

Samuel Beckett's Drama in Hungarian Theatre History and Criticism before 1990

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Abstract: The international and intercultural aspects of Samuel Beckett's theatre have been widely recognised by an increasing number of scholarly works in the last few decades. This article offers a study of the pre-1990 reception of Beckett's drama and theatre in Hungarian criticism and literary and theatre histories. Its focus is on critical and theoretical investigations of three of Beckett's masterpieces for the stage, *Waiting for Godot* (1953), *Endgame* (1957), and *Happy Days* (1961), provided by Hungarian authors in Hungary or in Hungarian-language forums of the neighbouring countries. While mentioning all the premieres of the three masterpieces in Hungary during the given period, the article surveys and compares only those ideas across the various theatre reviews, which contribute to the Hungarian critical reception of Beckett and the selected works. To place the addressed pre-1990 Hungarian studies and reviews in the broader field, the article is framed by references to some relevant writings of international Beckett scholars.

"The 'what' and 'where' behind the story of Beckett's international reception are under scrutiny in the essays collected in this volume", Mark Nixon and Matthew Feldman, editors of *The International Reception of Samuel Beckett* (2011) write in their "Introduction". More specifically, they add that the book "testifies to trends and patterns within a network of critical and cultural exchange, yet also to the realization that there exist many 'Becketts', read through specific cultural, historical and political situations".¹ The Hungarian Beckett

¹ Mark NIXON and Matthew FELDMAN, "Introduction: 'Getting Known' – Samuel Beckett's International Reception", in *The International*

is not discussed in the volume separately. The chapter "Samuel Beckett and Poland" by Marek Kędzierski introduces the politically and culturally restrictive milieu the Soviet bloc countries faced before 1990, with a quotation from the Hungarian-born Marxist philosopher György Lukács, a persistent advocate of realism, which testifies his rather negative attitude to Beckett. Nevertheless, *Waiting for Godot* had its Polish premiere as early as 1957.² Further in the book, Octavian Saiu's chapter "Samuel Beckett behind the Iron Curtain" briefly calls attention to certain aspects of the writer's reception in Hungary beside that in other Eastern European countries. Saiu claims that during the socialist era, censorship was less severe in Hungary than in Bulgaria and Romania, "which may account for a larger number of productions and translations of Beckett's works". Regarding the pre-1990 period, he reminds the reader that both in print and on stage *Waiting for Godot* arrived in Hungary by 1965. The premiere took place in the Thália Studio Theatre, Budapest, originally a small rehearsal room, which choice was "not a sign of disrespect", Saiu adds, "but a strategy employed by the directors, Károly Kazimir and Péter Léner to make the socialist authorities accept the project". Saiu also mentions the debate between various Hungarian critics about the play in the same year, stating that "the range of opinions expressed was as broad as Beckett generated anywhere: from wholehearted admiration to sheer revulsion". As

Reception of Samuel Beckett, ed. Mark NIXON and Matthew FELDMAN (London: Continuum, 2009), E-book edition.

² Marek KĘDZIERSKI, "Samuel Beckett and Poland", in NIXON and FELDMAN, E-book edition.

for the pre-1990 premiere of other Beckett plays in Hungary, Saiu refers to almost all of them.³

The Hungarian *Godot*-debate is briefly commented on by dramaturge István Pinczés in his unpublished doctoral dissertation (2009), which explores issues of dramaturgy regarding the production of the play. So far it is Anita Rákóczy who has most thoroughly studied how the Hungarian Beckett came into being. She has devoted scholarly articles to the Hungarian staging of *Godot* and *Endgame*, as well as made interviews with relevant theatre makers, which were included and published in essay collections she authored or co-edited. In this study of the early, pre-1990 reception of Beckett's theatre in Hungarian criticism and literary and theatre histories I am going to draw on some findings of Rákóczy. While her main focus is on productions and their directors' innovations, I am primarily concerned with critical, historical and theoretical reflections on three of Beckett's masterpieces, *Waiting for Godot* (1953), *Endgame* (1957), and *Happy Days* (1961), provided by Hungarian authors in Hungary, or in the Hungarian-language forums of the neighbouring countries. Accordingly, this article considers only reviews written about theatre productions which contributed to the Hungarian critical reception of Beckett and the three selected works. In my argument I will also refer to and quote from Noémi Herczog's nuanced study of the relations between Hungarian theatre criticism and the practice of political denunciation over the years 1957–1989, called the Kádár-era after János Kádár, leader of the one-party socialist system ruling the country during that long period. Besides, I also make ample use of the two bibliographies availa-

³ Octavian SAIU, "Samuel Beckett behind the Iron Curtain: The Reception in Eastern Europe", in NIXON and FELDMAN, E-book edition.

ble of Hungarian writings on and responses to Beckett's work.⁴

Using Emil Kolozsvári Grandpierre's translation from the French original, the Hungarian *Godot* was first published in August 1965 by a major journal specializing in world literature called *Nagyvilág* (Great World). A preface to the text written by Gábor Mihályi dwells on the fame *Godot* had already earned world-wide and the controversies it generated in many international scholarly communities due to the devastating picture it conveys of the human existence in decline. However, the play is important even for people in socialist Hungary, the author says, because "it is the unacceptability of this picture that might encourage us to say no to negativism and set optimism against it".⁵ The three main points Mihályi makes about the unquestionably growing reputation of the writer, the controversial nature of the play, and the reasons why it can be important for the Hungarian audience have their echoes in the ensuing, quite heated *Godot*-debate.

The debate about the play and its premiere in Thália,⁶ was hosted also by *Nagyvilág*; it involved some leading critics' voices about the merits and the shortcomings of Beckett's work, as well as about the ways in which it

⁴ CSÁMPAI Zoltán, *Samuel Beckett bibliográfia*, <http://beckett.uw.hu/sbbibl.htm/>, 2005.

KURDI Mária, P. MÜLLER Péter "Samuel Beckett in Hungary: A Centennial Bibliography", *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 14, No. 1. (2008): 133–158.

⁵ MIHÁLYI Gábor, „A *Godot* elé”, *Nagyvilág* 10, No. 8. (1965): 1171–1172. The translation of the quotation from Hungarian into English is my work (MK) and applies to all cases where another translator's name is not given.

