

# From Fame to Shame? Study upon Forming and Reforming of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Theatre in Hungary as Reflected in the Story of a Family of Actors

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Received 31 March 2018 ▪ Revised 30 May 2018 ▪ Accepted 10 June 2018

## *Abstract*

In the beginning of the 19th century there existed an abstract ideal of a national theatre in Hungary, besides the travelling theatre-companies all over the country. This ideal was a national, moral and patriotic theatre that both educates and entertains people: the whole nation. This paragon and the practice of the companies had led to building the National Theatre in Budapest. Also, this invoked a series of problems regarding rural/urban (virtues, actors, criticism, audience, drama, theatre), parameters of quality, etc. My research focuses upon a special family (a theatre director father, an actress wife and actress daughters): the Komlóssy family. After years of wandering in the west part of Hungary, finally – according to their fame – they were invited to the new theatre in the capital. What kind of mentality/style differences had led to their separation, to the shaming failure of Mrs. Komlóssy, and finally their leaving the national theatre?

**Keywords:** 19<sup>th</sup> century, national theatre, romantic, sentimental, actress, theatre director, rural, urban.

## 1. Introduction

The opening of the Pesti Magyar Színház (Pest Hungarian Theatre) in 1837 was celebrated as the fulfilment of a paragon that had been crystallized through “so many bitter struggles and delusions”<sup>2</sup>. Even before its inauguration the institute had already become an ideal: forming a place-based community, a citadel of culture and patriotism<sup>3</sup>. Mihály Vörösmarty, the poet laureate of the day, who was requested to write a dramatic prologue for the opening gala performance agreed with the directory that – according to Schiller – cultural state should be

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<sup>1</sup> PhD student.

<sup>2</sup> Cited from Vörösmarty`s letter to the procurer of the dramatic prologue for the opening gala performance. Cited by Egyed Emese: *Az Árpád ébredése című embléma*. Szenárium, nr. 1. 15 September, 2013. [Árpád's Awakening – an Emblem] [https://nemzetiszinhaz.hu/magazin/2013/09/az-arpad-ebredese-cimu-emblema#\\_ftnref4](https://nemzetiszinhaz.hu/magazin/2013/09/az-arpad-ebredese-cimu-emblema#_ftnref4). Accessed 21 October 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Egyed, *ibid.*

created through common theatrical experiences given by national theatre. This thought contradicted the widely spread scientific thesis stating the upcoming annihilation of the nation and language in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – explains Emese Egyed in her study on Vörösmarty's drama<sup>4</sup>. Cultural community can only be created through common theatrical treats, which train and create their own interpreters. The years of travelling theatre companies and the theatre's toils to become permanent had gradually prepared the embodiment of this conception in Hungary since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The "old fighters" (according to the actress Déryné) of the travelling theatre companies hardly had any qualification and most times they didn't have the least conditions for playing: nonetheless they were the catalysts of the above-mentioned process. This study would not be enough to enumerate all the outstanding personalities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian theatre history. We only mention them, because the objective of this research is the carrier of two of them: the theatre director Ferenc Komlóssy and his actress wife, Erzsébet Czégényi. Their theatrical fate is somehow a print of the nascent theatre, its failures and achievements. Being Thalia's priests, their careers suggest a paragon that they would identify themselves with. Their failure in the Pest Hungarian Theatre indicates the anachronism of these ideals but also a necessity of them. The way they reloaded their career is also a symbolic deed. The precise, thorough work of Ferenc Komlóssy was utilized later as he became a librarian and a kind of finance director of the National Theatre, his wife had also a fate unattainable for most actresses of her generation: she lived in financial security granted by her husband and could enjoy the fame of her actress-daughters (a result of good nurturing though).

- In the 19th century there existed a paragon of a Hungarian National Theatre.
- This paragon and the practice of travelling theatre companies led to building the National Theatre in Budapest.
- This invoked a series of moral and value conflicts (regarding virtues, actors, criticism, audience, drama, acting style, quality).

This study shares a few results of a wider research, now focusing mainly upon Komlóssyné<sup>5</sup>, but her career is inseparable from her husband's management. My reference sources were writings on theatre history and women history, memoirs, letters, newspapers from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and also the research material (manuscripts, playbills, theatrical almanacs, etc.) kept in the National Széchényi Library (OSZK) and the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute (OSZMI-PIM) Hungary.

## 2. Context

"When there weren't any scientific societies<sup>6</sup>, nor Athenaeum<sup>7</sup>, nor Pest Theatre, I'd already sacrificed my youth to struggling with prejudices and indifference on the waste of the Hungarian theatre. I tried to kill the weeds and thorns, so as to plant little and fragile flowers. My success is proven by the existence of stone theatres in the cities of Szabadka, Füred, Kecskemét, where travelling companies could find home and relief, and get the power to lead the poor and illiterate Hungarian people to the majestic court of Thalia making them eager to visit Her palace when coming to Pest in order to sell wheat, bacon, poultry – thus becoming susceptible for arts"<sup>8</sup> – begins the public letter of Komlóssyné in 1839. The actress who had been fined by Mihály

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Komlóssyné is her married name: it stays for Mrs Komlóssy.

<sup>6</sup> She refers to the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

<sup>7</sup> Mihály Vörösmarty's famous liberal thinking and straightforward-minded newspaper that strongly criticised Mrs Komlóssy.

<sup>8</sup> See *Athenaeum*, 6 January 1839, pp. 28-32.

