

University of Theatre and Film Arts  
Doctoral School

**Captured by the Musical Stage: The Oeuvre of Gusztáv Oláh**

Theses of doctoral dissertation

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Gusztáv Oláh died in 1956. Since then, only a repertory<sup>1</sup> and an exhibition<sup>2</sup> (2001), some articles in the length of a few pages and an encyclopaedia entry have been written in his memory. The data in these are sometimes contradictory and often incorrect. In fact, his contemporaries only summarised his oeuvre but no fundamental research has ever been conducted and neither has a monography been published on his work.

During my research that began in 2016, I explored Oláh's entire legacy as well as the sources held in public collections. I also contacted several research institutions abroad (Stockholm, Munich, Vienna, Salzburg, Rome, New York, Moscow and St. Petersburg). My dissertation was prepared from the perspective of the historian. Following Thomas Postlewait's method, I rearranged the written and visual sources, and I also strove to explore the causal relationships as required by historical positivism. My work was similar to that of the archaeologist who explores the mosaic floor of a Roman villa destroyed by an earthquake. He knows the era and the causes of the demolition, and he even has an idea of what the mosaic depicts, but the places of the specific pieces are uncertain and some parts are incomplete. Sometimes I tried to make these hiatuses visible, thus creating historical constructions, but sometimes I considered it sufficient to note the ellipsis. My activities included an extensive exploration of sources and an examination of impact history, which were mainly based on the digital database of Arcanum and some parts of Oláh's legacy. In the chapters on scenic design, I used two methods. The descriptions of the set designs were based on volumes of the series *Masters of Architecture*, complemented with my associations, thus creating a visual context for the designs. On the other hand, I used the Philther method, which creates reconstructions of performances by writing microhistory by means of contextualising the visual and textual memories that we have inherited.<sup>3</sup> At the beginning of my research I found it important to conduct oral history interviews with the few surviving eyewitnesses, but only few excerpts of these were included in my dissertation.

I wrote Gusztáv Oláh's biography, in which I clarified such so far contradictory details like the cause of his death (cardiac arrest during bile surgery), and I revealed that he did not have an architect degree and neither did he finish his studies at the Academy of Music Budapest. In the chapter on his self-representation, I collected Gusztáv Oláh's scope of

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<sup>1</sup> Alpár, Ágnes: *Gusztáv Oláh (1901-1956) tervezései, rendezései*. [The designs and directions of Gusztáv Oláh.] Budapest, Magyar Színházi Intézet, 1975.

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Museum, Oláh Gusztáv a színpad varázslója [Gusztáv Oláh, the magician of stage]

<sup>3</sup> Kékesi Kun, Árpád: *A Philther mint historiográfiai modell*. [The Philther as a historiography model.] [http://netrix.mta.nsd.sztaki.hu/data/cikk/13/33/80/cikk\\_133380/MTA\\_20131120\\_Kekesikun.pdf](http://netrix.mta.nsd.sztaki.hu/data/cikk/13/33/80/cikk_133380/MTA_20131120_Kekesikun.pdf) (25.11.2020.)

activities, which prove that during his 35 active years he did not only solve an exceptionally large number of tasks, but these encompassed a very wide range. He created designs for the musical stage<sup>4</sup> during his whole adult life, but he only worked for dramatic performances routinely only until 1932 when director Sándor Hevesi retired. After that, Antal Németh and Tamás Major commissioned him to contribute only in a limited number of productions, and that is why Oláh withdrew to the performing stages of the Opera House, which meant a stable base for him. As a kind of “compensation” for losing the dramatic stage, opera direction, later open-air stages and finally international opportunities appeared in his career, and even film for a brief period. In addition to these, he travelled around the world, gaining experience he could use on the stage as well as in the classroom. Besides his practical activities he also became a theoretical expert, and as his success grew, the highest circles of the society began to recognise and support him. His unquestionable talent and his acceptance mentioned above saved him in 1933/1934, when articles in the daily *Az Újság* and even parliamentary speeches revealed that a certain leader in the Opera House harassed a ballet soloist (Tibor Andor). Although Oláh’s homosexuality became an open secret, he came out of this case without losing prestige and his reputation was not harmed. He never dealt with politics and he retired during the arrow cross regime. After the war, as a member of the Committee of Five, which was charged with examining the artists’ activities during the war, he had to judge over others but resigned from this post as soon as it was possible. He remained sceptical with the political system which was built out after 1948 and did not join the party, but he wisely realised when it was time to make concessions. He stood up for people, for his former friends when it was necessary, for instance for Count Gyula Batthyány painter or Sári Fedák actress. As the state security documents about him have been destroyed, details of his private life cannot be reconstructed.

