

“The Hypocrite Can Be Killed, but Hypocrisy Survives”

Interview with Theatre Director **Gábor Tompa**

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Born on August 8, 1957, in Târgu-Mureș, Gábor Tompa is a Romanian-Hungarian theatre director with extensive activity both within Romania's borders and abroad. Since 1990, he has been the Manager of the Hungarian State Theatre in Cluj-Napoca and, since 2018, the President of the Union of European Theatres. Over time, he has staged highly successful productions in numerous significant Romanian institutions, receiving multiple nominations and distinctions from UNITER (Theatre Union of Romania). He is also a Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters from the French government (Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres).

Due to his special fascination with Molière's personality, he first staged Tartuffe in 1994 at the Institute of Theatre Arts in Târgu-Mureș. He later revisited the play, notably with a critically acclaimed production in 2000 at Theatre de l'Union in Limoges, France. Similarly, in 2011, over a decade after staging The Misanthrope at the Hungarian State Theatre in Cluj-Napoca, he created a new production of the same play at the National Theatre in Iași, in an entirely different aesthetic paradigm. During this interview, I attempted to unravel the driving forces behind this enduring fascination with one of the founders of European comedy, whose dramatic stakes transcend mere frivolous amusement.

***Alexandra Dima:** What do you believe constitutes, 350 years after his death, the "relevance" of Molière, a profoundly subversive author in the context of the 17th century?*

Gábor Tompa: Molière's work is vast. There's a scene in Bulgakov's play, *The Cabal of Hypocrites* – which I've also staged: after *Tartuffe* is banned at the Palais-Royal, at the pressure of the clergy, Molière is told, "Monsieur de Molière, from now on, we'll only perform your merry comedies," and he responds: "But, Your Majesty, this is the cruelest punishment, worse than death. Why?". Louis XIV does not respond but leaves quietly. Thus, I believe that even today, there are aspects and issues in his plays that, even without being forcibly updated or even updated, still retain their validity, primarily because all those intrigues, the fronde, the scheming behind the scenes still exist in one form or another. Politically, not much has changed, only that certain subtleties have been replaced by other subtleties or even with a greater lack of scruples and greater cynicism. Theatrically, I find it very interesting how

theatre functions in public life. For instance, if I think about *Tartuffe* all the characters are also performers: the family performs in front of Madame Pernelle, Tartuffe in front of the family, with his hypocrisy, playing a false saint or a pseudo-saint. And Tartuffe is an extraordinary actor, changing his language depending on his interlocutor or the character he’s interacting with: he speaks differently to Orgon, differently to Elmire when courting her, differently to Cléante after laying his hands on that box containing subversive acts against the state, differently after being caught and Orgon wants to kick him out of the house... So, he is a chameleonic actor, skillfully changing his roles. But even Elmire learns from him how to perform. And although Tartuffe is aware that he was nearly exposed, he cannot resist physical passion and, in a way, falls into his own trap – the trap of the theatre. It’s interesting how Molière uses theatrical means, a kind of “theatre within theatre”, to reveal this labyrinthine system of hypocrisy.

Alexandra Dima: From an aesthetic perspective, how do you approach these thematically complex plays?

Gábor Tompa: I am fascinated by the baroque soul, the sensitivity to beauty, to aesthetics. Of course, this aesthetic is sometimes heavy, exaggerated, but there is still a grandeur and harmony in the baroque soul that Molière, who lives and writes in the second period of the Baroque – Neo-Baroque, almost close to Rococo –, uses as a contrast between essence and appearance. I have seen and created many shows with contemporary implications. For example, even though I placed the staging of *Tartuffe* within this baroque framework, very precisely in a way, with the costumes, Orgon’s house, the grass, and richness of elements, at the end of the show contemporary bodyguards appear. I am talking about that happy end added by the author at the request of the authorities, where Louis XIV is praised, but which can still be staged extraordinarily well because we can sense the irony and the fact that those words do not mean what they seem to mean... And when those lines were spoken in the ’80s, they created very strong tension. Or similarly, in the ’90s. I did my first *Tartuffe* in the ’90s (then I redid it in Paris). And at the end of the show, Tartuffe is beaten as he tries to escape, but at the same time, the

king's men destroy Orgon's house and hang Tartuffe upside down with ropes from what is left from the house. And then a TV enters with Bryan Adams singing *Please Forgive Me (I can't stop loving you)*. So, after Tartuffe is killed, the family continues to pray for his soul and for him to become a better person – even though he's already dead. What I wanted to show, skipping through centuries, is that the hypocrite can be killed, but hypocrisy survives. Molière speaks a lot about hypocrisy. But also about friendship, about relationships...