Vörösmarty attempted to defend herself in public. The first few lines of the opening letter of the so-called Caligula-polemic summarize all the merits that Komlóssyné and her husband, Ferenc Komlóssy – actively contributing to the letter – attributed to themselves. The pathetic-ironic debate assumes that the existence of these cultural institutions derived from rural travelling theatre companies and their cultural-social extension. The letter specializes all those achievements that had led to the later establishment of the Pest Hungarian Theatre: the cultivation of Hungarian language on stage, cultural management, formation of tastes and patriotic propaganda. Exaggerated a little bit, but this statement carries the truth.

### 2.1 A brief historical treatise

Though Hungarian government officials and the nobility had already taken in 1808 a decision about financial support for building the Hungarian National Theatre in Pest, the case was delayed – although the construction of an oversized German theatre in Pest could have begun (as the city had a rather significant German population too). From the beginning of the 1830's the plan of a Hungarian Theatre was again raised. His supporters agreed on the liberal perception of theatre, on the creation of an independent national theatre, on financial management assured by shareholders and on the parameters of the building. Finally, the theatre was finished in 1837 as a result of amazing nationwide collaboration (handwork and financial donations). This can also be attributed to the efforts of travelling theatre companies. The Pest Hungarian Theatre intended to be a model for other provincial theatres and aimed the improvement of Hungarian dramatic art so as to achieve a European level.

During the Reform Age, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there existed two different systems of Hungarian theatre: attempts of permanent theatre supported by counties and travelling companies. A permanent theatre meant more theatrical seasons for several months in a settlement: the given financial and community care resulting in financial security, permanent professional improvement, organic theatrical infrastructure, professionalization process<sup>9</sup>.

There were high-profile initiatives: in 1828 six counties from the western part of Hungary established the so-called Transdanubian Theatre Company that would play in each county, supported by the actual one. This theatrical region functioned until 1834, the theatre company supported by them was known as being the best in Hungary<sup>10</sup>.

## 3. Biography

### 3.1 Ferenc Dániel Komlóssy

**Ferenc Dániel Komlóssy** (1797-1860) actor, theatre entrepreneur, playwright and stage director. He first played on stage in 1813 when he was only 14 years old. He quitted his studies in law in order to work in different rural theatres: he was the founding member of the theatre company from Székesfehérvár in 1818, and its co-director between 1824 and 1826, the director of the Transdanubian Theatre Company between 1828 and 1834, the tenant and director of the theatre in Kassa between 1834 and 1837, between 1841-1845 he directed different companies staging operas too, from 1845 he had various administrative jobs at the National Theatre in Pest.

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<sup>9</sup> An important book on theatre resources: Egyed Emese ed. *Theátrumi könyvecske. Színházi zsebkönyvek és szerepük a régió színházi kultúrájában*. Scientia kiadó. Sapientia könyvek 4. Kolozsvár, 2002. [Theatre Pocketbook: Theatre Almanacs and their Role in the Theatre Culture of Transylvania]

<sup>10</sup> See Rajnai Edit: Színikerületek. In: P. Müller Péter – Tompa Andrea: *Színház és emlékezet. Színháztudományi szemle 34*. OSZMI, Budapest, 2002, pp. 68-70. [Theatre Regions]

He was acknowledged for his comic and scheming roles<sup>11</sup>. Aladár Schöpflin, a theatre researcher considers him one of the most significant personalities of the 19th century Hungarian theatre history, “a real model of rural theatre directors”<sup>12</sup>. Déryné<sup>13</sup>, who was close friends with him, describes him as a cold-blooded, phlegmatic, honest man, a loving husband and father, always focusing upon his duties, and never interfering with any kind of controversy<sup>14</sup>. He wrote several plays, and translated 197. After his death the *Vasárnapi Ujság* newspaper dedicated a pathetic necrology to the “master of the Hungarian theatre”, who belongs to the Pantheon of the great and prolific theatre founders<sup>15</sup>. He published his memoirs<sup>16</sup> in 1860 in the *Magyar Színházi Lap* newspaper.

### 3.2 Komlóssyné, Erzsébet Czégényi

**Komlóssyné, Erzsébet Czégényi** (1805-1855) committed herself to theatre at a very early age (14). She didn't have a theatrical background. Her father died when she was still a child, their financial situation got worse: a theatre company could provide work and learning opportunities<sup>17</sup>. Probably she was also motivated by the desire for love and self-expression. Apparently, she wasn't extremely talented, but she was a dedicated and prolific actress – proven by the existent sources. Her career began when the star divas of the Reform Age theatre – Déryné and Kántorné<sup>18</sup> – had already shone. She built up her career thoroughly always following the greatest ones. She was not a scandalous and capricious prima donna. All encyclopaedias suggest that the most important fact of her life was her public polemic with Mihály Vörösmarty, laureate poet and theatre critic, in 1839.

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<sup>11</sup> See Székely György ed. *Magyar Színházművészeti Lexikon*. Budapest, 1994, p. 401.

<sup>12</sup> Schöpflin Aladár: *Magyar Színművészeti Lexikon*. Vol. III, 1931, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Déryné, Róza Széppataki (1793–1872) actress, who became a symbol of the Reform Age Hungarian theatre. She was a versatile and successful prima donna who played ingénue roles in dramatic performances and sang soprano on operas. Her repertoire contained of hundreds of roles. She contributed to the promotion Hungarian acting. She was a significant translator. Her memoirs are a prominent feature of the Hungarian Biedermeier prose. She was a talented, conscientious, devoted actress. Her luxurious and tasteful dressing had been the admiration of contemporaries. Her aging coincided with the romantic style revolution in theatre. She died almost forgotten. Schöpflin, *ibid.*, I, 341-342.