⁶ About the political circumstances and the extreme challenges of the premiere see Anita RÁKÓCZY, "It All Started with *Godot* in 1965': Dialogue with Péter LÉNER", in Anita RÁKÓCZY, *Samuel Beckett's Endgame and Hungarian Opening Gambits* (Budapest – Paris: L'Harmattan, 2021), 119–125.

can or should be interpreted for Hungarian audiences. First among the contributors, Géza Hegedűs's article dismisses the play as worthless because it does not say anything new, it is tasteless, and cannot even provoke laughter. Moreover, by the portrayal of hopelessness it morally justifies idle behaviour, the critic says, which looked, no doubt, intolerable through the lens of the socialist ideology and its demand that the whole society work industriously for a better future. To sum up his rigidly disparaging and berating opinion of *Godot* and its author, Hegedűs quotes a well-known phrase from one of Hans Christian Andersen's tales: "the king is naked!"⁷ The other contributors to the debate did not share Hegedűs's degrading attitude and rejection, yet their views proved contradictory in various ways: they identified values and merits in *Godot* while also distanced the work from themselves and the audience as a capitalist product, which demonstrates the bourgeois societies' problems of alienation and hopelessness. Given that the mid-1960s were still a time when the cultural and literary life of Hungary was dominated by Marxist ideology, which required that artists disseminate an optimistic belief in easily attainable social change and improvement, the situation could hardly have been otherwise. At the same time, the contradictions in the critics' position reflected also the spirit of the literati's ongoing debates about socialist realism, for some still a viable criterion of rules of representation while an outdated mode for others, as well as about the many faces and phases of realism itself.⁸

In the debate, György Szabó's article emphasizes that the play encourages a multiplicity of meanings through devices by which it can avoid remaining a bundle of dry ab-

stractions. Moreover, Szabó argues, the play carries a revolutionary effect in that it portrays profound disillusionment and both mocks and rejects bourgeois ideas in the way the Dadaist artists did decades earlier. Not forgetting to add something in the negative, Szabó says that the dark view of the world Beckett transmits through his art needs to be challenged by our belief in progress and the potential for change.⁹ In his contribution, Béla Mátrai-Betegh opposes Hegedűs by saying that the play does have the capacity of making the audience laugh at Vladimir and Estragon's antics, who, although capitalism moulded them uniform and deprived them of individuality, still show differences in their character. Also, Mátrai-Betegh maintains that Lucky's monologue conveys the madly desperate outburst of an oppressed man, by which the text is approaching some painful but beautiful lyricism. In this critic's eyes, *Godot* is not a pessimistic drama because it shows how people are not able to live and, thus, inspires the audience to embrace useful activities.¹⁰ Uniquely among the contributors, Aurél Varannay separates the work and its author, setting them in opposition. He says that here "waiting is the expression of the life instinct, that of hope against hopelessness", and the play's vision of life is tragic like Hamlet's, whereas its grotesque, wry humour exposes hypocrisy. Having praised the drama, Varannay implies criticism of Beckett's choice to portray a kind of existence which is limited, painful, and humiliating to such an extent that he would rather wait for *Godot* – probably for a play

⁷ HEGEDŰS GÉZA, „*Godot*-t újraolvastva”, *Nagyvilág* 10, No. 11. (1965): 1715–1719.

⁸ About these debates see a contemporary American article by Ann DEMAITRE, "The Great Debate on Socialist Realism", *The Modern Language Journal*, 50, No. 5. (1966): 263–268.

⁹ SZABÓ György, „Egy másik nézőpontról”, *Nagyvilág* 10, No. 11. (1965): 1719–1723, 1720, 1723.

¹⁰ MÁTRAI-BETEGH Béla, „A néző szemével a *Godot*-ról”, *Nagyvilág* 10, No. 12. (1965): 1867–1869.

which fulfils all his social, aesthetic, as well as moral expectations.¹¹

Writing an afterword to the debate, László Kéry provides a brief summary of the contrasting points in the others' discussion of Beckett and *Godot* before his own ruminations. Indeed, his assessment also oscillates between appraisal and fault-finding, and regards Beckett as an author of anti-drama. Moreover, he introduces a tendency of comparing the socialist and politically committed Brecht with the absurdist Beckett at the expense of the latter, who does not aim to bring about individual and social change by means of the theatre. To an extent, the comic games of the protagonists have some alienating function, but they are not able to dissolve the pessimistic determinism which pervades the play, Kéry argues, and this is why it is a mistake to look for catharsis in *Godot*. Nevertheless, the play's effect lies in its multi-layered nature, therefore, as a significant work of recent bourgeois literature it is worth studying among other western cultural phenomena, since its aesthetic, emotional, and intellectual value cannot be denied, Kéry admits. Perhaps unknowingly, at the end Kéry sums up the general paradox of putting the obligatory Marxist view of literature into practice: "This is not the only work in the bourgeois literature of the past half-century, which poses the following anxious question: how can a work of art, problematic or even unacceptable because of its philosophy, become significant and considered valuable?"¹² For Kéry, a professor of English literature, the principle work of a similar hue must have been Joyce's *Ulysses*, which was made available for the public in a new Hungarian translation only in 1974.

¹¹ VARANNAY Aurél, „*Godot* mellett, Beckett ellen.” *Nagyvilág* 10, No. 12. (1965): 1869–1870.

¹² KÉRY László, „A mozdulatlan drámája – Utószó a *Godot*-vitához”, *Nagyvilág* 11, No. 7. (1966): 261–264.

