

Article

The Categorization of the Operetta Dance Genre in the *Táncművészet* Magazine between 1952 and 1956

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Abstract: The aim of the Hungarian state socialist regime to renew the operetta art manifested in the transformation of operetta-playing via the setting of its main cultural objectives. Once private theatre organizations were disbanded in 1949, newly written and composed operetta pieces had to be adjusted to meet the expectations cultivated by those responsible for the drawing up of the contemporary cultural policies, not only in terms of theme, subject, and dramaturgy but also, as productions designed for stage performance. At that time, questions regarding the realm of operetta dance and choreography arose as significant professional issues. The remarkable case of operetta dance was brought to the notice of the larger professional community by an article written by choreographer Ágnes Roboz, which was published in 1952 in the *Táncművészet* magazine (1951). Due to its professional nature, this magazine served as a suitable platform for the discussion of the operetta dance genre. The present study reflects upon its publications from the period between 1952 and 1956. Throughout these years, 16 articles discussing the categorization of operettas were published. I aimed to analyze these primary sources according to their genre before presenting, juxtaposing, and contextualizing them. Thus, my objective is to gain a thorough understanding and comprehensive overview of professional discussions and arguments over 1950s operetta dances and choreographies.

Keywords: state socialism; operetta dance; professional discourse; stage dance; history of Hungarian operetta



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1. Introduction¹

The operetta was one of the most popular forms of entertainment in 20th-century Hungary. It emerged as a musical genre in the second half of the 19th century, and Jacques Offenbach, a French composer, can be accounted largely responsible for its growing popularity. This genre was and still is characterized by a structure that somewhat reflects upon the traditional nature of previously existing theatrical genres. One of the unique characteristics of the operetta, however, is that it features popular hits of dance music as well as fully-fledged dance scenes.² The first appearance of the so-called “Viennese–Hungarian version” of operetta coincided with the years of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy when the Hungarian sub-version proved to be the more prominent and “functional”³ one (Jenő Huszka and Ferenc Martos, *Bob Herceg* [*Prince Bob*], 1902). Considering the periods of Hungarian operetta performance, the era of state socialism, and the thorough studying of its attempts to renew and transform operetta art with works brought to the stage via the application of socialist realist aesthetics,⁴ are rather determining. “Since 1945, the «identity» of Hungarian operetta—its genesis and history—seemed to be evident, and it seems to be clear now. It was a type of private theatre entertainment that fell under the cultural-historical categories of the “theatre industry”, the “show business”, and Bourdieu’s “subfield of mass production” (Heltai 2012).

When the state socialist regime⁵ started to deal with “popular genres”, they also tried to define the new role of the operetta. “We must note that the issue of the popular genre

was made a problem, and even a political question, by the representatives of the socialist idea. Before, the operetta had its gigantic hits, even if the genre was not in its full power, it still existed, indestructible in its simplicity, ignoring arrogantly the society that was shaken profoundly, without even recognizing that the operetta performers sing in the center of a changing universe, while simultaneously “experiencing” those thunderous marriage-attacks in Act III. In 1948, operetta suddenly became a genre of importance: the Academy of Drama and Film in Budapest established an operetta department led by Margit Gáspár. They were responsible for the premiering of a Soviet operetta (by Adujev-Scserbasov) for the first time in Hungary. The piece, titled *A dohányon vett kapitány* [*The captain who was bought on tobacco*], was presented on 19 June 1949 and was considered the “operetta of the turning point” (Z. Bán 1980). In 1949, with the disbanding of private theatre organizations⁶, the Capital Operetta Theatre (now Budapest Operetta Theatre), directed by Margit Gáspár at that time, became the primary “home” of the operetta genre and its political milieu. This cultural shift influenced, amongst others, theatre repertoires—both in Budapest and in the county—the themes of the new works—this period notes the emergence of the so-called TSZ (farmers’ cooperative) and minor operettas, thus evoking changes in dramaturgy, musical material, audience, and even its featured dances and dance styles.

Initially, Operetta Theatre had a small dance company of 12 artists. After 1949, permanent contracts were signed by the dancers, and thus, the company expanded. While work methods also developed, there still was no specific operetta dance training, neither for dancers nor for actors. When understanding the functional presence of dancing in operettas, one may encounter several interpretations, including the idea that dance itself is a mere form of “decoration” or perhaps a more significant addition to the plot. Besides others, this question and these possible interpretations of operetta dance and choreography have been discussed for several decades. However, in order to fully acknowledge the various existing discourses about operetta dance, focusing on those studies published in *Táncművészet* that contain performance critiques and commentaries might be fruitful.

The aim of the current study is to analyze the gradual categorization of operetta dance in the articles of *Táncművészet* magazine between 1952 and 1956. While drawing attention to those excerpts that are relevant to the topic discussed, the significance of the period of socialist operetta performance is going to be explained further, making links between state power and the genre (to give an example, composers, librettists, and theatre directors also all influenced this often-propagandistic genre and medium). As Márk Gara summarizes the importance of *Táncművészet*⁷ in the given era, “[t]he magazine, which was launched in the autumn of 1951, was written by practitioners, and it embodied the attempt of the dancer’s association for universality. On the one hand, it manifested in the coverage of all dance styles (ballet, folk, and ballroom dance), while on the other hand, the magazine wished to represent both the professional and the amateur milieus of dancing. The colorful content presented a wide variety of topics: art policy discourses (analyses, debates, comments), performance reviews about new premiers and the repertoire, new and familiar faces on the stage, competition results, guest performances, studies on dance history and folklore, reports from company journals, quotes from Soviet thinkers, fan-letters, and others. All these topics were included in the columns of ‘Debate’, ‘Performance Review’, ‘From our post’, and ‘Chronicle’. [...] The last issue of *Táncművészet* was published in September 1956” (Gara n.d.).