<sup>14</sup> Déryné *naplója*, III. s.a.r. Bayer József, Budapest, Singer és Wolfner, pp. 156-159. [Memoirs]

<sup>15</sup> *Vasárnapi Ujság*. 22 January 1888.

<sup>16</sup> Komlóssy Ferenc Dániel: Adatok a magyar színészet történetéhez. *Magyar Színházi Lap*, 1860, nr. 4–7. [Data on the History of the Hungarian Theatre]

<sup>17</sup> In her study upon the 18<sup>th</sup> century fashion of child actors Nóra Tar highlights the pragmatic objectives of child actor employment: religious and general education, manners, morals, etc. See Tar Gabriella–Nóra: *Gyermek a 18. és 19. századi Magyarországon és Erdélyi színpadjain*. Az Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület Kiadása, Kolozsvár, 2004, 74-77. [Children on the Stages of Hungary and Transylvania in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century]

<sup>18</sup> Kántorné, Anna Engelhardt, (1794-1854) also known by her married name. She was a pioneer of Hungarian theatre: she was the first significant dramatic heroine and a great tragedienne, a thorough and well-prepared actor. She wandered throughout Hungary with the travelling companies and was a founder member of many. She had never become member of the Pest Hungarian Theatre although she was one of its most committed supporters. Her aging coincided with the romantic style revolution in theatre and soon she retired from acting. She became a ticket agent, a caretaker and a cook. Her death was not mentioned by the papers. Schöpflin, *ibid.*, II, 363. – <http://www.szineszkonvyvtar.hu/contents/k-o/kantorne.htm>. Accessed 11 March 2018.

She got married in 1820, since then we find her by her married name. She soon had her two daughters, Paulina (1820) and Ida (1822). From 1823 her theatrical career developed parallel with her husband's<sup>19</sup>.

### 3.3 Some facts about their theatrical career

Between 1819 and 1838 Ferenc Komlóssy visited with his travelling companies many of the cities of the historical Hungary: Székesfehérvár, Veszprém, Füred, Zombor, Szabadka (Subotica), Pozsony (Bratislava), Győr, Pécs, Temesvár (Timișoara), Arad, Baja, Pest, Pápa, Zalaegerszeg, Sümeg, Szombathely, Esztergom, Gyöngyös, Nagykanizsa, Sopron, Baja, Halas, Kiscell, Kecskemét, Kaposvár, Keszthely, Komárom, Kassa (Kosice), Eger, Miskolc. This means several companies. These years are only partly about the vicissitudes of travelling because they could also experience the financial security given by the supportive system of the counties. In 1838 Ferenc Komlóssy became a member of the Pest Hungarian Theatre together with his wife and daughters.

According to Déryné's memoirs the Komlóssy family had a virtuous and restrained way of life. They treated her as a child of their own. "We were the best friends", she recalls<sup>20</sup>. They also had the habit of patronizing young actresses who used to live in their own apartment.

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century public opinion tended to treat actors as exotic, free-spirited creatures: they were funny, entertaining, a good company, but who had no morals. Woman actors were judged much more strictly<sup>21</sup>. Ferenc Kerényi, theatre researcher points out that being an actor often became a source of exclusion from civic career even for men<sup>22</sup>. The existence of a family was interpreted as a sign of honesty and puritanism in this context<sup>23</sup>. The Komlóssy couple were aware of this fact: we can find no rumour about them in the rich memorial literature of the time. On the contrary: when Ferenc Komlóssy was offered a contract in Kassa, the boards of trustees took his wife and two little daughters as the proof and guarantee of pure morals.

The two daughters were granted the best possible education: they learned languages, dancing, singing and playing the piano, and got singing and dancing roles from a very early age. Ida later became one of the lead actresses of the National Theatre. Paulina was an appreciated singer, who later gave up her career.

The Komlóssy couple belong to the young actor generation that provides the greatest personalities of the following three decades of Hungarian theatre history<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Székely, *ibid.*, p. 401.

<sup>20</sup> Déryné, *ibid.*, III, pp. 156-159.

<sup>21</sup> The actor István Balog in his memoirs mentions an older trader who wanted to save a young actress from her 'immoral lifestyle' by marrying her: "... tell me, would anyone choose such a despised career path while held onto her moral appreciation? If you want physical and mental tranquillity, avoid it. Rejoice if you could escape from immorality!" Balog István: *Egy agg színész életéből*. s.a.r. dr. Barna János, Makói Friss Újság nyomda- és lapkiadó vállalat, 1927, p. 89. [Episodes of an Old Actor's Life]

<sup>22</sup> See Kerényi Ferenc: *Magyar színháztörténet 1790-1873*, ed. Kerényi Ferenc, 1990, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, Vol. I, 130.

<sup>23</sup> Listen to actor István Balog again: "...marriage is not a sustainable way of life for actors. I assume, everyone knows, that we are much more vulnerable to temptations." Balog, *ibid.*, 71.

