

Hungarian University of Fine Arts Doctoral School

Changes in the sets of the Hungarian State Opera House from 1991 to 2016

Thesis of the DLA Dissertation

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2024

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The research topic of my DLA thesis is the changes in the scenery of the MÁO during the quarter century between 1991-2016.

Hypothesis

The thesis asserts that there was an **epochal change** in the theoretical, creative and technical level of set design on the stage of the MÁO during the period under study. The epochal change means that the scenery on the stage of the MÁO shows the stylistic trends in the visual arts that characterise the shifts in the visual arts in Western Europe and America in the 20th century.

The **role** of the set designer moves, they not only create „the fantastic stylization” for the director's message, as was common between WW2 and the regime change but also the dramatic force field in the performance by displaying the visual world of contemporary art. It creates a visual on stage that directly facilitates the reception of the director's interpretation unfolding on stage.

Thus, **the set as a visual experience becomes more and more part of the director's message**. This phenomenon became general and dominating on the stage of the MÁO during the period I have been studying.

During my research, I also investigate **whether** causal relationships, **trends** and tendencies **can be found** in the sets of opera performances presented over the past 25 years.

My research steps

- I examined the differences between opera sets and other theatrical genres
- I researched opera set design before 1991, master set designers and technical conditions
- I selected 4 groups of scenery representing changes from the period I studied, whose scenery is linked by a common focal point, and examined possible trends.
- I selected a performance from each of the four groups, considering strong professional and audience reactions, and analysed their sets to see what important changes in set design occurred between 1991 and 2016. The 4 selected performances best represent the visual characteristics of the groups.
- I examined in detail the reasons for the changes in the sets.

Aspects of the analysis of scenery

- Reason for choosing this piece
- Description of the set
- Overview of the exhibition
- Summary

The presumed reasons for the change, according to my hypothesis

One reason for the change is the change in the political system. Until the end of the Second World War, set design in Hungary was part of the bloodstream of Western European art movements. Still, the official art movement of the socialist political system that emerged after the Second World War was socialist realism, so Western European art movements were only occasionally present on the MÁO stage until the **change of regime**. The same statement applies to the debates on the history of ideas that created and fertilised the art movements.

(It should be noted that in the prose theatres, this change I have outlined had already taken place in the 1970s and 1980s.)

Another reason for this change is the **technical progress** that is taking place on international opera stages at the turn of the millennium and the beginning of the 21st century (new materials, new production technologies, new image makers, lasers, projection, use of cameras on stage...) and on the stage of the MÁO.

The third reason for this change is the **visual revolution** that is taking place in the period I have been studying, due in part to the widespread use of the Internet, which is transforming the visual expectations of the audience concerning the stage vision, and designers are responding to this.

A summary of the analysis of the 4 selected plays

Alban Berg: Wozzeck

- Premier: 29 May 1992
- Director: Viktor Nagy
- Set designer: Csaba Antal

This set represented a completely new approach on the stage of the MÁO because it was based on the visual and cinematic traditions of Western Europe and the USA, and it also incorporated one of the most important architectural trends of its time, the 1980s and 1990s, the **deconstructivist architectural style**.

Other similar deconstructivist sets of the period:

- Verdi: Otello (Director and Set Designer: Stefano Poda, premiere: 26.09.2015),
- Péter Sári: Total solar eclipse (Director: Balázs Kovalik, Set designer: Péter Horgas, premiere: 28.11.2009),
- B.Britten: Peter Grimes (Director: Balázs Kovalik, Set designer: Csaba Antal, premiere: 13.11.1999)

The visual world of the German expressionist films that inspired the set is characterised by unnaturally distorted perspectives, distorted scales, disharmonious compositions, lack of symmetry and right angles, and the importance of the role of darkness and shadow. The deconstructivist architecture of the 1980s rebelled against the traditional structuralism

that dominated architecture, experimenting with forms that created space by sliding and rotating, and even questioning the vertical and horizontal systems. His background is the existential precariousness of a 20th-century man.

The opera *Wozzeck* is the story of the little man around whom the intelligible world is falling apart. It is precisely this disintegrating world that we see in the set, which the set designer, Csaba Antal, presents partly with a disharmonic spatial composition typical of German Expressionist films and partly with a disharmonic spatial composition typical of architectural deconstructionism.