His scenic designs for opera and ballet show eclectic features, which means that he did not become a follower or a slave of any style. The spectacle was always inspired by the music of the work of art to be presented and the time and atmosphere of the story, which means that, although he never said it, he usually regarded the given opera or ballet as a Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The stylistic solutions in his pre-war designs covered a wide range: from Hungarian style to *art deco* and the clear approaches of Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia. Even after socialist realism became dominant, he created stage designs which were pleasing and appropriate to the era (the level of stylisation decreased), although the originality of these were inferior to those before the war. When adapting Soviet ballets, Gusztáv Oláh could remain

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<sup>4</sup> The term ‘musical stage’ encompasses opera, ballet and operetta.

an autonomous artist and he did not have to take over Soviet scenic solutions (*The Nutcracker*, 1950) whereas Zoltán Fülöp could not succeed so in the cases of other ballets. Oláh used the most modern stage technological procedures like image projection and the “mood-depicting” characteristic of lighting (lighting dramaturgy). His designs were successful internationally too, and he had good relations with his colleagues abroad, but his international career was definitely hindered by the world war and the subsequent descent of the Iron Curtain. A special feature of his designer career was that he made scenic designs for various oratorios, virtually making them operas (Franz Liszt: *Christ*, Rezső Kókai: *King Stephen*), which made these works more digestible for a wider audience by enhancing the spectacle. For most of Mozart’s works and composers before Mozart’s era, Oláh provided a visual scenic frame which were probably inspired by the scenic solutions of the historical eras. His scenic designs often depict real locations or real details transposed to be stage scenery (Ottorino Respighi: *La fiamma*). As a leader of the workshops of state-owned theatres, he gathered young professionals and formed a unified team out of them (Klára Tüdős, Teréz Nagyajtay, Zoltán Fülöp, Tivadar Márk), but, at the same time, he supported their independent endeavours. Although stage set and costume design was in its infancy in Hungary when his career began, he soon became a highly recognised and the most respected expert in his art form, and he did not simply work as an applied artist but shaped the repertoire and the artistic standards of the Opera House.

He is remembered as one of the Hungarian pioneers in acting on open-air stages, and he created timeless productions in Tata, Szeged, the Vajdahunyad Castle, the Margaret Island as well as the Arena di Verona. He was not only excited by the technical challenges of this new field, but, following the footsteps of Max Reinhardt, he strove to elicit an even stronger impact on the audience with the enhanced spectacle and the mass scenes.

Being an “unofficial” student of Sándor Hevesi and László Márkus, he found his path as a director instinctively. Therefore, as a practicing musician, designer and director, he could control the operas from every aspect in a professional manner. His ideal in this field was the *Gesamtkunstwerk* too. His collaboration with Kálmán Nádasdy was legendary. Out of the two, Oláh became a master of *Außenregie* (spectacle, the moving of masses), whereas Nádasdy excelled in *Innenregie* (the characters’ internal processes and how to explain these to the singers). Oláh himself recognised that he was more successful in staging more static pieces. One of their best collaborative works was Verdi’s *Don Carlo* (1934). After this they enhanced their collaboration in developing operas and make them more stage-like and their dramaturgy easier to understand. This peaked in two Erkel operas, *Hunyadi László* (1934) and *Bánk bán* (1940).

In a state theatre the repertoire and art are often political questions. In the interwar era, politicians hardly ever intervened in the artistic presentation of the pieces and were satisfied with representation, whereas after 1948 the leading party exercised complete control over the institution, the repertoire and the artistic implementation. The attack in the Communist daily *Szabad Nép* in 1950 did not leave Gusztáv Oláh untouched, but as he was not replaceable in his positions and he was not against the system openly, he continued to receive commissions and recognitions, even two Kossuth prizes. The exclusive dominance of socialist realism did not evidently cause any difficulties for Oláh in his directions as he had seen and admired Stanislavsky and his followers during his visit to the Soviet Union in 1934. And as he had basically approached operas in a realist way already before the Second World War, he could continue to work without any break. In order to avoid attacks, he usually published the concepts of his directions in advance: the ideology of the era, as a compulsory component, appeared in his works but he basically implemented his own concepts. By 1955 Oláh had reached the point when he questioned the supremacy of realism on the operatic stage in an article.

In the last chapter of the dissertation, I show how Gusztáv Oláh participated actively, both as an author and designer, in creating the only ballet (*Bihari nótája*) in the history of Hungarian dance in which he openly followed the example of the Soviet *dramballet* but it can still be regarded as an organic continuation of the dance traditions of the interwar era.

The presentation of my doctoral research is closed with the revision and methodological introduction of the repertory prepared by Ágnes Alpár. It was my decision not to deal with two areas: dramatic theatre and film. However, the dissertation gives a comprehensive picture of Gusztáv Oláh's activities for the music stage and thus it provides an opportunity for writing a monography in the future.