<sup>24</sup> The beginning of their career: 1807 – István Balog, 1809 – István Déry, 1812 – Pál Szilágyi, 1813 – Alajos Kőszeghy and Ferenc Komlóssy, 1815 – Miklós Udvarhelyi, Dávid Kilényi, Sándor Újfalussy, Zsigmond Szentpétery; Kántorné, Anna Engelhardt – 1809, Déryné, Róza Schenbach – 1810. Kerényi, *ibid.*, p. 133.

#### 4. Years of travelling – Patterns and ideals

Ferenc and Erzsébet Komlóssy's career reveals how they influenced public notions of theatre, and how articulated expectations of the audience had also shaped them. The lexical set of the written sources gives the components of this ideal.

##### 4.1 „I welcome thee, glorious lady!”

Komlóssyné's career track was a discreet yet unbroken success story until 1838. Her routine and sensitivity to critique made it so. She shifted between leading roles and secondary roles as needed thus experienced vertically the crucial points of an actor's career.

Her husband confided her: she was the on-duty prima donna as he could always count on her given the ever-changing composition of the troupes and a persisting shortage of actresses at the time. Her masters of art were the two excellent leading actresses and stars of the theatre at the time: Kántorné and Déryné. Both were characterized by high-level self-cultivation: Komlóssyné learned playing tragic roles from Kántorné, while the ingénue roles and dressing style were shaped by Déryné's influence. They often played on stage together, this offered her a good opportunity to refine her style. She played ingénues, dramatic heroines (later, after 1840 mainly elderly women). She had a physical beauty and a gentle voice (to be legible, a character on the stage had to look right according to sentimental drama<sup>25</sup>). We meet her name regularly in the theatre-concerned articles from 1833, as theatre critique improved in Hungary and audience developed a growing interest for theatre and press as an everyday spiritual need<sup>26</sup>.

The critical reports mirror her as an enthusiastic, “fire-spirited”, lively actress, who is “within her circles”, whose performance is in harmony with the spirit of the play and the staging actors<sup>27</sup>. Being a lead actress in her husband's companies she supported his career morally, spiritually and socially. The highly conscious manager Ferenc Komlóssy used this as an advertising opportunity.

Her greatest weakness is her speaking technique: she sputtered. According to her critics, it would give a lot to “the pleasure of her pronunciation” if she controlled her quick speech, and her voice was stronger. They advised her to improve her stage talk<sup>28</sup>. She probably was aware of her deficiency – and struggling with it – because it happens that a critic recommends her as a referral to novice actresses due to her purposeful stage talk, and emotionally authentic speaking technique<sup>29</sup>.

She had her greatest success playing sentimental characters. Her poses and gestures were praised by theatre-going spectators and commentators. Sentimental drama focused on visually and emotionally expressive scenes. She managed convincing transitions from one attitude toward another, incarnating effective counterpoint of rather different feelings. Let's cite some of the commentators: “she convincingly played the loving wife of prince Béla agonizing between pain and sorrow”<sup>30</sup>; “she showed both feminine softness and vain pride, so the play became

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<sup>25</sup> Bruce McConachie, Tobin Nellhaus, Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei, Tamara Underiner: *Theatre Histories: An Introduction*. New York, 2016, p. 89.

<sup>26</sup> Solt Andor: *Első színikritikusaink*. ItK. 1971, p. 128. [Our First Theatre Critics]

<sup>27</sup> *Hazai és Külföldi Tudósítások*. 1 September 1824, pp. 137–138.

<sup>28</sup> There were no formal acting schools at this time in Hungary. *Honművész*, 15 June 1834, p. 382. – 8 March 1835, pp. 158–159.

<sup>29</sup> *Honművész*, 25 September, 1834, p. 614.

<sup>30</sup> Crown and Scaffold. Pozsony, 15 April 1833.

enjoyable”<sup>31</sup>; “she embodied the role of Ilka with both gentle feminine desperation and Hungarian generosity”<sup>32</sup>; “...the faithful wife who sacrifices all and mirrors joy, pain and sympathy at the same time keeping us in the theatre”<sup>33</sup>; “Erzsébet Mosonyi’s personality was raised to the most interesting stage of art. We saw a really loving and lively suffering woman... At the end of the performance, public applause and satisfaction filled the theatre”<sup>34</sup>; and so on. Most theatre critics agreed that she had a natural talent in incarnating tragic heroines<sup>35</sup>. She played on stage with the most talented and sympathetic male actors of the time, and they had an auspicious influence upon her.

We notice that a deep sense of her roles and a complete comprehension of the performed works was often lacking. This is due to the short learning time, tiring everyday performances, and to the fact that actors were generally unfamiliar with the whole drama. Ferenc Komlóssy tended to choose representative and popular plays characterized by theatricality, and permanent rehearsals also had a positive impact on the quality of the performance. This is why we should treat theatrical critique circumspectly – states Andor Solt, warning us that absolutization of theatricality and patriotism had been validated at the expense of art repeatedly<sup>36</sup>.

At the top of her career (1836-1838) her “happy whim”, serious performance, devoted presence, gestures and mimic were praised: “She played with all her flaring verve and suitable complexion. Only envy and inadequacy could negate this fact”<sup>37</sup>. Her excellent memory, refined and classy dresses are often mentioned. Her “tongue is fast as fire” but tried to adopt her playing style to suit the expectations. Her acting techniques and grand rhetoric prove that she belongs to the so-called sentimental “old school” (just like Déryné and Kántorné). “Komlóssyné works with all her diligence for our institute” – stated Gábor Kramer (an anonymous commentator) in his muster of the theatre company of Kassa in 1837<sup>38</sup>.