Looking at the later *Wozzeck* sets, this set is 20 years ahead of its time, because it rotates, moves, rises, moves horizontally and vertically forwards and backwards, and thus anticipates the visual world of later *Wozzeck* sets (including Western Europe) in terms of technical elements and visual world.

In this production of *Wozzeck*, the set designer has taken full advantage of the possibilities offered by the Opera House's lower machinery.

Béla Bartók: Bluebeard's Castle

- Premier: 20 February 1993
- Director: Viktor Nagy
- Set designer: Imre Makovecz

This set is a completely new phenomenon on the stage of the MÁO. For the first time, a unified architectural style, the **organic style**, appears, which has the peculiarity that not only the environmental, historical, geographical, ethnographic and social aspects are part of its holistic approach, but also the unity of myth, faith, transcendence and reality.

In the set, the specific motif treasures and technical characteristics of Hungarian folk architecture, **folk art roots and symbol systems** and organic modern architecture are reflected. In its material and appearance, a unique set has been created which, with all its problems and shortcomings, could have been a great opportunity to create a unique style of its own on the stage of the MÁO.

The following performances similarly incorporate folk art symbols of the period:

- Janacek: *Jenufa* (Director: Attila Vidnyánszky, Set designer: Belozubob, premiere: 13.03.2004),
- Kodály: *Székelyfonó* (Director: M. Znaniiecki, Set designer: L. Scoglis, premiere: 1.10.2016).

If anyone had attempted to continue this style later, they would have had to consider the practicalities of theatre sets, such as the ability to be flattened, easily stored in small spaces, wear resistance and durability, which this set lacked. Another important consideration in terms of size is the time needed for construction/dismantling, as this is a repertory theatre set (which is a feature of the MÁO), so it is not practical to play in blocks.

Richard Strauss: Elektra

- Premier: 28 November 2007
- Director: Balázs Kovalik
- Set designer: Csaba Antal

This set is characterised by **abstract spatial forms, and the magnified use of architectural elements in the creation of space** (stairs, cubes, bridges, columns, bridges...)

In the period I studied, the same was true of the sets of the following performances:

- Wagner: Ring (Director: Viktor Nagy, Set designer: Attila Csikós, premiere 1993-1998.),
- Boito: Mefistofele (Director: Balázs Kovalik, Set designer: Csaba Antal, premiere: 14.09.2010),
- R.Strauss: The Shadowless Woman (Director: János Szikora, Set designer: Balázs Horesnyi, premiere: 25.05.2014),
- Stravinsky: The Rake's Progress (Director: Ferenc Anger, Set designer: Gergely Zöldy Z., premiere: 18.01.2015),
- Beethoven: Fidelio (Director and Set Designer: Balázs Kovalik, premiere: 05.10.2008)

Csaba Antal's set design is unique on the MÁO stage because the chosen pop art style allows the director to use visual intertextuality (by superimposing the images of the ritual bath and the social-religious swimming pool) to question sacral architectural forms, such as the ritual bath, which is the site of spiritual purification, and thus to question the coping strategies of both Elektra and Chrysothemis in the given situation. In addition, the technical feat of the set, with the building's entire upper set element falling out, emphasises the point in the story when, for just one moment, everything is morally inverted. But this is also the most tragic moment in the story, and one that none of the protagonists can survive because time is then „snapped” and a similar power grab ensues, just as Elektra has been fighting against all along.

Jean-Philippe Rameau: Hyppolite and Aricie

- Premier: 26 June 2013
- Director: Csaba Káel
- Set designer: Éva Szendrényi
- Visual Designer: László Zsolt Bordos

This was the first Rameau opera to be performed on the MÁO stage. The special feature of the performance was the creation of miraculous spatial elements with 5 projectors. The visual designer's images were projected from 5 different locations. In this way, we achieved a special atmosphere, which we could call „extraterrestrial”. This feeling is particularly familiar to young viewers, as by the influence of the internet and 3D films.

The performance takes the power of love seriously and, by placing it in **transcendent spaces**, draws attention to the timeless aspect of love. In a postmodern age in which everything is questioned, this production does not place the story in the baroque spaces

of the past, when we could believe in the permanence of love, does not put love in quotation marks as in the modern productions mentioned above, but dares to assume the romanticism implied by the text and the music, presenting the unquestionable permanence of love on the stage of time. The set is characterised by **virtual spatiality** and the **projection** projected onto it.