From this period, between Volume 2 Issue 2 (1952) to Volume 6 Issue 6 (1956), one may find articles in which operettas appear. For deeper analysis, one needs to sort the sixteen articles based on various aspects, such as theme and genre, thus distinguishing three major categories:

- (1) those articles initiating debate and/or shaping the already existing discourse about operetta dance or stage dance (that also includes operetta dance): 1. Ágnes Roboz (1952) *Az operett-tánc* [*The operetta dance*]; 2. Karola Szalay (1953) *Megjegyzések a táncbetétekről* [*Notes on dance sequences*]; 3. Ervin Tabi (1955) *Ankét az operettéről* [*Discussion on operetta*]; 4. *A színházi tánc problémái* [*Problems of theatre dance*] (1956);

- (2) those articles that mainly contain performance reviews: 1. Géza [Körtvélyes \(1952\)](#) *Az "Orfeusz" táncairól* [On the dances of "Orfeusz"]; 2. László [Boldog \(1952\)](#) *Fővárosi Víg Színház: Szibériai rapszódia* [Víg Theatre Budapest: Siberian rhapsody]; 3. Rózsi L. [Dési \(1953\)](#) *Fővárosi Operettszínház: Luxemburg grófja* [Budapest Operetta Theatre: The count of Luxembourg]; 4. György [Csizmadia \(1953\)](#) *Fővárosi Operett Színház: "Boci-boci tarka"* [Budapest Operetta Theatre: "Boci-boci tarka"]; 5. Ágnes [Roboz \(1953\)](#) *Két vidéki operett-bemutató: Kecskeméti Katona József Színház: „Boci-boci tarka"* [Two countryside premiers: Katona József Theatre Kecskemét: "Boci-boci tarka"]; 6. István [Szenthegyi \(1953\)](#) *Két vidéki operett-bemutató: Győri Kisfaludy Színház: Luxemburg grófja* [Two countryside premiers: Kisfaludy Theatre Győr: "The count of Luxembourg"]; 7. László [Danielisz \(1954\)](#) *Fővárosi Víg Színház: Újpesti lány* [Víg Theatre Budapest: girl from Újpest]; 8. Zsuzsa L. [Merényi \(1954\)](#) *Táncok az Álruhás kisasszony című operettben* [Dances in the operetta titled "miss in disguise"]; 9. H. [Bán \(1954\)](#) *A Boci-boci tarka előadása a Pécsi Nemzeti Színházban* [Performing Boci-boci tarka in the National Theatre of Pécs]; 10. Ágnes [Roboz \(1955\)](#) *A Csárdáskirálynő Kecskeméten* [The gypsy princess in Kecskemét]; 11. Zsuzsa [Kun \(1955\)](#) *Operettek nyári színpadokon: Mária főhadnagy—Elcserélt menyasszony* [Operettas on summer stages: lieutenant Mary—switched bride];
- (3) other, miscellaneous articles: László [Sándor \(1953\)](#) *A Fővárosi Operett Színház tánckarának munkájáról* [About the work of the choir of the Budapest Operetta Theatre].⁸

2. On Articles Initiating Debate and/or Shaping the Already Existing Discourse about Operetta Dance

As highlighted, questions regarding the generic categorization of operetta dance first appeared in 1952 in the columns of *Táncművészet* ([Roboz 1952](#)), and these issues were further discussed by Ágnes Roboz (1926–2022)⁹, who worked as a choreographer at the Budapest Operetta Theatre at that time. She begins her article by revealing the origins and traditions of the operetta genre, claiming that "[t]o bring up and clarify the questions of operetta dance, we need to look at the origin and traditions of the operetta genre itself before going into details" ([Roboz 1952](#), p. 50).

Via mentioning its origins, however, she also draws attention to two equally fascinating concepts, thus separating the interpretation of opera as one of the preceding genres of operetta (as some folk operetta variants draw on other folk-inspired stage genres), which, of course, was fitting to the ideological expectations of the era. On that note, Margit Gáspár remarks in her critique¹⁰ of "capitalist" operetta playing that "[. . .]he attitude of bourgeois theatre history towards the genre is that operetta is a special product of the capitalist society, and it originates from the 19th century. On the other hand, our attitude follows the Soviet stance, meaning that operetta is a descendant of musical folk comedy and folk plays, which included singing, dancing, and improvised dialogues. [. . .] the operetta became amoral and unprincipled; it aimed to obscure the consciousness of the crowd. A new and great period of operetta development started when Soviet creative artists led the genre back from the social aberration and replanted it into the lives of the people" ([Roboz 1952](#), p. 50).