According to the sentimental theatre’s ethic she embodied a paragon of virtue, beauty and national culture for her audience. This is perfectly eternalized by panegyric poems (although platitudinous) written to her. One of them was offered in 1833 by Gergely Czuczor, a priest–professor<sup>39</sup>. The poem describes the role of the actress by mixing aesthetic ideals of the 18<sup>th</sup> century sentimental theatre (natural, authentic and ethical) with a new, romantic view of women’s ethereal transcendence<sup>40</sup>. The poem denotes the spectators’ expectations to be impressed by what they see on stage, to experience strong passions, to be taught and consequently lead to a “Hungarian Canaan”, where national culture is raised and pathetic deeds of national magnitude are shown. The offertory is much more important than the verses: it refines the place of an actress in the context of public thinking and suggests women’s moral superiority<sup>41</sup>. Such panegyric verses

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<sup>31</sup> *Honművész*, 1 September 1833, p. 357.

<sup>32</sup> *Honművész*, 26 September 1833, 410-411.

<sup>33</sup> *Honművész*, 28 June 1834, pp. 551-552.

<sup>34</sup> *Honművész*, 8 March 1835, pp. 158-159.

<sup>35</sup> *Honművész*. 8 March 1835, p. 158.

<sup>36</sup> Solt *ibid.* pp. 135–136.

<sup>37</sup> *Honművész*. 5 March 1837, pp. 149-150.

<sup>38</sup> *Honművész*. 19 March 1837, pp. 182-184.

<sup>39</sup> *Komlóssynéhez*. 22 August *Honművész* 1833, pp. 332-333. [To Mrs Komlóssy]

<sup>40</sup> Vaderna Gábor: *Mit hagyományozott a 18. századi költészet a 19. századra?* It., 2013-4, p. 468.

<sup>41</sup> Papp Júlia: „Ti vagytok a’ polgári Erény ’s Nemzetiség védangyali...” – Női olvasás a felvilágosodás és a kora reformkor időszakában. In: Papp Júlia ed. *A zoltártól a rózsaszín regényig. Fejezetek a magyar női művelődés történetéből*. Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum, Budapest, 2014, p. 146. [“You are the Guiding Angels of Nationhood and Morals” – Women’s Reading Habits in the Enlightenment and the Reform Age]

were written to many influencing actors of the age – they give a better insight to public taste, than masterpieces. The actor Károly Szuper also took her for a muse of his career.

#### 4.2 „*The Lord's temple is here*”

Ferenc Komlóssy dedicated himself to theatre. His concepts about it are summed up in his memoirs and memorandums: he nurtured an ideal of moral and patriotic theatre that is carried on by human sacrifice, subservient actions and that shows itself in products (venues, performance), and it is a community achievement. Its objectives are: creating and serving communities, entertainment and spreading national culture. As a director of travelling theatre companies not only could he experience destitution, he also had the opportunity of realising theatrical events having the technical equipment and human resources needed.

He was effective and appreciated – proven by several sources. In 1837 Pál Emődi, prompter describes the theatrical seasons spent in Kassa as a fulfilment of the golden age: “the beautiful travelling art has found its home in the free noble royal city of Kassa... prestige of nobility shines supportively upon the Stage... souls enlightened to perceive aesthetical senses – hearts eager to sacrifice themselves for the motherland ... The Lord's temple is here!”<sup>42</sup> László Klestinszky (notary of the board of directors of the theatre in Kassa, playwright and actor) called Komlóssy an “outstandingly honest theatrical expert”<sup>43</sup>.

He had made his actors practice until the performance was perfectly successful<sup>44</sup>. He kept his repertory constantly up to date by acquiring the most popular plays/operas and gave them big publicity. His theatre companies performed almost every day. He was an experienced head-hunter: invited popular guest performers, offered job to the best lead actors of the time, and nurtured talented emerging actors as well. He built up successful social connection networks.

Until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the theatre director's duties were not exactly specified. Ferenc Komlóssy's practice combines the tasks of director, stage manager and actor: he would often blend with the “crowd” on stage to organize and supervise the performance, and if necessary, changed his costumes several times<sup>45</sup>. He believed that theatre should be involved in community affairs through charity actions and by sharing local events (even political ones). Audience was involved in theatrical events too: he staged plays written by local authors and included local amateur dance and music groups in their performances. His theatre politics was marked by originality, novelty and prestige.

By 1838 the couple became well-known in Hungary. At this moment Ferenc Komlóssy and his family joined the Pest Hungarian Theatre.

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<sup>42</sup> Játékszíni zsebkönyv, melyet a' nagyméltóságú méltóságos, fő-tisztelendő, nagyságos, tekintetes, nemes, és minden rangon lévő nagy lelkű honfiaknak mély tisztelettel hálája örök jeléül nyújt 1837-ik évre, örök tisztelőjük, Emődi (emődy) Pál, a' kassai nemzeti dal- és színésztársaság sugója – (OSZK) Kassa, 1837, pp. 7–8. [Theatre almanac: for the honourable, venerable, considerable, noble and of all status generous patriots recommended for the year 1837 by Emődi Pál the prompter of the Opera and Theatre Company of Kassa]

<sup>43</sup> Klestinszky László: *A kassai magyar színészet 1781-1877*. Kassa, 1876, p. 9. [Hungarian Theatre at Kassa 1781-1877]

<sup>44</sup> Tóth László: *...nagy haszna a Teátrumnak. Régi és új színháztörténeti dolgozatok Komárom és Pozsony múltjához*. Gondolat, Budapest, 2016, p. 64. [Old and New Treatises on the History of Theatre for the Past of Komárom and Pozsony]

<sup>45</sup> Déryné, *ibid.*, Vol. III, pp. 156-159.