In the period I studied, the same was true of the sets of the following performances:

- Handel: Xerxes (Director: Balázs Kovalik, Set designer: Balázs Horesnyi, premiere: 30.04.2009),
- Wagner: The Flying Dutchman (Director: János Szikora, Set designer: Éva Szendrényi, premiere: 19.01.2013),
- Wagner: Ring (Director: Géza M. Tóth, Set design: Ildi Tihanyi, Gergely Zöldy Z., presentation: 2015-2016),
- R.Strauss: Ariadne on the island of Naxos (Director: Ferenc Anger, Set designer: Gergely Zöldy Z., premiere: 07.05.2013)

Summary

My research **has not generally confirmed the hypothesis** put forward. The results of my research show that there was a change in the theoretical, creative and technical level of scenic design on the stage of the MÁO during the period under study, but **this change is not systematic**, it does not result from the change in the political situation and the return to the mainstream of Western European artistic development, nor does it result from technical progress and the visual revolution in the world. My research has shown that it is true of many works by great artists (e.g. the 4 performances I have selected and many others) that decorativeness is receding and that the imagery and visual world of the set increasingly reflect the influence of contemporary European visual arts, and that the independent visual message of the set is being valorised. However, it cannot be said that this is the case for all sets, for all shows, so it cannot be proven that this periodic change is true for all sets in the period I have studied.

Counterexamples:

- Cilea: Adriana Lecouvreur (Director: Viktor Nagy, Set designer: Attila Csikós, premiere 14.11.1992),
- Mozart: Escape from the Seraglio (Director: Miklós Gábor Kerényi, Set designer: Zsolt Khell, premiere 26.11.1994).

However, based on my research, I can say that the majority of the sets (including the 4 performances analysed) confirm my hypothesis.

The invitation of foreign designers (e.g. Helmut Schörghofer, Andrejs Zagars, G. de Bosio, Armand Bernard, Jirzi Menzel, M. Znaniecki, Stefano Poda) has become common practice, and many of our directors and set designers have been invited by foreign opera houses, enriching the toolbox of our creators.

Our designers are part of the international design scene, are members of international organisations and keep up to date with the latest foreign trends. However, I have found

no evidence in my research that this change has been systematic and that it has been a feature of all the sets on the MÁO's stage during the period under review.

However, the trends in decorative design do indeed reflect the changes. Besides the 4 productions I have selected, there were many other productions on the stage of the MÁO that also deserved to be included in the works I am analysing (e.g. *Woman without a Shadow*, *Spiritists*, *Xerxes*, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, *Planet Dutchman*, *Turandot*), but the sets of the 4 productions selected contain the strongest characteristics of the new visual thinking and, in my opinion, offer the most lessons.

The analysis of the sets, the images, and the reviews all support the claim that the importance of the independent visual message of the set has increased. If we look at *Wozzeck's* overlapping gulas, the dramatic space of *Elektra* reminiscent of a dried-up swimming pool, the modern projection technique of *Hyppolite and Aricie*, the organic and symbolic spaces of *Bluebeard*, we can say that the audience can guess what kind of opera interpretation they are going to see in the performance as soon as they look at the set.

In this period, the modernisation of stage technology has opened new possibilities for scenography, with the development of lighting technology (intelligent lamps) and the involvement of new artistic disciplines in scenography (film, video mapping).

The development of materials and production technologies, and the rise of computer-aided design, have made it easier and faster to design, produce, stage and travel with sets that meet the specific requirements of opera.

These changes cannot be approached only from the point of view of the set designers, but also, in the period under study, a new demand from the public. Udo Bermbach put it very aptly in 1996: „The visualisation of the world and the individualisation of communication are developments which have a decisive impact on the self-image of modern societies and the socialisation and education of the younger generations, and even have a significant influence on the behavioural styles of the older generations.”

The above-mentioned processes are still taking place today and will probably continue in the future, so this trend is unstoppable, but it seems that projection and film techniques are trying to keep up with these processes and attract new generations to the Opera House.

To conclude, my research has confirmed that there is indeed a trend change in scenic design on the stage of the Opera House, but it cannot be said that this change is complete and that it is true for all scenic designers who have worked on the stage of the Opera House in this period, i.e. no coherent trend can be established.

The period from 2017 to the present is not the subject of my thesis, but an insight into the performances of these seasons shows that the previous 25 years have laid the foundations for a process that has resulted in a demonstrable predominance of sets of the new visual paradigm as a means of successfully and increasingly successfully addressing new generations, both on the opera stages of the MÁO and the world.