Her sharp criticism targets both operetta dancing and the concept of the "birth" of the operetta genre. About the operetta performances of private theatres before 1949, she claims that [. . .] Hungarian operetta dance also reached a degree of corruption and deprivation during societal growth, where 'boys' and 'girls' performed in the ugliest clothing possible while imitating American revue films in a tasteless, decadent, and formalist manner. A similar justification can be found in László Sándor's 1953 article, in which he questions, "[f]irst of all, what was the typical scenario on the operetta platform here prior to the nationalization of theatres? Operettas performed at the time reflected the features of bourgeois art ostentatiously: they were characterized by a sense of unconsciousness, false outlook on life, sinful cosmopolitanism, and sloppy playing style [. . .] ([Sándor 1953](#)). These dances fit the cheap and often vulgar tale of operettas with their cosmopolitan style, artlessness, and content-lessness" ([Roboz 1952](#), p. 50).

In her article, Gáspár makes a link between the change in quality and the period after the nationalization of theatres, namely, the years 1949 to 1952. She also sheds light on the nature of the then-contemporary working method, the coordination of theory and practice, as well as the first challenges. She remarks that “[i]nitial challenges can be traced in many aspects. [...] operetta has gained its rightful position within the cultural, and its developments and the performers’ hard efforts have also made it possible for dance to convey its message amongst the appropriate settings and through collectives that have gotten better and more harmonious through time. Today, our working methods are established on the following practices: learning ballet techniques based on the Vaganova ballet system, the Lopuhov-Bocsarov-Sirjajev character dance training system, and the Stanislavski method. With this approach, we aim to train our dancers to be socialist-realist artists capable of performing the most diverse tasks” (Roboz 1952, p. 50).

Later, choreographer Gáspár claims the relationship between dramaturgy and dance to be of importance. She also notes that, in the case of every operetta performed at the Operetta Theatre, for example, *Szabad Szél* [Free wind], *Havasi kiért* [Alpenhorn], *Aranycsillag* [Golden star] or *Szelistyei asszonyok* [Szelistye women], there is a different situation: 1. in some cases, the “timing” of the appearance of the dance sequence was decided when the play was already adapted onto stage; 2. in other instances, dances were “inserted” into the play during its staging process (Roboz 1952, p. 51). Touching upon the issue of the role the dance sequence should occupy within the plot of the operetta, she remarks that “[...] some people might say dance should always improve the plot. Our position is there can be a dance sequence in an operetta, having only one role, that is, to enhance the atmospheric qualities of the production. Thus, dance can either relate to the plot itself, or be completely independent from it, of course, still having applied with consideration to the development of the story itself” (Roboz 1952, p. 51).

Gáspár gives a personal example in connection with the *Szüret* [Harvest] sequence from Tamás Bródy and János Kerekes’s operetta, titled *Palotaszálló* [Palace hotel]. Via that instance, she emphasizes that composers must understand the basic principle, namely, that good music and good dance cannot be separated from one another (Roboz 1952, p. 52). She also highlights that there were professional debates about the importance of cooperation between director and choreographer (Roboz 1952, p. 52), stage and/or costume designer and choreographer (Roboz 1952, pp. 52–53), conductor and choreographer (Roboz 1952, p. 53) when defining the final quality of operetta dance and choreography. She further reflects upon the already existing criticism about the choir and dance sequences, expressing her optimistic view on their tasks in the future,¹¹ claiming that “[their] duties in the field of operetta dance are crucial. We are aware that we have only taken small steps on the path towards the ultimate goal. In this sphere, we feel like our theoretical work lags behind the practice. We first must clarify the questions regarding the tradition of operetta dance, and especially the traditions of Hungarian operetta dance, Hungarian folk plays, and folk dance. Moreover, we need to create the scientific evaluation of the genre, based on the best soviet and democratic operettas, on musical films, and on the music and dance analysis of the classics of the genre [...]” (Roboz 1952, p. 54).

In her article, titled *Megjegyzések a táncbetétekről* [Notes on dance sequences], published in 1953 (Szalay 1953), Gáspár writes about operetta dance again, thus revealing that it is a significant issue in the forming of the professional discourse. She highlights that “dance is already an important part of operettas since—according to the genre—it consists of texts, songs, and dance; yet, in this context and age, the audience wants more of the dance” (Szalay 1953, p. 306). In this respect, she is continuously emphasizing the aesthetic-entertaining role of dances in operettas.

Yet, another notable example contributing to the discourse of operetta dance is Ervin Tabi’s report about a conference organized for the fifth anniversary of the nationalization of the Budapest Operetta Theatre. Tabi summarizes the remarks of István Albert, Viola Rimóczy, and Ágnes Roboz while also citing the principles of the three dramatic unities. As these three professionals had been bringing up the same artistic concerns since 1949

(or 1952, surely), István Albert also queried at the conference that “[he] would like to ask writers to take action. When the dramaturgy of the play develops—taking the three dramatic unities into consideration –, one shall not forget about the »tertiary« point that operetta is a dancers’ genre to a certain extent. In this regard, the situation is rather burning, as the dance part is often left out, since it »cannot be fitted in«. Of course, one should not expect it from the dancers to carry the whole operetta on their backs. We are simply aiming for them to have a bigger part in some performances [. . .].”¹² By drawing attention to the much-needed appreciation of dancers, István Albert expressed his concerns about leaving out some dance sequences from operettas, which can also be considered the “questioning” of the role of operetta dance.