## 5. Possibilities and fiascos

The inauguration of the Pest Hungarian Theatre had led to a polarization of theatre production: they employed the best ones, this caused the lowering standards of provincial theatre companies (*provincial* or *rural* denoting now low quality). Kerényi presumes that Ferenc Komlóssy “refuged” to the Pest Hungarian Theatre, just like many of his generation<sup>46</sup>. His experience, “curriculum vitae” could be valued in the Hungarian Theatre while the theatrical management, some literate groups and noble supporters divided by a conflict of interests tried to evolve all those ethical-practical frames needed for getting this multifunctional institution work.

Ferenc Komlóssy’s contract nominates him for chief stage director and specifies complex management tasks and responsibilities regarding theatrical praxis, but he was not allowed to participate in corporate decision-making. The second paragraph of his contract specifies his whole family’s engagement<sup>47</sup>.

### 5.1 “I’m just a duck quacking”

#### 5.1.1 From October to December 1838

Komlóssyné had a rather short career in the Pest Hungarian Theatre. She’d found herself in a truly delicate situation. By engaging prima donna Madame Schodel opera triggered violent polemics (“opera war”) in the Hungarian Theatre since opera got higher popularity than any other dramatic genre. Nevertheless, the role of ingénues and dramatic heroines were already “occupied” by popular and younger actresses.

Her debut performances had been chosen by his husband: well-known, earlier successful performances, the best roles from her repertory characterized by theatricality. Success was aimed. Theatrical critique reacted dismissively. Mihály Vörösmarty wrote in his newspaper, the *Athenaeum*, that both her appearance and her performance were incompatible with such a prestigious institution. Her speaking and acting techniques, her rhetoric and gestures were as well harshly criticised: “that deaf, hardly rolling voice, that unnaturally singing manner of the old school, those rigid gestures are not welcome to the Pest Hungarian Theatre”<sup>48</sup>; “she tries to imitate Kántorné’s performance but she had acquired all the faults”<sup>49</sup>. On 10 December 1838 she performed one of the lead roles in Dumas’s bloody drama entitled *Caligula*. Mihály Vörösmarty chided her again in a rather brusque manner and made her a source of shame and amusement calling her performance outrageous, and moreover: “she always performs lead roles. It is excruciating for herself and for spectators also. I admit that she is a skilful actress. But hear that duck voice while she quacks her role pathetically! She does not fit this Theatre”<sup>50</sup>.

Mihály Vörösmarty had often denounced the actors’ bad speaking techniques, which he considered a “moral sin”, claiming that speaking had a much more important role than poses on stage. He was a loyal critic, led in principle by pure and sincere pedagogical intentions<sup>51</sup>, but

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<sup>46</sup> They got mostly administrative jobs. Kerényi, *ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 231.

<sup>47</sup> *A színház színészeinek szerződéseiből*. 1837/38, 1837/1839. Fond 4/113. OSZK, SSzT, Nemzeti Színház iratai, 28r. [Actors’ Contracts from the Years 1837-1839]

<sup>48</sup> *Athenaeum*, 4 October, 1838, pp. 455-456.

<sup>49</sup> *Athenaeum*, 11 November, 1838, p. 639.

<sup>50</sup> *Athenaeum*, 16 December, 1838, pp. 799-800.

<sup>51</sup> “He often criticised us – because he loved us, – but he did it for our sake, never ignominiously” Egressy Gábor: Emlékezés Vörösmartyra. In. Vörösmarty Mihály: *Dramaturgiai lapok*. Vol. 14. Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1969, p. 347. [Remembering Vörösmarty]

this case made him really “highly strung” after all<sup>52</sup>. Sylvia Gangel, theatre researcher states that “monotonous affectation” and grand rhetoric might have been Komlóssyné’s greatest fault<sup>53</sup>. The actress’s style was a heritage of the so-called old “crying-singing school”, which became anachronistic on the stage of the Pest Hungarian Theatre<sup>54</sup>.

### 5.1.2 *The Caligula polemic*

The offended actress finally replied her greatest critic. Vörösmarty published both her letter and his response in the *Athenaeum* newspaper.<sup>55</sup> This is called the “Caligula polemic”: a conflict of principles regarding the old and the new acting schools, rural and urban theatre, merits and prejudice. Vörösmarty’s letter is often praised by theatre researchers as “a masterpiece of literary art” created by “a humble artist” with “wise resignation”, and “manly seriousness”<sup>56</sup>. He is depicted as an impeccable judge, honourable father, and veritable master<sup>57</sup>. Komlóssyné is portrayed through a variety of stereotypes: an ironically mocking, childishly bragging, sentimentally moaning woman<sup>58</sup>, who pitifully complains about her sacrifice for the national theatrical art<sup>59</sup>. This approach thus sets their duel into a comical-patriarchal frame: its antagonists are the disciplined, perceptual Man and the whimsical, hysterical Woman. This thread however misleadingly hides the fact that Komlóssyné’s letter was a moral-symbolical synthesis of what travelling theatre companies and rural theatres had given to Hungarian theatre history. I agree with Dezső Tóth, who suggests a new point of view: Komlóssyné (just like so many of her generation) is characterized by a rigid mentality that barely exceeds national, moral, non-aesthetic interpretation of the things<sup>60</sup>.