Concurrently with the *Godot*-debate, the politically influential literary historian, Pál Pándi's article in the communist party's daily paper *Népszabadság* (Freedom of the People) hailed the translation, publication, and staging of *Godot*, because, he claimed, one had to know and understand the play before forming an opinion of its qualities. Thus, differently from Hegedűs's scanty reasoning, Pándi departs from a seemingly valid standpoint, yet arrives at an even more severe, heavily ideologized conclusion than the other critic: he rejects the play on the grounds that it is nihilistic, characterized by “grotesque scepticism”. As such, for Pándi, *Godot* negates humanism, it is not modern but decadent, moreover, its philosophy of despair and passivity is incongruous with the vitality of the dramatic genre.¹³ László Varga approaches *Godot* from the angle of modernism, deploying Antonin Artaud's theories which undoubtedly influenced the language of the absurd theatre. Beckett intended, Varga says, “to loosen dependence on the text and utilize the whole space of the stage as well as the potential of the human, the actors' body”. The dramaturgical talent of the playwright lies in his capacity to depict even the most hopeless situations with grotesque humour, while his sympathy for his down-and-out characters evokes the lyrical tone, Varga says. After this unconditional appraisal it sounds all the more surprising that he switches to the ideological terrain, stressing that the picture Beckett provides of human life is distorted because of showing it contradictory and not suggesting, in any way, that contradictions can be overcome by purposeful activity, which sounds much like the Marxist programme of building socialism.¹⁴

At the opposite end of the scale articles were written free from ideological consider-

¹³ PÁNDI Pál, „Megismerés vagy elfogadás? – *Godot*-ra várva. Színmű, a Thália Színház előadása”, *Népszabadság*, 1965. nov. 27., 8.

¹⁴ VARGA László, „Beckett és a korszerűség”, *Kritika* 4, No. 5. (1966): 33–38., 34, 35, 38.

ations, for instance Mihályi's in *Híd* (Bridge), a journal based in Novi Sad, then Yugoslavia (1966), which focuses on the dramaturgical innovations and stylistic values of Beckett's theatre. Beckett, Ionesco, and other authors of the absurd declared conventional forms of dramatic writing unsuitable to render the complexities and contradictions of their age, Mihályi claims. According to him, Beckett's "tragicomedies", by means of grotesque humour and parody, unmask old myths which had become empty and meaningless by that time. Also, Mihályi reinterprets the often-cited negativism in *Godot*, positing that Beckett's art represents the negation of negation, a new myth, the myth of the never arriving Godot, which creates a lyrical tone of sympathy and compassion, revealing the playwright's profound humanism. Identifying *Godot*'s links with the traditions of world theatre, the author finds it similar to the greatest tragedies in which the fate of the protagonists is pre-determined.¹⁵ Mihályi's article lacks any ideological baggage, probably because it was published in Yugoslavia, a country formally socialist but not dependent on the political supremacy of Moscow after 1948, so it did not come under the kind of censorship that were operating in the Soviet Union's satellite countries like Hungary.¹⁶ Another thought-provoking inquiry into *Godot* is in a book chapter by Vilmos Zolnay. Scrutinizing the comic mode in the play, he quotes from the initial scene, where the famous utterance "nothing to be done" refers to both Estragon's struggle to take off his shoes and Vladimir's philosophy of life, the gap between them creating tension but also its comic release, because bringing the high and the low together is an age-old device employed by comedies. Opposites with a

¹⁵ MIHÁLYI Gábor, „Beckett *Godot*-ja és az elidegenedés mitológiája”, *Híd* 4, No. 10. (1966): 505–510., 505, 506, 507, 508.

¹⁶ In this context it is worth mentioning that the first *Godot* premiere behind the Iron Curtain took place in Belgrade, as early as in 1955.

similar effect characterize *Godot* at several points, Zolnay continues, for instance, in the scene where the protagonists discuss hanging themselves which would give them an erection, thus fusing death with the possible conception of a new life.¹⁷

Among the critical reviews of *Godot*'s Hungarian premiere an oscillation between serving the official demand for an ideologically restrictive approach and a freer evaluation can also be seen. Ernő Taxner re-addresses the Brecht-Beckett comparison, stressing that Beckett gave up trying to convince his audience of social truths, and represents isolated situations and passive states. However, for Taxner, like for Kéry before him, there seems to be a touch of the Brechtian in Beckett, because the comic behaviour of the tramps in *Godot* actually cautions the audience not to identify with them. At the same time Taxner comes up with the quite combative political interpretation that Beckett's play transmits western thinkers' ideas about life as an aimless waiting not only in their world but everywhere, therefore we, in the socialist countries, should be alert to the danger this belief might entail when employed by political practice.¹⁸ Tamás Ungvári, author of another review of the first Hungarian *Godot* on stage, expresses a more lenient opinion: the production helped the audience understand that the play is worthy of attention as it is about "something different". Its symbolism allows for a number of interpretations, and in Thália the alienating mode of playing it suggested that it depicts types of people whose chances are limited by capitalism, Ungvári contends.¹⁹

¹⁷ ZOLNAY Vilmos, *Az írói mesterség: A mű és elemei* (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1971), 212, 214.

¹⁸ TAXNER Ernő, „Színházi levél Budapestről”, *Jelenkor* 9, No. 2. (1966): 141–145., 142–143.

¹⁹ UNGVÁRI Tamás, „Egy színházi kísérlet – Beckett: *Godot-ra várva*”, *Magyar Nemzet*, 1965. nov. 17., 4.

After Beckett had received the Nobel Prize in 1969, it appeared to be high time to demonstrate the Hungarian interest in his work more ambitiously. Importantly, the cultural climate in the country was becoming more favourable to the realization of such plans. Since the end of the 1960s, György Aczél had been the nominated Secretary of the Central Committee for Cultural Affairs. Culture was state managed, historian László Kontler writes, and the official strategy was the division of the cultural sphere into “prohibited, permitted, and promoted” (tiltott, tűrt és támogatott in Hungarian) products. In fact, “there was a category of tolerated works of art and intellectual achievements, which were deemed neither likely to have a subversive effect, nor to be particularly conducive to the attainment of the professed social and political goals of the regime”.²⁰ Beckett’s works seemed to fall into this category, resembling the Hungarian reception of his also Irish-born predecessor, Oscar Wilde, whose dramatic oeuvre was rehabilitated in this period.²¹

The volume of Beckett’s collected plays in Hungarian translation saw the light in 1970. With a nod to *Endgame*, the title of Miklós Almási’s substantial afterword, “Tragédiák a szemétkosárban” (Tragedies in Ashbins), calls attention to two aspects of the oeuvre, which are discussed in the afterword itself. On the one hand the emptying out of the tragic mode and a grotesque dramatization of physically and/or psychologically incarcerated and helpless characters on the other, which renders any showing of samaritan humanism toward them ineffectual and outdated. Like most previous authors, Almási

offers both critique and appreciation. He stresses that the writer has continued portraying the experience of shock and loss during World War II and its aftermath, which made him a poet of humans without an alternative. Looking at the masterful use of stylistic devices closely, Almási observes that the black humour rampant in the playwright’s work is a means to discredit a character when s/he would begin to soar to tragic heights. Nevertheless, the critic reminds the reader of other kinds of representation in the contemporary theatre, hallmarked by Peter Weiss, Arthur Miller and the late Ionesco, who stage people as active agents, capable of resistance and change, in contrast with Beckett’s hopeless figures.²²