Alexandra Dima: How does The Misanthrope fit into this paradigm you described?

Gábor Tompa: My first play with *The Misanthrope* was about our community, about the Hungarian Theatre in Cluj, where profound love is often experienced, but also jealousy, because living certain roles or situations with intensity is inherent to the theatrical act. Alceste, who is somewhat a Hamlet-like figure, fights the authorities because he doesn't want to be an opportunist and because he sees this hypocritical world around him for what it is. He is disgusted by this world where mediocrities like Oronte end up in high positions on an upside-down ladder. So, this is a world where sincerity isn't possible. I was saying that, in a way, Alceste is a Hamlet-like character because he tries to restore the balance between order and chaos in the world – just like Hamlet, Prospero, or Oberon do in Shakespeare's plays. But all these attempts end in failure. It also depends a lot on how you play Célimène, who is worldly, who accepts assimilation into this hypocritical world – something Alceste cannot bear as he even accuses her of deceit, although it's probably not true. So, in a way, she is also a victim. For Alceste, withdrawing from society is the only solution, which Célimène doesn't accept. There is this kind of neo-asceticism nowadays as well, and we can observe in the younger generation: people who are no longer interested in money, profit, but in possible ways to find factual truth. From this perspective, *The Misanthrope* is a very powerful play. In fact, I consider *Tartuffe*, *The Misanthrope*, and *Dom Juan* to be a trilogy, which I once hoped to stage as such, with the same actor playing Tartuffe, Alceste, and Dom Juan.



Fig. 1: Scene from the *The Misanthrope*, HST, 2000. Photo credits HST.

Alexandra Dima: In what sense do these plays constitute a trilogy?

Gábor Tompa: Especially *Alceste* connects, at least in my mind, to *Don Juan*. Because after this human experiment of his fails, he is faced with a very important decision: to commit suicide – as it is also suggested in the text –, to withdraw from the world, or (the contemporary and cynical solution) to become *Don Juan*. Who isn't a macho seducer collecting female trophies, but is a man in love with the idea of Woman itself, in love with the idea of Love, and therefore with Death, because sexual, erotic love cannot be eternal. And, as Kierkegaard analyzes, *Don Juan* is the “knight of resignation,” a philosophical character, much deeper, defying death and actually desiring it because he aims for a kind of absolute that doesn't exist. He can never be satisfied because he feels the limits of knowledge.

Alexandra Dima: How does Tartuffe integrate into this trilogy you mentioned?

Gábor Tompa: Not necessarily in a biographical sense. For example, I actually killed Tartuffe in my stagings of the play. The hypocrite was thus punished. But this hypocrite played with the cards on the table from the beginning. The fact that he was acting was evident right from the start. So, in a way, Tartuffe also conducts a human experiment. This also connects to that sudden change in Orgon's life, as he is someone who probably fell out of favor with power and who is also hiding those subversive documents. Orgon wants to comply with the new order, which is why he suddenly introduces a radical change in the family's life. This, however, does not come from sincerity but from fear. Therefore, Tartuffe, Alceste, and Dom Juan conduct a type of experiment with humanity. Of course, Tartuffe is a charlatan. But we must ask ourselves why it is possible for someone like him to dominate us. And if we look at the play, except for Orgon and Madame Pernelle, everyone sees Tartuffe for who he is. There are many interpretations where even Orgon knows... Although, dramatically speaking, it's good that not all characters are initially involved in the essential conflict of the play because that would simplify and impoverish its meaning. If, in Hamlet, Gertrude knows the truth and is complicit, everything becomes more one-sided. But if she learns from the play Hamlet puts on, things become much more complex. Similarly, if Orgon uses Tartuffe, the table scene loses its impact. Although, it's possible, I've seen this interpretation, along with many interesting ones. For example, I saw a play by Ivo van Hove that had an extraordinarily beautiful beginning because Tartuffe is found on the seaside like survivors from one of those migrant boats on the coast of Italy. Here, therefore, lies a contemporary problem: how many of these people come to integrate, how many have another purpose.

Alexandra Dima: As you mentioned earlier, both Tartuffe and The Misanthrope are plays you revisited many years after the first staging. What did this "revisiting" entail for each of them?