The letter was probably formulated together by the Komlóssy couple – Ferenc Komlóssy was also insulted by theatre critique as stage director and husband. The letter signed by Komlóssyné reveals an emancipated woman aware of her own merits. The text is a consciously and precisely designed suite that aims the spectators’ sympathy and understanding. It presents a series of pathetic-sentimental theatrical scene. First act: a metaphoric desert of Hungary (a culturally un-institutionalized one) cropped with the flowers of art by rural travelling theatre companies. Second act: a Biedermeier scene of a mourning family of actors rejected by heartless critics. Third act: a duck (the metaphor of the actress) consuming the snakes and frogs (theatre critics) trying to hurt it. With the help of these tableaux the letter puts in question Mihály Vörösmarty’s moral and aesthetical competence. Morality and patriotic deeds become synonyms in this regard. Self-sacrifice for national concern (theatre) is shown as a religious and romantic truth, which is beyond any theoretical objection.

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<sup>52</sup> Solt Andor: *Jegyzetek. Vörösmarty*, ibid., p. 549. [Notes]

<sup>53</sup> Gangel Sylvia: *A színpadi beszédművészet és a Nemzeti Színház első évtizede*, manuscript, Budapest, 1948, pp. 32–33. [The Art of Speaking Techniques and the First Decades of the National Theatre]

<sup>54</sup> The old acting school, characterized by pathetic theatricality and grand rhetoric (hallmarked by Kántorné’s acting and speaking techniques). The new acting school aimed naturalism and simplicity.

<sup>55</sup> *Athenaeum*, 6 January 1839, pp. 28–32.

<sup>56</sup> Vörösmarty, ibid., p. 552.

<sup>57</sup> Gyulai Pál: *Vörösmarty életrajza*. Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1985, pp. 202–204. [The Biography of Vörösmarty]

<sup>58</sup> Vörösmarty, ibid., p. 552.

<sup>59</sup> Salamon Ferenc: *Dramaturgiai dolgozatok*, Vol. I. Budapest, 1907, p. 159. [Treatise on Dramaturgy]

<sup>60</sup> Tóth Dezső: *Irodalmi kritikánk kezdeteinek néhány kérdése*. ItK. 1958, p. 204. [Some Problems of the Beginning of Our Theatre Critique]

The letter offers a series of roles women had been offered by society in the overwhelmingly androcentric<sup>61</sup> Reform Age in Hungary: a mother, a patriot, elevated and noble soul, loyal, charitable, placid, lettered, dedicating herself to nurturing both her family and national culture<sup>62</sup>. In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century actors could have learned acting techniques via everyday experience and from the elders. The fact marked in the letter about the daughters prepared for theatre career by education harmonizes with the professionalization of acting that had been gradually becoming a socially legitimate career. Education validated women's social representation<sup>63</sup>, and her efforts pull out Komlóssyné from her "provinciality" attributed to her by critique (though we may notice the mingling of two different things here).

The Komlóssy couple represent a mentality that assumes: norms of art and social life cannot be treated as detached from each other. For example, acting is a patriotic deed thus can be only morally treated and criticised. Critique's aesthetical and theoretical objections seem illegitimate from this point of view. Such intermingling of ethic and aesthetic paradigm is common in the 19<sup>th</sup> century discourse<sup>64</sup>.

Mihály Vörösmarty's response sketches a new, modern paragon of actors: talented, engaged in his/her self-education, self-reflective, versatile, cultured, qualified, taking care of his/her mental and physical health (this was maybe a hint at Komlóssyné's possible laryngitis that had deteriorated her voice), acknowledging his/her insufficiency (Ida Komlóssy was given as a good example for this – she had quickly become popular in Pest).

### 5.2 Ferenc Komlóssy as chief stage director

Ferenc Komlóssy had to supervise complex processes in the Pest Hungarian Theatre, managing multiple administrative tasks: staging, negotiating with suppliers, coordinating construction works, taking care of costumes, props, library, cash-book, lights, applying internal rules for actors, acquiring new dramas and translations, supervising new contracts, etc. The reports suggest us: it is probable that this triggered his conflict with the theatre management and led to his dismissal in 1840. Ferenc Komlóssy had a very accurate vision about how "theatre machinery" had to work: his praxis was based upon the worldly-wise concept of theatre as an entertaining industry setting focus on the audience's involvement. In his report from 1839 he suggests sure profit strategies via new, recent, entertaining dramas, operas and parodies (quality was not primary)<sup>65</sup>. Theatre critique and spectators were divided over the entertaining, spectacular performances staged by him in Pest (manoeuvring a large number of actors on stage, mixing exotic and national features). He was rather practical than focusing on theory: a really useful strategy while directing travelling companies – though seemingly not at the Pest Hungarian Theatre.

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<sup>61</sup> László, *ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>62</sup> See Papp, *ibid.*, pp. 143-146.