A couple of reviews about the collection of Beckett’s dramatic output employ new perspectives to sum up this unique achievement. Márton Mesterházi considers his works a source of enhancing the reader’s or spectator’s self-knowledge. The more we are willing to recognize our own mistakes in those of Vladimir and Estragon, the stronger the cathartic effect of the play can be on us, Mesterházi claims.²³ Similarly, Bálint Rozsnyai affirms that the situations in *Godot* look more and more familiar to the reader or spectator who recognizes in them his/her own experiences, resulting in a cathartic effect. Rozsnyai’s subtle observations contribute new details to the Hungarian Beckett reception, by discussing certain issues across the dramatic oeuvre. In most of them the characters are confronting and wrestling with the past, feeling constrained to repeat the same narratives over and over again, according to this review. The image of the sea

²⁰ László KONTLER, *Millenium in Central Europe: A History of Hungary* (Budapest: Atlantisz Kiadó, 1999), 445.

²¹ Mária KURDI, “An Ideal Situation? The Importance of Oscar Wilde’s Dramatic Work in Hungary”, in *The Reception of Oscar Wilde in Europe*, ed. Stephano EVANGELISTA, 245–255 (London: Continuum, 2010), 251.

²² ALMÁSI Miklós, „Tragédiák a szemétkosárban: a drámaíró Beckett” Utószó, in Samuel BECKETT, *Drámák*, trans. by István BART et al. (Budapest: Európa Kiadó, 1970), 353–383., 359, 360, 361, 365, 377, 383.

²³ MESTERHÁZI Márton, „Beckett drámaköte-téről”, *Nagyvilág* 16, No. 5. (1971): 745–750., 746.

is also present in many of the plays, Rozsnyai notes, but it does not connote the power of purification. In his conclusion Rozsnyai draws a parallel with Jonathan Swift on the grounds that both writers see humankind as hopeless and futureless, yet Beckett's work is able to rouse more sympathy in the audience.²⁴

In 1970, the history of English literature in the twentieth century came out with Mihályi's chapter on Beckett. The plays, *Godot* primarily, capture a kind of feeling about life which is very characteristic of the modern era, Mihályi says, and does not make a difference between western and socialist countries. He also emphasizes the formal perfection of *Godot* and the precise construction of the complementary pairs of characters. However, Mihályi's idea that the endless waiting in *Godot* resembles that of the sisters for going to Moscow in Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, holds truth only in broader terms: both belong to modern tragicomedies.²⁵ A few years later a literary scholar, Pál Réz re-considered the Beckett-Chekhov parallel more convincingly in the aesthetic field, saying that Beckett possesses an exceptional lyrical talent akin to Chekhov's, which enables him to name the unnameable.²⁶ In his own work of theatre history, Mihályi adds some new ideas to those above. Beckett, for him, reduces man to his final essence, the instinctive wish to survive, while the characters represent basic human behaviour patterns, reminiscent of figures in medieval moralities and mysteries, yet they offer an oppositional parable which ridicules religious beliefs. Mihályi discards the earlier practice of regarding *Godot* as an anti-drama defying all generic rules; he thinks its construction follows as strict for-

mal expectations as classical French drama does. In *Endgame*, Mihályi discovers the parody of Noah's story in the Bible, whose second son was called Ham. Like Noah, Hamm in Beckett's play has a shelter for his family, but, unlike the Biblical character, he destroys all creatures around himself. In addition to its Biblical ring, Mihályi claims that Hamm's name can also be associated with the phrase a "ham actor", meaning a bad performer in English. With regard to Winnie's monologue in *Happy Days*, the critic raises but does not pursue the philosophical issue that it is having a listener which gives her speech meaning²⁷— a Listener was to be put on stage in the later play, *Not I* (1972).

The assessments of Beckett's work in other literary and theatre histories or reference books published in the 1970s and 1980s offer a varied picture. *Az angol irodalom története* (The History of English Literature, 1972), authored by three academics, devote a few pages to Beckett's fiction and drama. The writers aim to be objective and also evaluative; *Godot* for them symbolizes the ultimate precariousness of human life. More generally, they conclude that "the Beckettian hero faces nothingness", and the pessimism pervading the works is counterbalanced by a sense of consolation that the heroes are at least capable of such a daring confrontation.²⁸ In 1971, *Színházi kalauz* (Theatre Guide) came out with an entry on Beckett from the pen of Judit Szántó. For her, Beckett's exceptional talent is manifested in representing the adramatic and passive condition of waiting by using new dramaturgical devices, with which he creates a grotesque and tragic tension. Even his most hor-

²⁴ ROZSNYAI Bálint, „Beckett: Drámák”, *Kritika* 9, No. 10. (1971): 55–57., 56, 57.

²⁵ MIHÁLYI Gábor, „Samuel Beckett”, in *Az angol irodalom a huszadik században*, ed. by BÁTI László, KRISTÓ-NAGY István, 77–100 (Budapest: Gondolat, 1970), 93, 98, 99.

²⁶ RÉZ Pál, *Kulcsok és kérdőjelek* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1973), 303.

²⁷ MIHÁLYI Gábor, „A patthelyzet drámái”, in MIHÁLYI Gábor, *Végjáték: A nyugat-európai és amerikai dráma 25 éve, 1945–1970*, 291–308 (Budapest: Gondolat, 1971), 294, 295, 299–301, 303.