Viola Rimóczy touched upon the issue of academic dance training in her performance review, and around that time, the reorganization of arts in higher education had already started, including dancers’ and actors’ training.¹³ According to Rimóczy, remaining true to both the given era and its aesthetics are of equal significance in the realm of the arts; thus, operetta dance should not make an exception, despite the fact that most of the young performers went onto the stage without an adequate dancing routine.¹⁴ “[U]nfortunately, many of the operetta artists do not have an adequate routing of dancing. This might be the result of a faulty academic dance training, letting operetta performers enter the stage without basic dancing skills. This, of course, leads to conflicts between the actor and the choreographer. [. . .] I suggest organizing a dance training course for actors [. . .].”¹⁵

In a 1952 article, Ágnes Roboz reflects mainly on the already achieved goals of the professionals. She suggests that the socialist-realist operetta playing essentially went against the traditions of the Viennese–Hungarian operetta version, and those creating socialist-realist operettas generally appreciated the attempts for renewing and (re)defining operetta dance, its variants, and cultural achievements: “[. . .] during the search for the new manner of operetta playing, the danger of being naturalistic sometimes overpowered our efforts. Since we turned our backs to the old operetta dance traditions so quickly, we failed to notice all that could have been further developed, and we sometimes took the wrong path. [. . .] The actors’ dance sequences were replaced by situational comedy, or, in many instances, these were forced out of the stage realm completely, thus making our operettas »poor« in dances. [. . .] Today, I believe we all employ dances as atmospheric backgrounds, as emotional motivations, and characterization. Out of these, I would like to draw attention to emotional motivation, which have increased the cultural duties of the genre. [. . .] We cannot see regard operetta dances to be the improvisations of the plot either [. . .].”¹⁶

One of the difficulties of the development of operetta dance is that professionals believe that these dances are of lesser artistic position. In 1955, Roboz added a note on the professional prestige of operetta dance, thus also revealing one of her further plans regarding the genre, claiming that “ultimately, the professional prestige of the operetta dance has to be gained” (Tabi 1955, p. 87).

In May 1956, the Association of Hungarian Dancers organized a conference mainly about operetta dance. During its “reports” (that were similar to those of 1955), many people claimed that the cultural-artistic development of operetta dance had indeed taken place and proved to be successful. Having the 1952 conference in mind, one can surely detect some “development” compared to 1956, however, but the role of the plot of the operetta remained a debate topic, thus suggesting that the issue had not been resolved completely. In order to make improvements in connection with the operetta plot, the members of the association urged the coming about of a constructive dialogue between writers and dancers. At the same time and despite all the arising difficulties, they still considered the previous progress to be positive, and they also designated their plans, urging for more cooperation between the creators (choreographer and writers or directors, for instance), all appearing in an article, titled *A színházi tánc problémái* [*The problems of theatre dance*] (*A színházi tánc problémái* 1956). As noted, “[i]n the name of the theatre and stage committee of the Association, Dóra Csáky reported. First, she wrote a piece about the work of the Budapest Operetta Theatre since the liberation of Hungary from Nazi Germany, on 4

April 1945, in which the achievements and difficulties of every theatre were highly reflected. Operetta dance has developed a lot: it sometimes equals plot-related dances, which help the plot develop, and these are significant parts of the operettas. Further developments lead to the direction of making operetta dance to be even more artistic elements of the operetta, just like the other components of the genre, such as music, singing, and prose. In the future, we need deeper cooperation between co-authors, and the choreographer should join this cooperative union as well" (*A színházi tánc problémái 1956*, p. 263).

In order to broaden this artistic-creative approach to operetta (dance), professionals argued for involving the conductor and the scenographer in the creating process, while those who have been contributing to the discourse about operetta dance for years (and with special intensity after 1952) emphasized the significance of the "three dramatic unities". "[...] about operetta, the question of creation was brought up. Árpád Ladányi urged to involve the conductor and the scenographer in the cooperation between the authors and choreographers. István Albert said that the authors give little chance for dance to appear in the operetta; therefore, the association organized a meeting with the authors to call their attention to the importance of the »three dramatic unities«, prose, music, and dance, would be fruitful" (*A színházi tánc problémái 1956*, p. 263).

Overall, in the new operetta style and at the beginning of the period of socialist-realist operetta creation, the redefining of the function and aims of the genre made it possible to deal with questions regarding the relationship of dance and operetta in a more serious fashion, in order to prove that the role of dance within the artistic genre is not of mere entertaining and aestheticization.

3. Performance Reviews

The majority of the performance reviews published in *Táncművészet* discuss the topic of operetta dance further, and more thorough articles were published about the following operettas (listed in the order of publication date): *Orfeusz a pokolban* [*Orpheus in the Underworld*] by Jacques Offenbach (composer)—(Budapest Operetta Theatre), *Szibériai rapszódia* [*Siberian rhapsody*] by Jurij Miljutyin (composer)—(Víg Theatre in Budapest), *Luxemburg grófja* [*The count of Luxembourg*] by Ferenc Lehár (composer)—(Budapest Operetta Theatre and Kiszfaludy Theatre in Győr), *Boci-boci tarka* by Vincze Ottó (composer)—(Budapest Operetta Theatre, Katona József Theatre Kecskemét and Pécs National Theatre), *A Csárdáskirálynő* [*The Gypsy Princess*] by Imre Kálmán (composer)—(Szeged National Theatre and Katona József Theatre Kecskemét), *Mária főhadnagy* [*Lieutenant Mary*] by Imre Kálmán (composer)—(József Attila Theatre Zoo Stage), *Elcserélt menyasszony* [*Switched Bride*] (Majakovszkij Stage)—Georgian-Soviet operetta, *Újpesti lány* [*Girl from Újpest*] by Albert Vajda and Dénes Kovács—(Víg Theatre in Budapest), *Álruhás kisasszony* [*Girl in Disguise*] by N. Kovnyer (composer)—(Budapest Operetta Theatre).