<sup>63</sup> László Ferenc: A nők mint a reformkori társas élet főszereplői. In. Fábri Anna – Várkonyi Gábor (eds.): *Nők világa. Művelődés- és társadalomtörténeti tanulmányok*. Argumentum, 2007, p. 169. [The Leading Roles of Women in the Social Life of the Reform Age]

<sup>64</sup> Tóth Dezső, *ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>65</sup> Komlóssy Ferenc ügyelői jelentése. 1839. május 9. A színház működésére vonatkozó vegyes tartalmú iratok. 5. OSZK SZT Nemzeti Színház iratai, Fond 4/25, 1r [The Report of Ferenc Komlóssy, 9 May 1839]

## 6. Epilogue

From January 1839 Komlóssyné played minor roles, her last performance on stage in Pest was on 16 April, 1839. On 18 April, 1839 her husband applied to the theatre management for her exemption from playing on stage<sup>66</sup>. He did not give any explanation.

In 1840 Ferenc Komlóssy was laid off from his duties<sup>67</sup>. The reports show that the theatre management later changed their mind saying, that his fault happened due to his good faith and was not a wilful default (though they did not specify the exact fault). The director and his family left Pest. Ferenc Komlóssy directed travelling theatre companies again until 1845. He had a new and talented prima donna: Ida, their daughter, his wife playing less and less on stage. From 1845 Ferenc Komlóssy was employed again in the National Theatre (former Pest Hungarian Theatre). He was an administrative manager (and a very successful one!). Komlóssyné retired from acting, she died 10 years later, in 1855 from cholera. Her husband worked until his sudden death in 1860.

## 7. Conclusions

If we would like to understand the reason of their ‘sudden incompatibility’, we have to apply an intentionally anachronistic point of view to the 19<sup>th</sup> century thinking. This suggests the inseparability of moral and aesthetic principles<sup>68</sup>. Furthermore we have to accept, that the making of the theatre needed different methods in the case of rural theatres, travelling companies and the Pest Hungarian Theatre.

Ferenc Komlóssy was a practical-thinking theatre director, promoting the vision of social theatre, the functioning of which depended on a larger group of agents: actors, directors, prompter, personnel, supporters, audience (equally). This rather modern perception of theatre gives the notion of ‘quality’ a concessive meaning in this context (including profitability and entertaining also). A less talented or untrained, yet hard-working actor could be really successful, if his/her social kindness or a well-chosen theatrical play helped her. But theatricality could not mislead the literate critics of taste from Pest. The ideal of National Theatre (promoted by influential circles of liberal thinkers) as a basic requirement of the so-dreamed cultural national state needed indispensably high theoretical and aesthetical standards, that could create the optimal conditions for a cultural community sharing the same interpretative and national basis.<sup>69</sup>

By the year 1838 Ferenc Komlóssy and his wife had acquired a really high reputation in the provincial theatres in Hungary. They could have experienced a more or less functional theatrical system of the supporting Hungarian cities (financial security, good social and economic networks, and a better equipment). Ferenc Komlóssy’s theatre companies gave a lot of talented actors to the Pest Hungarian Theatre. These facts could have easily led to the illusion that they could compete with the new requirements. The fact is they could not adapt their playing and staging style to suit the new, romantic type of production. Even if they knew that rural actors in

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<sup>66</sup> Jegyzőkönyv az 1839. április 18-i ülésről. A részvényes társaság színészeti választmányának ülései. – Pest vármegye kisgyűlése. Jegyzőkönyvek és jegyzőkönyvi kivonat, 1838. OSZK SSZT, Nemzeti Színház iratai, Fond 4/10. [Meeting Report, 18 April 1839]

<sup>67</sup> Jegyzőkönyv 1840. március elejéről (dátum nélküli, március 3. előtt). = A részvényes társaság színészeti választmányának ülései. – Pest vármegye kisgyűlése. Jegyzőkönyvek és jegyzőkönyvi kivonat. 1840. Fond 4/18, 20v-21r [Meeting Report, March 1840]

<sup>68</sup> See Tóth, 1958.

<sup>69</sup> Egyed ibid. [https://nemzetisinhaz.hu/magazin/2013/09/az-arpad-ebredese-cimu-emblema#\\_ftnref4](https://nemzetisinhaz.hu/magazin/2013/09/az-arpad-ebredese-cimu-emblema#_ftnref4). Accessed 21 October 2017.

Pest were perceived as second-class, mediocre, their practical experience (more than 20 years!) and the constraint of self-positioning imposed the possibility of success.

Komlóssyné was not a trained actor, and her playing style, speaking techniques showed the inheritance of the sentimental theatre. She had a work routine, was a skilful actor bolstered by a great manager, her husband. But spectators desired operas. Dramas in prose could compete with the fame of the opera only by means of high-quality genuine plays (written in their mother-tongue) and really high-talented and trained actors. Nor the couple's experience, neither their adaptability could save them from becoming anachronistic due to the romantic style revolution (sharing the same fate with so many from their generation).

#### Author Declaration

This treatise is my own original work, except where I have appropriately cited the original source. It has not been published before. It summarizes a part of a yet unpublished academic thesis of my own. It is not under consideration for publication elsewhere, its publication is approved by all authors and tacitly by the responsible authorities where the work was carried out. It will not be published elsewhere including electronically in the same form, in English or in any other language, without the written consent of the copyright-holder.

#### Acknowledgements

We owe thanks to the staff of the Theatre Collections and Manuscript Department of the National Széchényi Library (OSZK), and to the staff of Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute (OSZMI–PIM) for placing the sources at our disposal. Grateful thanks are due to Emese Egyed, professor of the Babeş–Bolyai Universities Hungarology Studies Doctoral School, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, prominent researcher of the Centre for the Study of Nineteenth-Century Hungarian Literature and Theatre for her constructive remarks and outstandingly supportive attitude.

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