²⁸ SZENCZI Miklós, SZOBOTKA Tibor and KATONA Anna, *Az angol irodalom története* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1972), 665, 667.

rifying visions, Szántó adds, were evoked by a deep sympathy with the sufferings of humanity.²⁹

Two other historical works published mainly for the general public, demonstrate some discrepancy. *Világirodalmi kisenciklopédia* (Short Encyclopedia of World Literature) contains a sound introduction of Beckett by Mihály Szegedy-Maszák in a few paragraphs. According to this, the protagonists of *Godot* live in a thoroughly alienated world, reminiscent of the threatened human existence under Nazi occupation, and *Endgame* is set on the verge of nihil, inviting to be interpreted as a parody of *King Lear*. In both plays, the author claims, language is used artistically and creatively. More generally, he attributes a "heroic pessimism" to the Beckettian literary world,³⁰ connecting to Mihály's idea about the new myth of a Godot who never comes (as suggested in his article in *Híd*, 1966), which can be interpreted as the acceptance of losing all illusions. Surprisingly, a decade later the voluminous *A színház világtörténete* (World History of the Theatre, 1986) presented hardly more material on Beckett, treating his work in the subchapter dedicated to the absurd and mid-century political theatre in France. The author, Géza Staud, restricts his portrait of Beckett to acknowledging that he became the primary representative of the absurd theatre. There seems to lurk some irony in Staud's conclusion that by the time the writer received the Nobel Prize for *Godot* (1969), the absurd had been surpassed by other trends in the theatre world.³¹

²⁹ SZÁNTÓ Judit, „Samuel Beckett”, in *Színházi kalauz* ed. by VAJDA György Mihály, 898–901 (Budapest: Gondolat, 1971), 899.

³⁰ SZEGEDY-MASZÁK Mihály, „Samuel Beckett”, in *Világirodalmi kisenciklopédia*, ed. by KÖPECZI Béla and PÓK Lajos, 112–114 (Budapest: Gondolat, 1976), 113, 114.

³¹ STAUD Géza, „Az abszurdok és a politikai színház”, in *A színház világtörténete*, ed. by

The second Hungarian production of *Godot* was undertaken by the Studio of Csiky Gergely Theatre in Kaposvár in 1975, under Tamás Ascher's direction. Reviewer Anna Belia says of the venture that they offered a laudably humanistic reading of the play, allowing members of the audience to recognize familiar attitudes and patterns in the tramps instead of viewing them from a distance.³² András Pályi's article is concerned only with actor Andor Lukáts, who impersonated Lucky, and played that role using the whole of his body and a rich arsenal of gestic language. *Godot* may be called the drama of motionlessness by some, but this performance, Pályi concludes, moves the audience profoundly by Lucky's terrifying monologue.³³ Another article by Pályi, written in 1988 on the occasion of the revival of the Kaposvár *Godot*, quotes Mircea Eliade to substantiate his idea that one can see the cosmic and cyclical in the drama. The cathartic experience generated by the production, Pályi suggests, lies in turning the audience toward their deeply buried selves.³⁴ With the drama, Mihály's review contends, Beckett asks whether humans can exist without hope and believing in something, to which the play provides the reply that they cannot, and *Godot* is a single, huge metaphor of the need to maintain hope against hopelessness. Notably, Mihály stresses that by 1975, the date of the Kaposvár production, nobody questioned the artistic values of *Godot*, and there

HONT Ferenc, 276–280 (Budapest: Gondolat, 1986), 278, 279.

³² BELIA Anna, „Beckett a kaposvári studio-ban”, *Színház* 9, No. 5. (1976): 16–18., 17.

³³ PÁLYI András, „Egy ember kibújik a bőréből – Lukáts Andor Luckyja”, *Színház* 21, No. 5. (1976): 19–20.

³⁴ PÁLYI András, „Beckett visszanez – A *Godot-ra* várva (ismét) Kaposvárott”, *Színház* 21, No. 8. (1988): 17–18.

were no more debates and doubts about its optimism or pessimism either.³⁵

In 1983 one more pre-1990 revival of the play took place, this time in Madách Kamaraszínház, Budapest, where the director was István Bódi. According to the theatre review of Zsuzsa Vass, this new production failed to capture the Beckettian ethos, and did not manage to present the ambiguities of *Godot* manifest between the desperate situation of the protagonists and their grotesque games. Beckett's perspective is dual, as Vass, along with other commentators, sees it: on the one hand philosophical, concerning how man can exist and survive in a world which renders existence almost impossible and, on the other hand, the expression of sympathy with the characters' plight through the lyrical mode.³⁶ Tamás Koltai is even more critical of this production, saying that it fails to transmit the innovations of the playwright, which initiated a third phase of dramaturgical changes after Brecht and Artaud in the 20th century.³⁷

The second play by Beckett to have its Hungarian premiere was *Happy Days* (1961), performed by the National Theatre of Szeged in the Aula of the University of Szeged in 1970. Perhaps because it was not an event in the main theatre, it passed almost unacknowledged. Lajos Kiss, a university lecturer welcomed the idea of presenting the play, which the average spectator might not have received well, before an audience of students and professors. This sounds like an elitist view, yet Kiss wonders why the play harvested so much applause despite the fact that its philosophy is not new and it undermines the dramatic genre as the protagonist, engulfed in meaningless actions, talks only to her-

³⁵ MIHÁLYI Gábor, „*Godot-ra várva* Kaposvárott”, *Nagyvilág* 21, No. 8. (1976): 1238–1240., 1238.

³⁶ VASS Zsuzsa, „*Godot-ra várva*”, *Színház* 17, No. 3. (1984): 22–24., 23.

³⁷ KOLTAI Tamás, „Beckett: *Godot-ra várva*”, *Kritika* 13, No. 1. (1984): 35–36.

self.³⁸ Another review expresses satisfaction that any fears of the audience that Beckett's drama is too difficult and might just baffle them were dissolved by watching the production. This author, Ö. L. claims that the designation “absurd” for Beckett's work does not apply because the non-realistic setting and dramaturgy symbolize a familiar experience of reality. Winnie's miserable optimism, he adds, carries a belief in humanism, suggesting that her protest and hope to change her predicament form the deeper meaning of the play.³⁹

Next *Happy Days* was mounted by the Studio Stage of Madách Theatre, Budapest, again not on a main stage, under the direction of László Vámos in 1971. As Noémi Herczog contends, if *Godot* in 1965 did not do so, this performance provoked some scandal following the publication of the first review by Péter Molnár Gál in the communist party's paper, *Népszabadság*.⁴⁰ Indeed, it is a declarative yet strangely ambivalent review, stating that Beckett should be saved from being staged by such a theatre company which misinterprets and tries to tame his work by failing to recognize its existentialist spirit. By “taming” Molnár Gál meant that the production presented Winnie and her monologue with undue humanism, even sentimentalizing her figure to win the sympathy of the audience, instead of sticking to Beckett's instructions. Although Molnár Gál packs his venom carefully, it seems obvious that he rejects the playwright because his work cannot be accommodated to the socialist culture built on a different world

³⁸ Kiss Lajos, „Meditáció Beckett szegedi bemutatóján”, *Kortárs* 14, No. 6. (1970): 1004–1005.