The first performance review was written about the re-imagined performance of the popular Offenbach operetta. This adaptation is analyzed extensively by Géza Körtvélyes in a 1952 article (Volume 2, Issue 4), with a hint of uncertainty about the "role" of operetta (Körtvélyes 1952). expressed. He also mentions all the artistic opportunities the choreographers Eugén Paplinszki and Viola Rimóczy (Körtvélyes 1952, p. 126) had, and later, Körtvélyes even looks at the dance scenes one after another (Körtvélyes 1952, pp. 126–27), thus highlighting the "pitfalls" of the adaptation. He even refers to the 1952 Roboz article, quoting that "[t]he role of dancing in an operetta is to have a strong connection to the plot, the libretto, the performance, and especially to the music. But here, [...] the plot itself and the music were not in connection with one another, making the role of dance to be either fitting to the libretto and the plot, or to be suitable for the music. This usually occurs in the case of Offenbach's music" (Körtvélyes 1952, p. 126).

The reviewing of the dance sequences does not have many positive aspects in the case of the Offenbach piece, due mainly to the mistakes mentioned above. Additionally, as Körtvélyes suggested about later performances, "[...] if, after all, we wish to summarize opinions about the dances of *Orpheus* and we also intend to draw our conclusions, we

have to note that the shortcomings of operetta gave eventually uncompleted tasks to the choreographers [...] We believe that the solution is a stronger cooperation between the co-authors in the future even if it is about a re-imagined version of a piece" (*Köztvélyes* 1952, p. 128).

In his performance review about *Szibériai rapszódia* [*Siberian Rhapsody*] performed at the Budapest Operetta Theatre, László Boldog mentions a major development in operetta dance (Volume 2, Issue 12) (*Boldog* 1952). The success of the performance (which was based upon the work of a Stalin Prize-winner Soviet composer, Miljutyin (*Boldog* 1952, p. 385)) is emphasized continuously in the article, and Boldog also draws attention to all those artistic-professional developments that were carried out by the institution after distancing themselves from the fake genre of bourgeois revue, while going along the path paved by the results as well as mistakes of the so-called »frame plays« (*Boldog* 1952, p. 385). However, after all these appreciative remarks, he writes about the flaws of the choir, and he also studies the dance sequences one by one. Despite the thorough analysis, in the end, he opts to consider the artistic opportunities, and he mentions that the choir served its duty brilliantly, adding that "[...] the professional, expressional, and technical skills still have to be improved further. The artistic level of choreographies must be higher, and the interpretation of the dance sequences shall enhance and enrich the development of the plot" (*Boldog* 1952, p. 387).

Two performances of Lehár's operetta, titled *Luxemburg grófia* [*Earl of Luxembourg*], by the Budapest Operetta Theatre (Volume 3, Issue 1) (*Dési* 1953) and the Kisfaludy Theatre Győr (Volume 3, Issue 12), are also analyzed in *Táncművészet*. It is important to note that this operetta play is an excellent work of Viennese–Hungarian operetta production and one of the tendencies in socialist operetta playing tended to be the reconstruction of these "grand operettas", with such primadonnas in Budapest as Marika Németh and Hanna Honthy. The casting of the performance of the Operetta Theatre was excellent, and the choreography was made by Viola Rimóczy (*Dési* 1953, p. 21). Rózsa L. Dési had a positive opinion about the fact that the basic storyline and artistic concept were known both by the actors and the dancers beforehand. "In this case, the choreographer and all members of the choir knew the play before they started to work on it. They knew the message of the play, they knew the characters, the age, and the circumstances they had to depict. This also helped the harmonization of the work of the director and the choreographer. We can detect this harmony throughout the whole performance. The dances had organic and structural connections with the message of the play" (*Dési* 1953, p. 22).

Dési also wrote about the polka-mazurka overture (*Dési* 1953, pp. 22–23), yet regarded the application of waltz in the stage re-adaptation to be problematic, as, according to her approach, "most problems are brought up by the waltz. One must say, the dance could be better with more careful preparation [...] The waltz fell behind in quality compared to the other operetta dances, and, in many scenes, the waltz is undeveloped, fuzzy, and thus its effect is not always aesthetically pleasing. The choreographer should have been more acute in the creation process, not only in the technical building of the composition but also considering the performance itself. In this way, the dance could be more tell more to the eyes and hearts of the audience" (*Dési* 1953, p. 23).

It is equally notable that, in Viennese–Hungarian plays, the co-existing of waltz and czardas could work as the symbols of the Viennese court and the Hungarian Kingdom, thus connecting the given play to the Monarchy, which, in this socialist regime, becomes more and more problematic. The mentioning of operetta star Róbert Rátonyi's dance "knowledge" is a fascinating component of the article, as "it would be good if Rátonyi would not always dance only in »Rátonyi's style«, but he could show his talent in a more diverse and variable way" (*Dési* 1953, p. 21). The existence of the so-called "theatre dances" also marked a rather pressing issue in the development of Soviet operetta dances, which were said to be influenced by Western traditions and aesthetics. When Rátonyi, the well-known actor, was criticized in the press, he was, in fact, criticized on ideological grounds.

