Ferenc Novák's creative career, which spans from Kőműves Kelem (The Stonecutter's Kelem) through Csíksomlyó passión (The Passion of Csíksomlyó) to István, a király (Stephen the King) and Hungarian Elektra. Novák's earlier folk dance dramas are evoked in this work. Novák has already crossed over into the theatrical medium in these works, where dance has become an element of equal importance to theatrical prose. Novák aimed to demonstrate that traditional culture could be presented through theatre, using folk dance to create dramatic works and a theatrical language. Drawing on the folklore treasures of the Carpathian Basin, and utilising his professional expertise and creativity, he developed a European dance art concept that honoured the "pure source", i.e. the Bartókian spirit, and pioneered authentic Hungarian folk dance theatre ahead of its time.

Hungarian Elektra: A historical overview of its impact

"To summarise, we have witnessed a highly theatrical and suggestive performance. Hungarian theatre culture benefits greatly from the incorporation of the values of Hungarian and South-Eastern European folklore, which have been explored with scientific credibility. This effort to organically combine traditional values with modern, internationally developed methods is invaluable for Hungarian theatre, which is constantly seeking new ways to evolve." Anna Pór's review provides an excellent illustration of the significance of Hungarian Elektra for theatre and dance history. It was one of the most outstanding productions of its time.⁴

The work premiered in the mid-1980s and gained legitimacy and relevance due to the international artistic phenomenon of the convergence of theatre and dance. This phenomenon was accompanied by the growing popularity of folk art, particularly folk dance. Hungary played an important role in this trend with the tangible presence of dance theatre and the inclusion of folk dance and culture in the repertoires of dance theatres.

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⁴ Pór Anna. Változatok Magyar Electra-témára. Színház. 17, no. 7. (1984): 24–27.

Simultaneously with the growing public interest, the contemporary trade press also focused on the topic of folklore and its representation on stage. The discussion centred on the challenge of presenting authentic folk dance in an artistic product that is primarily aimed at audience enjoyment, rather than entertainment or pastime. It was acknowledged that dance cannot be presented on stage in the same way as it is in its natural environment.

In this context, which mainly relates to the theme of authenticity, the choreographers' strategic task of preserving the authenticity of folk dance under stage conditions is highlighted. Ferenc Novák's Hungarian Elektra choreography is of outstanding importance in achieving this goal.

This study aims to explore the relationship between theatre and folk dance, specifically through the phenomenon of Hungarian Elektra. The focus will be on the issue of the authenticity of 'folk dance moving to the stage', which remains relevant today.

Historical overview

"I believe that simply reproducing folk dance will not sustain its longevity. In 1956, I collaborated with Károly Szigeti and Katalin Györgyfalvai to develop the ars poetics, which emphasises the importance of ensembles performing folk dance in a clear and authentic manner. However, we viewed this as merely a reference guide. It was believed that creating a theatrical performance from dance would allow for the expression of opinions on worldly matters, as failure to do so would result in a transient art form." The sentences above demonstrate Ferenc Novák's approach to the question of authenticity, which allowed him to create something timeless with his Hungarian Electrica as both a choreographer and conceptual director. To comprehend how the second generation of choreographers from the 'Hungarian School' arrived at this conclusion and how it influenced their artistic careers, it is necessary to briefly examine the history of the development of Hungarian folk dance culture and research in the 20th century.

The first half of the 20th century marked a significant transformation in Hungarian folklore dance. The rising popularity of village folk art performances in the 1920s laid the foundation for the nationwide success and impact of the Gyöngyösbokréta movement, which was founded in 1931 by Béla Paulini. The folklore movement played a crucial role in shaping the Hungarian population's perception of folk customs, folk dance, and folk costumes. In addition to the dance programmes, the performers also emphasize the staging of certain customs, such as presenting specific moments of weddings, spinning, various carnival customs and games, and folk festivals and greetings. This is mainly done to preserve tradition. After its abolition in 1947, new guidelines for folk dance research began to emerge in the early 1950s. György Martin formulated these guidelines, emphasising the importance of recording the memories of 20th-century peasant dance culture as fully as possible.⁶

⁵ Novák Ferenc. *A tánc az életem. Novák Ferenccel beszélget Fazekas Valéria.* Budapest: Kairosz Kiadó, 2008.

⁶ "Tánc." In A magyar folklór, edited by Ortutay Gyula, 477–540. Budapest: Tankönyvkiadó, 1979.

Folk dance research is one of the most successful disciplines in Hungarian ethnography. It has validated the results of the Hungarian folkloristic and folk music research school, resulting in a comprehensive presentation of the historical stylistic layers and main dialectics of the Hungarian dance heritage. This proves the European origin of the traditional and resulting national dance cultures of the peoples of the Carpathian Basin.⁷

In parallel with their unique practice of researching folk dance, the choreographers, including Ferenc Novák, who are considered the founders of the "Hungarian School of choraographers", developed a new approach in the 1950s and 1960s. Their activities fundamentally changed Hungarian and European folk dance art on stage.