Gábor Tompa: I first staged *Tartuffe* with the students from Târgu-Mureș, Bogdán Zsolt's class. There, I first used this idea of a bridge across centuries, where hypocrisy survives. Of course, I developed it in the French production,

but with more complex sets, with more money... And both times I introduced a character who never appears in the actual play, who is only mentioned by name, Laurent, whom I made Tartuffe's doppelgänger. Both were shaved, wearing the same priestly garments. And when Elmire called Tartuffe again, to seduce him, with Orgon under the table, the two of them came together. So, he no longer trusted her like the first time. At the end, I developed the idea that Laurent is the one who betrays Tartuffe and hands him over to the authorities, suggesting that he was probably the man of power from the beginning. That's how I approached and re-staged *Tartuffe*, for example. As for the *The Misanthrope*, I first staged it in Cluj, without a set, just with a bed and a piano and with the audience on stage. There, the relationships between the actors were very personal. In fact, the show was about us, about our theatre, about the existence or absence of sincerity, about how and if we can continue together... some actors even left at that time. That was in the year 2000. Then, after 11 years, I was invited to Iași. And since Sorin Leoveanu was an actor I thought should play *The Misanthrope*, I called him in as well. This time, I worked with a different set designer, Andrei Both. The only thing I kept from the previous show was the piano. So, we had a complex setting this time: a shiny black floor that reflected almost everything, a huge chandelier hanging very low, with the actors almost bumping into it, and a large bookcase. The play was about the intellectual isolation of our times, about the loneliness of writers, artists, etc. In this show, there were two important moments. The first one was with Célimène's servant, Basque, who was always semi-nude, sometimes in a bathrobe. And slowly, he dressed up as a kind of angel of death. At the same time, he kept coming and dusting the piano and sometimes put a finger, seemingly scared of the piano's sound, as if he didn't know what it was. Then, at some point, he sat down and perfectly played Bartók's *Allegro Barbaro*. Which is a prelude to death. The second moment, right at the end, was meant to highlight the gap between Alceste and society, as there is an earthquake that splits them. And the part where Alceste remains with his bookshelf moves away, as if an island were breaking away from a continent. In fact, this is where Prospero's story begins, with his books. This way, Alceste integrates into the Pantheon of those solitary intellectuals trying to restore the balance between order and chaos.



Fig. 2: Scene from the *The Misanthrope*, HST, 2000. Photo credits HST.

Alexandra Dima: So, all these shows are placed in a timeless or at least temporally uncertain framework. Therefore, how would you define your relationship, as a director, with the space and time in Molière's plays?

Gábor Tompa: The two stagings of *Tartuffe* start there, in Molière's time. Orgon, for example, to appear faithful to the regime, is dressed like King Louis XIV. And the show unfolds in this ambiance until everything dismantles, and suddenly we are in contemporaneity. So, in *Tartuffe* there's a leap over centuries. In *The Misanthrope*, in the first version, in Cluj, the characters are dressed as "civilians". In Iași, not so much. But both shows spoke about their times – the years 2000 and 2011 respectively. The versions of *The Misanthrope* were quite clearly determined, both geographically and temporally, whereas in *Tartuffe* there was this bridge across centuries, suggesting that hypocrisy continues to develop.

Alexandra Dima: Beyond the two plays that you hierarchically and thematically place alongside Dom Juan you also staged The Pretentious Young Ladies in 1997. What place does that play and your production occupy in the Molièorean universe you have outlined so far?

Gábor Tompa: I staged *The Pretentious Young Ladies* at the “Alegria” Theatre in Spain with some freshly graduated actors. We experimented with the Baroque and had improvised sets. In fact, the play was about the Baroque and how we imagine it today, what we take from those times. Or, for example, referring to those celebrities in the fashion world, what artificial attitudes we inherit or reinvent. That is what that show was about.

Alexandra Dima: You mentioned earlier the subversive impact of Molière’s plays during the ’80s, when, despite the regime claiming them, directors often used these works to criticize authorities — which somewhat reflects the playwright’s relationship with King Louis XIV. How do you explain this duality and its perpetuation over centuries?

Gábor Tompa: Great masterpieces always hold this power because they are open structures. They have this duality precisely because they can generate many different interpretations. Censorship often depends on the level of fear of each official responsible for overseeing the political correctness of a theater production. So, even in the ’80s, some shows passed that we wouldn’t have thought would, while some otherwise benign ones were stopped. Often, a costume or gesture that could be deemed indecent led to the banning of an entire performance. But at other times, truly subversive shows filled with political allusions passed without issues. This always depended on circumstances. Fear grows in such a system precisely because there are numerous possibilities for interpretation, and because, in reality, each spectator interprets the message in their own way.



Fig. 3: Bogdán Zsolt in the *The Misanthrope*, HST, 2000.
Photo credits HST.