³⁹ Ö. L., „Beckett-est az egyetemen”, *Délmagyarország*, 1970. febr. 24., 5.

⁴⁰ HERCZOG Noémi, *KUSS! Feljelentő színikritika a Kádár-korban* (Pécs: Kronosz Kiadó, 2022), 364.

view.⁴¹ Some other critics reacted to Molnár Gál's review almost immediately, sensing the presence of implied denunciation between the lines. Tamás Ungvári explicitly states that a critic should not behave as a policeman. Basically, he admires the interpretative work of both the director and the actress, Klári Tolnay, who played Winnie, and also celebrates the placing of a transparent curtain between the audience and the small stage.⁴² On her part, Vera Létay, conveying a retort to Molnár Gál, deems it quite acceptable that Tolnay's performance is emotional and lyrical rather than revealing the latent grotesque tone, but does present Winnie's down-to-earth (no pun intended) banalities with a pinch of irony. While transmitted as comic, in this production Winnie's figure has retained some respectability as a human being who does not give up hope even in the deathliest situation, Létay says.⁴³ Imre Demeter confirms that the Hungarian theatre world is strong and mature enough not to refrain from staging Beckett's world-famous drama, be it existentialist in its philosophy and shockingly unorthodox in its dramaturgy.⁴⁴

As Herczog highlights, Molnár Gál did not hesitate to refuse the critique of the other reviewers,⁴⁵ which is implied in their writings, even though they do not refer to him by name. Molnár Gál kept insisting on his politically motivated conviction that Beckett shows the wrong path of utter hopelessness for his audience. This reads much like Pál Pándi's rejection of *Godot* in 1965, nota

⁴¹ MOLNÁR G. Péter, „Ó, miért épp ezek a szép napok? Beckett drámája a Madách Stúdiójában”, *Népszabadság*, 1971. jan. 8., 7.

⁴² UNGVÁRI Tamás, „Ó, azok a szép napok!”, *Magyar Nemzet*, 1971. jan. 10., 11.

⁴³ LÉTAY Vera, „Mindennek ellenére”, *Élet és Irodalom*, 1971. jan. 16., 12.

⁴⁴ DEMETER Imre, „Ó, azok a szép napok! Beckett-dráma a Madách Stúdióban”. *Film Színház Muzsika*, 1971. jan. 16., 10–11.

⁴⁵ HERCZOG, *KUSS! Feljelentő színikritika...*, 365.

bene, published also in the communist party paper *Népszabadság*. The title of Molnár Gál's new article, “Beckett és akiknek kell” (Beckett and Those Who Need Him), openly derides the positive Hungarian responses to the playwright, and negates the possibility to interpret his work in more ways than one, conforming to the rigorous party politics, which he was serving as a secret agent.⁴⁶ Herczog calls attention to a summary of the polemics about this production of *Happy Days* written by Anna Földes to introduce an interview conducted with Klári Tolnay, the impersonator of Winnie.⁴⁷ The interview makes it clear that the actress interpreted the figure as an ageing person who, even though her living space and mobility become more and more restricted, still finds something to hold onto and does not give in to utter despair.⁴⁸

The 1980s saw two more revivals of *Happy Days*. First, in 1982, the Kaposvár theatre ventured it, directed by Tamás Ascher, with Judit Pogány in the main role. Among the reviewers Mihályi finds that the excellence of Pogány's Winnie was proven by the audience feeling that her self-deceptions and illusory happiness reflected their own attempts to ignore the most troubling and menacing issues of life's inevitable realities, while the grotesque and tragic features of Winnie's fate were also highlighted. For Mihályi, the irony and satirical overtone in the drama connects Beckett to his great Anglo-Irish predecessor, Jonathan Swift, who mocked the human species by first dwarfing its representatives then making them too big.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ MOLNÁR G. Péter, „Beckett és akiknek kell”, *Népszabadság*, 1971. jan. 27., 7.

⁴⁷ HERCZOG, *KUSS! Feljelentő színikritika...*, 365–366.

⁴⁸ FÖLDES Anna, „Winnie-t vállalva. Beszélgetés Tolnay Klárral”, *Színház* 4, No. 4. (1971): 29–33., 30–31.

⁴⁹ MIHÁLYI Gábor, „Titokzatos sugárzóképeség. Pogány Judit Winnie-jéről”, *Színház* 16, No. 12. (1983): 33–35.

Tamás Koltai sums up the Kaposvár *Happy Days* as the best ever Hungarian Beckett production, including the 1975 *Godot* in the same theatre. Pogány, Koltai claims, plays Winnie's character as Beckett imagined her: a woman who resists the pressure of her desperate situation by fulfilling a programme of day-to-day banalities.⁵⁰ Next, *Happy Days* premiered in Kecskemét by Katona József Színház in 1984, directed by Tamás Banovich. In this case the reviews were less enthusiastic. Tamás Bécsy expresses dissatisfaction with the use of too much irony (or attempt to ironize certain details), which neutralizes the suffering and the loneliness characterising Winnie's situation.⁵¹ Mihályi observes that the outstanding actress, Mari Törőcsik played Winnie brilliantly yet interpreted the role in a rather one-sided way: she presented a woman saddened by the problem of ageing without the grotesque overtone in the Beckettian text.⁵² Similarly, Katalin Róna calls attention to the shortcoming that Winnie's situation does not appear to be as unbearable and shocking in the Kecskemét production as Beckett conceived it.⁵³ However, the review of Judit Máriássy offers a very moving assessment in favour of Törőcsik's acting Winnie with all the body parts she was still able to control, thus realizing the subtle nuances the text conveys, most importantly Winnie's struggle to retain sanity and the ability to speak and remember in the second act.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ KOLTAI Tamás, „»Emlékezés által való kínzás.« Színházi esték Kaposváron”, *Jelenkor* 26, Nos. 7–8. (1983): 689–96., 693–94.