In the review of the Győr performance (which was choreographed by Sándor B. Szalontay), written by István Szenthegyi¹⁷, the author highlights that the adaptation of *Luxembourg* by theatres located in the countryside have reached the quality of the performance in Budapest in many ways (Szenthegyi 1953, p. 385). Szenthegyi had an opinion about the polka-mazurka and the waltz sequences similar to that of L. Dési, suggesting that “the waltz in the second act was the least successful artistic solution. The choreographer wanted it to be the »great« dance of the operetta. He did everything he could. Ultimately, what effect did the dance have? The audience sees a pile of forms and figures as the true atmosphere of the waltz, yet we do not get its vigorous ease; it gets lost amongst those piles of figures. In this way, dance inevitably becomes some »classic« illustrative-educational material [...]” (Szenthegyi 1953, p. 385).

The most successful work of socialist-realist operetta¹⁸ is definitely a farmers’ collective piece titled *Boci-boci tarka*. Following its premiere in Budapest (Volume 3, Issue 10), it was performed at many provincial theatres. There are reviews about the performances in Pécs (Volume 3, Issue 12) and Kecskemét (Volume 4, Issue 3) published in the *Táncművészet* magazine. György Csizmadia, for instance, praises Ágnes Roboz’s choreography, and he categorizes it as an operetta rich in dance-related and folk traditions. Csizmadia gives an overall positive critique, with special acknowledgment of the performance of the actors and the choir (Csizmadia 1953). He notes that the musical basis of socialist-realist operetta proved to be suitable and that the work of the Operetta Theatre was a success since “[t]he music by Ottó Vincze provides a great opportunity for the dancers. On one hand, it is quite rhythmic, and on the other hand, in the great dance scenes, the creation of the dance composition is helped significantly by the increasing of the dynamics. This type of dance music enriches the music of the whole operetta with an especially fresh and peachy shade. By performing *Boci-boci tarka*, the leadership of the Budapest Operetta Theatre took a useful and important step toward the further development of Hungarian operetta culture. This one is our best Hungarian operetta, which depicts a piece of our reality via hearty humor and vibrant characters. It is a special pleasure for us that its dances make it more beautiful, rich, and meaningful” (Csizmadia 1953, p. 320).

The choreographer of the performance in Kecskemét was Eta Sallay, and its performance review was written by the choreographer of the performance in Budapest, Ágnes Roboz (Roboz 1953). She draws attention to the shortage of professional staff in the country theatres and, in general, the lack of opportunities, despite which she praises the dances of *Boci-boci*. In conclusion, she adds that she “wrote about the dances in the performance about the people of Kecskemét abruptly but happily, because [she feels] that [they] paid off a debt for provincial theatres when [they] praised their commendable and exigent attempts in the columns of this magazine” (Roboz 1953, p. 358).

This attempt is continued in H. Bán’s (1954) performance review about *Boci-boci tarka*, who also evaluated the work of choreographer Imre Mille while writing about the whole performance. “The message of the author can only be expressed with the strong stylistic unity of prose, music, singing, and dance. One of the basic mistakes in the performance of the Pécs National Theatre is that this unity, especially that of dance, could not be created perfectly. This can mainly be detected in the dances of the actors” (H. Bán 1954, p. 95).

Concerning the dance sequences of a new socialist operetta, *Újpesti lány* [*Girl from Újpest*], performed by the Budapest Víg Theatre, László Danielisz (Volume 4, Issue 1) notes about the choreography of Ágnes Szöllősi and Richárd Bogár, judging the harvest dance scene that “[...] the affectation of the dancing girls, their mealy-mouthed movements, their tasteless, variety-mannered ways of throwing their legs reduces the original choreographic effect” (Danielisz 1954). He writes rather sharply about the application of folk dance in operettas (Danielisz 1954, p. 28). Finally, he brings up the quality of operetta theatres as an example and urges the reader to “[...] take a look at the choir of the Budapest Operetta Theatre as an example, since it operates under similar circumstances and struggles with the same problems as others, yet it improved a lot in the past years, and it shows great results” (Danielisz 1954, p. 28).

An article (Volume 4, Issue 2) (L. Merényi 1954) about the Soviet operetta, titled *Álruhás kisasszony* [*Miss in disguise*], performed at the Budapest Operetta Theatre, was written by Zsuzsa L. Merényi. She studies the choreography by Ágnes Roboz in-depth, examining how it fits the Italian setting, etc. (L. Merényi 1954, pp. 60–61), while also reflecting upon questions and answers about the operetta dance, which “was brought up many times in study groups. How could dance be fitted into operettas tastefully, what should one do in order to make these dance sequences less secondary, how to make them carry the plot of the given play further, and how make them add depth to the characters?” (L. Merényi 1954, p. 60). She continues her analysis by claiming that Roboz’s choreography could overcome its artistic obstacles successfully and remarks that “[t]o this question, we get the answer during the performance of *Álruhás kisasszony* [*Miss in disguise*]. Based on this play, I believe that the ultimate answer is an operetta setting in a determined social environment, where the depicted society is represented by proper archetypes, and the music also meets certain requirements—one cannot find huge problems in such a piece. [...] In operettas like that, the dance sequences are not only decorative elements; they are not only for mere applause, yet the message of the play itself gives them significance. In the case of these operettas, there cannot be a question about creating some specific movement material, or dances in some kind of »operetta style«. The *Álruhás kisasszony* [*Miss in disguise*] is an operetta like that, and from this point of view, the dancing bits do not cause problems” (L. Merényi 1954, p. 60).