The first and second generations of choreographers from the "Hungarian School" consistently argued that Hungarian folk dance is suitable for creating dramatic works. They believed that it can and should express modern messages through its formal language and that it is also capable of creating a unique theatrical language. Folk dance, with its theatrical effect, paved the way for the development of dance theatre. In Hungary, the formal language of dance theatre was largely based on folklore roots.

It should be noted that the peak period of the creative circle mentioned above, which occurred during the 1970s and 1980s, coincided with the flourishing of the Hungarian Tanchaz movement.

The Tanchaz movement brought attention to the communal function of tradition. The revival of folklore led to a division in the presentation of folk dance on stage, with one trend featuring original folk dances and the other showcasing choreographic creations.

In his 1979 study titled "The Artistic Trends of the Folk Dance Movement", Ferenc Novák presented two trends: "Pure Source" and "From Pure Source". Novák emphasised that both methods had produced great new works and together they represented a value recognised throughout Europe at the time as the "Hungarian school of choreographers".⁸

The oeuvre of the second generation of choreographers of the "Hungarian School" is still a decisive factor in Hungarian folk dance.

The question of authenticity in relation to (folk) dance theatre in Hungary in the context of Hungarian Elektra

Nowadays, in the course of the proliferation of folk dance festivals and competitions, we can observe that the term authenticity does not have a uniform meaning in stage folk dance productions and competitions, neither in the interpretations of the choreographers, nor in the interpretations of

⁷ Könczei Csongor. "Táncos (ellen)pontok III." Művelődés, 2006. 10.

⁸ Novák Ferenc. Tánc, élet, varázslat. Budapest: Hagyományok Háza, 2016.

the jury, nor in the interpretations of the dancers and participants, as there is no precise definition of the term.⁹

In folk dance competitions, the prize for the "authentic performer" category is often awarded to the dancer judged to be the most authentic performer of the dance, as stated in the public competition notice. However, it is important to note that there is no uniform definition of authenticity in ethnographic and folk dance literature (such as Néptánc kislexikon and Magyar Néprajzi Lexikon). Therefore, the use of the term "authentic" in this context may be subjective and should be clearly marked as such. Despite the debate surrounding its legitimacy for several decades, there is still no consensus on the definition of "ethnicity".

Prior to the presentation of Hungarian Elektra, the issue of authenticity had already been raised multiple times in Transylvanian journals and professional debates. In the pages of Művelődés, József Faragó addressed and resolved this question. "The question of whether the village's cultural artefacts are scientifically and artistically authentic arises. If they are indeed authentic, should they be staged or require further examination? In response, we propose a new thesis: the primary requirement for the scientific and artistic authenticity of folklore, both on and off stage, is quality." ¹⁰

Faragó argues that authentic folklore dance should be performed under stage conditions as the original environment cannot be replicated. In the village, everyone dances, whereas on stage, only those designated by the choreographer perform. They do not dance in their usual space and environment but on stage. Their performance is not for their own pleasure but for the pleasure of their audience. Therefore, their dance transforms from entertainment and pastime into a production.¹¹

The role of the spectator and the duration of the dance may change depending on the context. In a stage production, the audience watches the performance from the auditorium, while on stage, the choreographer has only a few minutes to qualify, sift, and order not only the dancers but also the dance motifs.¹²

In stage dance, the space and scope of the dance, as well as the order and alternation of motifs, are no longer regulated by the dancers' preferences and traditions. Instead, they are determined by the size of the stage, the duration and structure of the production, in other words, the choreographer's vision and will.

The choreographer's task is to preserve the authentic traits of folk dance within the constraints of the stage.

Faragó states that in dance studies, it is necessary to comprehensively examine choreography, including procedures that are motivated by dramaturgy.

⁹ The manuscript of Anna Székely: Examining the question of authenticity and authenticity in three Hungarian folk dance competitions, 2015.

¹⁰ Faragó József. "A néptánc hitelessége a színpadon" *Művelődés*, 24-25, 1982.

¹¹ Faragó József. "A néptánc hitelessége a színpadon" *Művelődés*, 24-25, 1982.

¹² Faragó József. "A néptánc hitelessége a színpadon" Művelődés, 24-25, 1982.

In the world of the stage, directors and choreographers use dramaturgy as a tool to enhance creativity, as a form of dramatic art, and as a technique of dramatic art. The ultimate aim of dramaturgy is to represent the world, creating the framework of fiction and defining the degree of reality of characters and actions. Its most important task is to 'harmonise' the text and the stage, to determine the way in which the text is to be per-formed and to provide the stage impulse that can illuminate the meaning of the text for the time and the audience.¹³

The characteristics required for theatrical performances, as outlined above, are essential for folk dance productions. In stage dance, the size of the stage and the choreographer's vision largely determine the space, scale, order, and alternation of motifs. The choreographer's responsibility is to maintain the authentic characteristics of folk dance in the stage setting.