⁵¹ BÉCSY Tamás, „Beckett: Ó, azok a szép napok!”, *Kritika* 13, No. 9. (1984): 32–33.

⁵² MIHÁLYI Gábor, „Reményvesztve – tragikusan. Törőcsik Mari Winnie-jéről”, *Színház* 17, No. 4. (1984): 25–26.

⁵³ RÓNA Katalin, „Bemutató Kecskeméten. Ó, azok a szép napok!”, *Film Színház Muzsika*, 1984. febr. 18., 12–13.

⁵⁴ MÁRIÁSSY Judit, „Vinnie, az óriás”, *Élet és Irodalom*, 1984. ápr. 6., 12.

Endgame came to the Hungarian theatre world at a slower pace. Its pre-1990 journey is documented by Anita Rákóczy, who reports that the “Hungarian stage premiere was preceded by a nearly-forgotten 1974 TV recording ... directed under studio conditions by the young, upcoming theatre artist, Gábor Zsámbéki”.⁵⁵ The first staging of *Endgame* took place in the Chamber Theatre of Szigligeti Theatre in Szolnok in 1979, directed by István Paál. The reviews the production inspired praised it, yet also paid considerable attention to the artistry of the text. Júlia Szekrényesy argues that in the play Beckett relegates two of our favourite illusions, the belief in individual abilities and the “Faustian man” to ashbins, showing them defunct. Their irrationality and ineffectuality, Szekrényesy continues, have been known to humans, but kept in secret under the mask of advertising the infinite possibilities of life and self-realization in the consumer society, while Beckett's drama debunks the cult of ego aggrandizement through its faceless and ruined characters. Her idea that Hamm's dreadful narrative functions as a parody of bad modern novels centring on inflated egos carries another evidence that the text of *Endgame* re-hashes bits of other literary material in thoroughly twisted and ironical ways. Szekrényesy praises the language of the play as expressive and vibrant, which enabled the Szolnok production to evoke polarized emotions.⁵⁶ Similarly, for Koltai the metaphorical and the banal intertwine in the drama with tragicomic and grotesque effects, achieved in Szolnok without fail.⁵⁷ Among the inter-

⁵⁵ RÁKÓCZY, Anita, “Samuel Beckett's *Fin de Partie* in Hungary: A Brief Reception History”, in *Samuel Beckett as World Literature*, ed. by Thirthanker CHAKRABORTY, Juan Luis TORIBIO VAZQUEZ, 125–135 (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1916), 125.

⁵⁶ SZEKRÉNYESY Júlia, „Zárkombinációk?” *Színház* 12, No. 12. (1979): 24–26.

⁵⁷ KOLTAI Tamás, „A játszma vége”, *Népszabadság*, 1979. okt. 27., 7.

textual elements, István Vánca finds a reference in the play to Nietzsche's prologue to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which contains the sentence: "The earth has become small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small. His race is as ineradicable as the flea-beetle; the last man lives longest".⁵⁸ It cannot be accidental, Vánca remarks, that halfway through the drama Clov finds a flea in his trousers and tries to get rid of it by using a bottle of insecticide, but the result is uncertain.⁵⁹ In support of Vánca's idea is the fact that Clov is unable to walk properly, he rather hops about like Nietzsche's "last man".

Parallel with the productions and reviews, the number of critical works and scholarly studies on Beckett's dramatic oeuvre, written from diverse perspectives and leaving ideological scruples behind, was steadily growing. Despite the atheist stance of the leading communist party and its government, the Catholic monthly called *Vigília* held its position even in the pre-1990 years. Being not radical, it fell into the tolerated category, and was allowed publicity. In this journal, authored by Sándor Szabadi, an interpretation of Beckett's major plays focuses on their lack of the transcendental level and representation of human despair in a world without God. Szabadi begins by referring to Kirillov's nihilist philosophy in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Demons* (1871), according to which man's destroying God entails the change of both the Earth and people. Beckett depicts such a transformation: in his work the decline of culture and the physical as well as spiritual degeneration of man can be seen, Szabadi claims. He discusses the kinship of the two writers in terms of their relentless search for truth and exploration of the depths of human suffering and pain, refer-

ring also to how the comic and tragic intertwine in their works as in a Godless world suffering looks grotesquely comic, even absurd. Indeed, Nell's much quoted half sentence in *Endgame* about unhappiness looking funny supports this view. The mimed family praying in the same play becomes a travesty of Christian traditions when Hamm interrupts it by cursing God who does not even exist, to which Clov's answer "Not yet" expresses a "frightening possibility" for Szabadi.⁶⁰ Here Szabadi seems to imply that Clov might wait for divine interference, which has "not yet" arrived; it is unknowable, therefore fills him with fear beside some slight hope.

The lack of the transcendental level and the viability of an allegorical interpretation also feature in Tamás Bécsy's 1974 monograph, although with the difference that his investigation is grounded in drama poetics, inspired by theories of structuralism, somewhat belatedly but markedly present in Hungarian scholarship at that time. Bécsy distinguishes three types of the dramatic genre: conflict-driven, central-pointed, and two-level models, of which the last one characterizes medieval and certain 20th century plays with the plot being set at the border of two worlds: the mundane and the transcendental. Bécsy's analysis of the figures in *Godot* and *Endgame* treats them as abstractions, similar to those in medieval works, but he stresses that they are not grounded in a firm belief system such as Christianity. "What we see on the [modern] stage can only vaguely remind us of certain everyday actions or conversations. They only evoke the image of those, only refer to them [...] mundane life is shown as meaningless and insignificant" Bécsy underlines, because the transcendental level proves vacant: the

⁵⁸ Friedrich NIETZSCHE, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. by Walter KAUFMANN (New York, London: Penguin Books, 1978), 17.

⁵⁹ VÁNCSA István „A kép kimerevedik”, *Film Színház Muzsika*, 1979. okt. 6., 4-5.

⁶⁰ SZABADI Sándor, „Ember és történelem Beckett drámáiban”, *Vigília* 37, No. 2. (1972): 99–103., 99, 102–103.

mysterious Godot never appears.⁶¹ Nevertheless, Bécsy's view about the role of waiting chimes with Mihályi's who also states that although humans face a bleak world, they cannot live without clinging to some kind of hope.