There were many re-imaginings and adaptations of Imre Kálmán’s operetta, titled *A Csárdáskirálynő* [*The Gypsy Princess*], and two articles were even published in the same issue (Volume 5, Issue 4) (Gera 1955), both about a performance in the Szeged National Theatre. For that performance, Károly Mezei and Mihály Huszár were responsible for the dance (Gera 1955, p. 181), and Mihály Gera writes explicitly about these dance sequences, praising both the cat dance and the waltz part (Gera 1955, p. 181).

The analysis of the dance of the performance at the Katona József Theatre Kecskemét, however, is much more detailed, which is also connected to Ágnes Roboz (Roboz 1955). Besides praising Eta Sallay’s choreography, Roboz evaluates basically the work of the whole theatre (Roboz 1955, p. 183), and she also notes that “[...] actually, [she] should write about the dances and [she] also should praise them. [She] shall praise Eta, the choreographer of the theatre, who set the actor’s dances in a moderate, tasteful, and stylish way, and [she] should praise the actors, who danced them nicely and simply [...]” (Roboz 1955, p. 183).

The summer premiere of the socialist stage adaptation of Huszka Jenő’s operetta, *Mária főhadnagy* [*Lieutenant Mary*], written in the 20th century, was hosted by the József Attila Zoo Stage. Zsuzsa Kun (Volume 5, Issue 8) (Kun 1955) criticizes the main message of the play in a sharp manner, which she links to the evaluation of the choreography created by Viola Rimóczy. “I think that in this operetta, we can find all the characteristics of bad operettas: romance full of kitsch, emotional middle-class attitude, witless witticisms, etc. Additionally, it is especially painful to witness in connection with such a great topic like our freedom fight. I do not wish to analyze the whole play, it is not needed, because the play expresses criticism about itself. However, as the great ballet parts have to fit inherently into the plot, the choreography cannot be studied separately from the whole play. As a preliminary point, I want to suggest that the mistakes of Viola Rimóczy’s choreography mainly come from the whole play itself” (Kun 1955, p. 379). She further emphasizes the more high-quality parts of the play, such as the Palotás scene (Kun 1955, p. 379), yet she cannot praise any other dance sequences.

The Georgian operetta, *Elcserélt menyasszony* [*Switched Bride*] was also written according to the Soviet model and was performed on the Majakovszkij Stage (Majakovsky Stage on Margaret Island, Budapest), also in the summer months. Ágnes Roboz’s choreography was, yet again, reflected upon by Zsuzsa Kun (Volume 5, Issue 8) (Kun 1955, p. 379). Considering that the performance had great casting (Latabár and Rátonyi were amongst its actors), she writes rather appreciatively about the dance solutions of the performance,

which, of course, fit into the discourse about the tasks of the operetta dance, which Roboz contributed to in 1952 (Kun 1955, pp. 378–79).

One may note that, in most of the reviews above, the author suggests that the judgment of the quality of a given operetta dance is due to its professional aspects, and because of that, the authors' options are limited until the given operetta dance cannot be fitted into the Soviet "value system", the socialist-realist aesthetics, which would also mean the employment of operetta art for propaganda purposes. After the period of nationalization, choreographers argued that the dances have to be somehow connected to the plot of the operetta, yet they obviously regarded the operetta art of private theatre organization as opposition to the dance parts and the Soviet-style operetta playing. However, of course, the ideological "repainting" of debate starters and critiques does not take away from these criteria and discourse starting and shaping attempts, which can be read in the issues between 1952 and 1956, all worth taking into consideration in the case of contemporary operetta adaptations.

4. Other Articles

Those pieces that do not fit into the other two journalistic categories and points of view, in the case of operetta dance, were also about the achievements of choreographers and choirs between 1952 and 1956. László Sándor, choreographer of Víg Theatre Budapest, published his article in 1953, titled *A Fővárosi Operett Színház tánckarának munkájáról* [About the work of the Budapest Operetta Theatre] (Volume 3, Issue 7), in which he reflects upon some of the current problems of operetta-playing as well. To give an example, he suggests that the re-imaginings and renewals of plays are problematic, as "in the past years, [they] often dealt with the current question of the cheerful musical genre, and before, with the problem of creating and developing the new type of operetta. The burning questions of the genre were brought up in many professional debates, at conferences organized for audience members, and in the press. [...] Today's operetta stage cannot meet its own requirements perfectly" (Sándor 1953, p. 196).

Sándor studied the development of the choir from performance to performance in Kálmán operettas, Offenbach operettas, and the Soviet type of operettas (Sándor 1953, pp. 197–99). Since the choir plays a role in operetta performances, Sándor could only see their technical development in operettas, and in his article, he even wishes successful work for the choreographers, choir, and the operetta stars of the theatre.