Success depends on the choreographer's folkloric training and responsibility. On-site study should precede preparation, and the choreographer must be familiar with the natural environment and life of the dance.

Faragó formulates a basic thesis on the concept of authenticity: "the first condition for the scientific and artistic authenticity of folklore on stage - and not only on stage - is quality."¹⁴

A quarter of a century later, Csongor Könczei also emphasised that when traditional folk dance is performed on stage, removed from its natural environment and stripped of most of its original functions, the question of authenticity is separated from the question of tradition. This is because we can only speak of the authenticity of a given production in relation to itself.¹⁵

Könczei holds a strong opinion on the relationship between stage dance and traditional folk dance. He believes that, in the context of traditional folk culture discovered by stage dance during the age of national romanticism, folk dance has become associated with a stylized stage representation of a people who are always smiling, happily merry, and dancing. Könczei challenges the notion that the artistic value and authenticity of cheerful choreographies is based solely on externals. According to Könczei, externals do not make folk dance authentic on stage. 16

As a solution, Faragó's suggested path is recommended, which Ferenc Novák also successfully used with Hungarian Elektra. The question remains: what should a professional or amateur folk dance performer do on stage? Should they continue to use this highly stylised dance style, which is a contrived revelry, primarily considering taste rather than the dancing itself? Or does it attempt to adhere to the rules of stage arts and begin to present (folk) dance theatre-style performances that explore the choreographic processes of the (folk) dance material through effective dramaturgical management...¹⁷

¹³ Pavis, Patrice. *Dictionary of Theatre*. Paris: L'Harmattan Publishers, 2006, 108.

¹⁴ Faragó József. "A néptánc hitelessége a színpadon" Művelődés, 24-25, 1982.

¹⁵ Könczei Csongor. "Táncos (ellen)pontok III." Művelődés, 2006. 10.

¹⁶ Faragó József. "A néptánc hitelessége a színpadon" *Művelődés*, 24-25, 1982.

¹⁷ Novák Ferenc. *Tánc, élet, varázslat.* Budapest: Hagyományok Háza, 2016.

Könczei refers to authentic choreographies, consciously structured performances that present a slice of traditional dance culture. The choreographer, playing a central role in the staging of the folk dance, aims only to showcase the selected source material and the quality and quantity of the dance material used. The choreographer, playing a central role in the staging of the folk dance, aims only to showcase the selected source material and the quality and quantity of the dance material used. The importance of proportion and clarity in presenting the basic idea is crucial in folk dance as a performing art. Traditional dance material serves only as a means to an end, not an end in itself. On stage, it can be boldly shaped and used to present a particular theme.¹⁸

Dance theatre, including folk dance theatre, demands a higher level of training for both choreographers and dancers.

According to Könczei, to establish dance theatre as an artistic genre that offers more than just aesthetic experience and content, it is crucial to clarify the means and extent of using and presenting traditional dance culture on stage.

Dance Theatre - Folk Dance Theatre

Patrice Pavis' theatre dictionary gives special attention to the dance theatre-night dance theatre genre as a possible alternative to the question of authenticity.

Dance theatre, which combines dance with theatrical effects, evokes moments of reality without departing from it and draws its themes from reality. Dance theatre is similar to traditional theatre in technique, utilising comparable texts, attention to scenography, props, and costumes, and care in the selection of materials and means of expression.

"Dance theatre is constructed by bowing dance to dramaturgy and direction, without necessarily recognising its already vague and unformable explanations. The theatre is found and joined to serve it. This unnatural marriage of dance and theatre gives birth to the most beautiful works of our time."

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The emergence of the dance theatre genre in the 1980s redefined dance as theatre. This resulted in innovative performances that built on the personalities of the dancers and revisited the expression of emotions and human drama. The performances often have a story-like quality or revolve around a particular phenomenon. The themes are bolder and the stage designs have moved towards minimalism, emphasising the importance of the dancer as a human being. Dance theatre commonly features movements that are not typical of traditional dance, but rather consist of everyday human movements such as walking, squatting, running, and clapping. Any form of movement that conveys a message can be incorporated into the performance. While speech may be used, it is not the primary means of storytelling or conveying a message.²⁰

¹⁸ Novák Ferenc. *Tánc, élet, varázslat.* Budapest: Hagyományok Háza, 2016.

¹⁹ Pavis, Patrice. *Dictionary of Theatre*. Paris: L'Harmattan Publishers, 2006, 430.

²⁰ Fuchs Lívia. "Mit nevezzünk fizikai színháznak?" *Színház*, (April 2011).

The focus is increasingly on the experience, drama, and everyday simplicity that brings the performance closer to the audience.

The quarter-century history of Hungarian dance theatre trends cannot be reviewed in the context of this study. However, it is important to mention one significant moment in relation to the narrower topic. In July 2019, after a decade of waiting, the National Dance Theatre was completed, and Ferenc Novák joined its management and advisory board. The individual and their new institution have created a significant opportunity for the development and promotion of authentic folk dance on stage in Hungary and the Carpathian Basin.

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