The exploration of how language is employed and functions in the three major Beckett plays is in the centre of some other scholarly writings. In as early as 1965, Ungvári published an article about the theatre of the absurd, understood in a broad sense, with references to several playwrights and plays, including Beckett's *Godot* on a few pages. The impossibility of expression in the drama (and in other absurd plays) can be approached, Ungvári suggests, by applying crucial tenets of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922). The critic quotes ideas from *Tractatus* to trace parallels in *Godot*, for instance the proposition that all assertions are equal, which is characteristic of the Beckettian protagonists' utterances: they do not express the personality of either Didi or Gogo, therefore they are interchangeable. There is no meaning and value in this world, only outside of it, Ungvári paraphrases Wittgenstein, which might explain why Beckett's protagonists are waiting for Godot to give meaning to their life.⁶²

In 1974 and 1983, two articles saw the light about speech and communication in Beckett's drama, their respective lines of thought reminiscent of, although probably not inspired by, Wittgenstein's theories of language games in his posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). The *Routledge Guidebook* to this seminal work notes: "Wittgenstein introduces the concept of a *language game* in order to bring into prominence the fact that language functions

within the active, practical lives of speakers; its use is inextricably bound up with the non-linguistic behaviour which constitutes its natural environment".⁶³ Erzsébet Juhász's article examines the characters' speech in *Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Happy Days*. In these the "non-linguistic behaviour" of the characters is waiting; they represent pure existence. Juhász compares the representation of speech in the three texts respectively, stating that it consists in language games merely to prove that the characters are alive and try to make their existence bearable, so the dialogues conform to certain rules. From this, it follows that Juhász rejects Mihályi's opinion about the characters of *Godot* being patterned as complementary: for her Vladimir and Estragon cannot be distinguished from each other and have no personalities, which was also noted by Ungvári's above quoted early study. As to the other major plays, Juhász argues that Hamm and Clov in *Endgame* are not able to play verbal games, their dialogue is mere clowning with parts of their speech becoming monological, while in *Happy Days* Winnie's talking to herself is an often self-addressing monologue, which cannot be found in the previous two plays.⁶⁴ This contention is arguable as the seeds of self-addressing appear in both of the other works too.

The other article, by Eszter Kiss, presents similar points to Juhász's, and also takes some of the latter's ideas further, although it explores the plays from another angle, that of communication theory. Kiss contends that in *Godot*, as an absurd play, dramatic action is replaced by quasi acts and the characters' speech functions only as a semblance of

⁶¹ BÉCSY Tamás, *A dráma-modellek és a mai dráma* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1974), 360–363, 381–382.

⁶² UNGVÁRI Tamás, „Abszurd dráma – drámai abszurdum”, *Helikon* 11, No. 2. (1965): 76–90., 79.

⁶³ Marie MCGINN, *The Routledge Guidebook to Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 47.

⁶⁴ JUHÁSZ Erzsébet, „Másodlagos jelentés és létélmény: Beckett *Godot-ra várva*, *A játékma vége és Ó, azok a szép napok* című drámái”, *új symposion* 109 (1974): 1280–1290., 1280, 1282–1283, 1285–1286, 1288–1289.

communication, which follows suit with Bécsy's and Juhász's views. It is not a drama of action, Kiss says, but a series of opportunities for action the characters make use of in their imitative communication which isolates itself from the world by being self-reflexive and patterned according to rules, like games do. Like Bécsy, Kiss also thinks that Vladimir's song about the never finishing story of a dog in the middle of *Godot* models the open structure of the eternal line of repetitive acts in the whole drama. About *Endgame*, Kiss expresses an opinion different from Juhász's: she says that here the conversations also form a series of games which do not provide information; both Hamm and Clov are conscious of this, yet they need the games in order not to have to face reality. The Beckettian dramatic communication is, thus, absurd as its use is to veil reality with meaningless words, Kiss says, and concludes that Beckett stages the unsayable, nothingness itself.⁶⁵

As this essay purported to demonstrate, at the beginning the reception of Beckett and his three major works for the stage depended on the ideological milieu and the cultural politics of the socialist government of Hungary to a considerable extent. Changes toward more openness and leniency with western cultural products, Beckett's oeuvre among them, were taking place from the late 1960s. Beckett's Nobel Prize in 1969 and the easing of political influence in the cultural sphere made it possible that from total or partial rejection and oscillation or ambiguity in forming critical attitudes, a development to comparatively ideology-free explorations of the unique and experimental dramaturgy as well as intertextual richness in the writer's oeuvre started to take place. During the period of two and a half decades targeted in this essay, scholar and critic Gábor Mihályi

⁶⁵ KISS Eszter, „Kommunikáció a drámában: Samuel Beckett drámáinak kommunikációelméleti megközelítése”, *Színháztudományi Szemle* 10 (1983): 7–54., 13–15, 27–30, 33, 41, 47.

(1923–2021) can be credited with a prominent role in the progress of Hungarian critical reactions toward a greater variety of nuanced observations and fruitful inquiries, likely to build on and enter into dialogue with each other and/or generating some kind of polemics. The notion that Beckett's plays present hope alongside decline as components of the human predicament has become almost unanimous. Looking at the 1970s and 1980s in his study on English-speaking Beckett criticism, David Pattie distinguishes two strands: one of “the humanists” who think that “his writing represents a heroically sustained and determined attempt to uncover [...] the naked, uncomfortable truth of human existence in an indifferent universe” and the other of those who “have drawn attention to the curiously self-generating nature of Beckett's texts” and conclude that “Beckett's work demonstrates that all human communication is subject to *aporia*”.⁶⁶ The present article has found that in the Hungarian reference literature of the period traces of both these strands, although not so separately, can be detected in Beckett's evaluation. Besides contributing, in their own way, to the results of the ever-widening international research into Beckett's theatre, the mentioned scholars and critics with their observations and analyses have established the foundations of the “Hungarian Beckett” by the time of the writer's death in December 1989, and by the major political change in Hungary in early 1990.

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⁶⁶ David PATTIE, “Beckett and Bibliography”, in *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies*, ed. by Lois OPPENHEIM, 226–246 (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2004), 227–228.

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