5. Summary

There are two main aspects by which the operetta was categorized in the *Táncművészet* magazine, including its "problematic" dance sequences. The first aspect was drawn to the attention of the public as the debate launchers and critiques emphasized the primary function of the operetta dance is to be designated to help develop the given plot. Thus, these dances shall exist beyond their entertaining and aesthetic qualities, which was an idea harmonious with the attempt to renew the genre in terms of content and dramaturgy. As critics tried to contrast the value systems of the Soviet type of operetta and that of private theatre organizations, they put special emphasis on the "immoral" dances of the previous periods. The other manner of analysis placed the focus on the choreographers and the choir. In many of the critiques, the technical development in the case of operetta dance sequences is highlighted, thus commemorating the dancing parts of the actors and the proper institutional background of dance learning (among others, the academy). In both cases and manners of approaching the categorization of operetta, professionals set their duties and goals to reach culturally. Considering the content of the articles from the period between 1952 and 1956, there is no virtual difference: the goal of the new tasks of the Soviet-type operettas is to develop one of its specifics further; namely, the operetta dance itself, within the ideologically proper frameworks, rules, and expectations. Besides these practical experiences and developments, professionals also wanted to increase

the number of theoretical studies about operetta dance, which, of course, was a partly successful attempt.

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Notes

- ¹ Hereby, I thank Zsanett Lengyel, a student of the Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies, University of Debrecen (HU), for her valuable notes on my manuscript. This study is the revised and extended version of my presentation held at the Hungarian Dance Academy in November 2019. Its shorter version is available in Hungarian in an essay collection. See (Lanszki 2020).
- ² The “origin myth” by Margit Gáspár, see (Gáspár 1963); Works on operetta history, cultural history, music history, etc., from representatives of different disciplines are also important, see (non-exhaustive list) (Batta 1992; Hanák 1997; Csáky 1999; Traubner 2003; Klotz 2016).
- ³ See among others (Batta 1992; Bozó 1859–1960).
- ⁴ In the new book on popular music, musicology, and state socialism, music historian Ádám Ignác sidesteps detailed presentation and discussion of socialist operetta. When he details popular songs and the relations of musical spheres, he notes: “[. . .] Already in 1950, it came up, for example, that artistic songs can become hits, and popular songs can be used for »pop music« purposes. In fact, the Department of Entertaining Music started studying the problem of operetta because of a similar reason, since professional composers of this genre automatically meant a guarantee of high-quality music [. . .]” (Ignác 2020).
- ⁵ See the characteristics of the art policy of the Hungarian Working People’s Party (MDP) (Bolvári-Takács 2011, pp. 17–51).
- ⁶ Although we know that the private theatre sphere did not completely perish in 1949, this is also noted by theatre historian Dániel Molnár: “The private theatre sphere did not completely perish in 1949: After the nationalization of Budapest Operetta Theatre, the Art Theatre, the Chamber Theatre, the Pesti Theatre and the Belvárosi Theatre, which was already a capital property, on 29 July 1949, revue theatres were still under control by their former tenants” in (Molnár 2019).
- ⁷ We know about the institutionalization of Hungarian dance training, different cultural policy mechanisms about the history of professional forums, and the correlations from the research and sources of Gábor Bolvári-Takács. He notes the following about *Táncművészet* magazine: “The *Táncművészet* served art politics till its last publication in October 1956” (Bolvári-Takács 2014).
- ⁸ The classification was made by the author of the study.
- ⁹ Ágnes Roboz (1926–2022) “choreographer, ballet master, teacher. She was a student of Trojanov between 1939 and 1944; then, she graduated as a choreographer at SzAK in 1950. She was a member of the Budapest Operetta Theatre between 1950 and 1956, and she taught folk dance and character dance in ÁBI until 1971” (Székely 1994).
- ¹⁰ The book of Gáspár (1963) and Gáspár’s writing titled *Operetta* (1949) by Margit Gáspár are significant, (Gáspár 1949); Among others, Anna Szemere also formed her critique about Gáspár’s “origin” theory: “[. . .] However, Gáspár projects the operetta on all the historically existing satiric plebeian genres from the pantomimists to the Commedia dell’ arte and Offenbach’s opera buffa[. . .] Gáspár’s theory (and her cultural, political activity) turns into an apology when she designates Offenbach’s direct continuity in the soviet type socialist-realist operetta [. . .]” in (Szemere 1979).
- ¹¹ She also mentions that they make the choreography for the Offenbach operetta, *Orfeusz a pokolban* [*Orpheus in the Underworld*]—or in other translations, *Orfeusz az alvilágban* [*Orpheus in the Underworld*]—the critique about that can be read two issues later, in volume 2, issue 4.
- ¹² Tabi quotes Albert (Tabi 1955).
- ¹³ See more about this in (Bolvári-Takács 2011, pp. 69–112).
- ¹⁴ In the 1950s, the operetta department was launched at the Academy of Drama and Film (today, the University of Theatre and Film Arts—SZFE), which was also connected to the name of Margit Gáspár.
- ¹⁵ Rimóczy quotes Tabi (Tabi 1955).
- ¹⁶ Tabi quotes Roboz (Tabi 1955, p. 87).
- ¹⁷ István (Szenthegyi 1953).
- ¹⁸ “The play was played altogether 262 times, and 203,349 people saw it, according to the data of Béla Taródy-Nagy. These numbers pale in comparison with the success of the Imre Nagy era’s theatres, the similar index of the revised *Csárdáskirálynő* [*The Gypsy Princess*] performed in November 1954. We have to add that many of the songs of Vincze’s operetta were broadcasted on the radio, as proved by contemporary records and handwritten orchestra parts that are still available in the institute’s archive [. . .]” (Bozó 2013).

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