

## Balázs Véghelyi

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### István Fazekas: The Palace of Time

'This town was originally built to be a palace of time in space. In the stones of its foundation, there is peace and heroism, protection and eternal sacrifice.' As though the earth's heart opened and sad Celtic music issued forth, so begins István Fazekas' docudrama entitled *Town of Great Times* with the lyrical statements delivered by the narrator, played by Gábor Koncz. Beneath the starry sky projected on the stage's borders, there appear the strong contours of three burial mounds. In the slowly strengthening glare of lights on the horizon, we are soon witnesses to an Iron Age funeral. Then, thunder is heard. Lightening flashes across the angered firmament, and from that moment on, we take part in a unique journey through time – just like in Madách's great work, *The Tragedy of Man*, only here we are tied to one concrete location.

The docudrama's subtitle is *Fables from the History of Százhalombatta*, and truly, the allegories plucked from time (from extinct ages to gradually more factual scenes approaching the present) are primarily tied to the territory of Százhalom. Nevertheless, so that the play, which explicitly follows the main currents of its setting's history, does not become mired in its locale, Fazekas cites moments from the past which make the fight for survival its binding element. The fables, which span centuries, are thus organically linked. Scenes of dialogue are separated by narration (which helps by supplying temporal and spatial orientation, as well as background information) and dance numbers that reflect the nature of the given period. Still, they are linked by cross-references, as well as by a Bronze-Age coin that can always be found in the territory of Százhalombatta, both physically and over the span of a millennium. Already considered antique in the Iron Age, it was engraved with a cross in Roman times to serve as a tangible testimony to Christianity – later gaining its final, contemporary significance in 1996, when the church, based on the designs of Imre Makovecz, was erected in the main square of Százhalombatta, incorporating the coin as its central symbol.

The central feature of the set is also constant. In the background of the stage, Annamária Húros, a well-known pupil of Makovecz, situates three stylised hills, which serve different functions with the changing scenes and eras. Their mobility aids in the fast changes, also assisted by the images and video clips projected onto them. Thus, the Bronze Age burial mounds can transform into yurts from the time of the country's conquest, as well as into oil tanks and churches. Their concave sides can delineate a school, a tavern, or occasionally the background for a throne room. As geographical elements, these three mounds are the least likely to wear away with time, indicated onstage by a shrieking wind effect. This is truly a modern set design, which will not bear anything superfluous on the stage.

The location binds together these distinct and interwoven fables. Százhalombatta is a settlement that clearly displays the layers of time. It acquired its name from the 122 burial mounds that store the remains of Iron-Age elites, but archaeologists have also discovered finds from the Bronze Age. In Roman times, a military camp named *Matrica* existed in today's territory of Százhalombatta as one of the borderline's guard posts. The remains of a thermal bath built of stone on the Danube bank remind us of the Romans' presence. Hun and Avar artefacts have been found from later centuries, and the conquering Hungarians settled this spot as well. Demeter Csáti recorded this in 1526, in the lines of his *Song of the Purchase of Pannonia*: 'Árpád came with the Hungarian people / Rising up in the land of Kelem on the Danube / They checked that of Cseke / And held sway in Tétén. // They achieved much in Érd / And settled at Százhalom, / Battling with princes' (Csáti 2010). Following this description from the *Gesta Hungarorum* (by an anonymous author), the conquering ruler embarked from here to subdue Transdanubia. It was also the site of an occupied settlement in the Middle Ages, proved by the remains of a thirteenth-century church. Until the mid-twentieth century, Százhalombatta was a quiet village inhabited by Hungarians and Serbians. Most of the residents lived from fishing and agriculture. In 1960, the central administration decided to build Hungary's largest power plant here, in addition to a petroleum refinery. In the wake of the investment, workers arrived from every corner of the country. Thus, beside the village, a consciously designed town grew up out of the cornfields. The settlement attained the status of a town on 1 April 1970, kicking off the dynamic development of the succeeding years.

This broad sketch of the settlement's history may even be excluded from the text; for, despite more or less adapting the documented history of a precise

settlement, István Fazekas' work evokes a general expression of a town (as an organised unit), its memory and its community. According to American city planner Kevin Lynch, people form a unique mental picture of their town; nonetheless, these singular images have qualities in common that arise from a shared culture, shared experiences and strategies, as well as the physical attributes of the settled environment. From the sum of individual perceptions, a cognitive map constantly takes shape, which not only aids in making the space comprehensible and liveable, but also allows people to determine more easily their place and circumstances in their own environment. Therefore, Százhalombatta could be any other Hungarian (or foreign) settlement looking back upon a long past while still enjoying an active community life. Hence, the location referred to onstage can be understood as an allegory in and of itself, and an exact knowledge of the place is unnecessary. It is an indisputable fact that theatre is a sensitive seismograph of life's phenomena, and this is well demonstrated by this docudrama, unprecedented in the history of Hungarian drama.

*Town of Great Times* consists of two acts. The first extends from the Iron Age to the First World War. Ancient mound-building people, Roman soldiers, early Christians and late pagans, stingy landowners and arriving Turks, soldiers leaving for war and deserted lovers – each appear for one short scene. Fictional characters (indicative of their times) and historic figures take the stage for a few emblematic statements. In the second scene, for example, a Christian couple accused of cannibalism is led before Marcus Aurelius in chains, and they inform the emperor of the mystery of the Last Supper, the symbolism of Christ's body and blood. In the sixth scene, King Matthias Corvinus passes judgment over a usurious counterfeiter. In the tenth scene, Maria Theresa serves justice in the case of local serfs unfairly toiling for a landowner. These scenes are based on historical sources. For example, Marcus Aurelius in fact came in person to the camps on the border. He surely turned up in Campona, which is close to Matrica. Therefore, it is realistic to suppose that he reached Matrica, and there are written documents concerning the two aforementioned legal cases.

The second act follows history of the village (and later town) from 1936 to the 1990s. The author touches upon the period of industrialisation and the process of building the town, as well as the conflict between local and county-level Party leadership. In the background of the public sphere, the opinions of the workers who settled the town are heard within the confines of the tavern. At the conclusion of the piece, we are shown a settlement in which the people who have

arrived from every point of the compass make up a community. In the shadow of industrial projects, culture and the preservation of traditions play an important role in the lives of the residents. The docudrama begins with a funeral, but by the closing scene, bursting forth in a prophetic vision, actual church bells toll for the living – in such a way that the Iron Age chieftain eulogising over the dead delivers almost the exact same monologue as the modern-day mayor, which serves as a frame for the play. The fateful repetition of the declaration ‘I have a dream...’ in the finale makes clear the intended, inter-textual reflection upon Mankind’s cathartic expression of solidarity and the desire for freedom. In one interview conducted with the author, he summarized the conception of the drama this way: ‘To begin with, [...] I wanted to adapt the period between the 1960s and 1970, although when it occurred to me that the clashes waged for the sake of the town between the local leaders and the heads of two great companies made up a drama of such volcanic proportions, I immediately had to place the chronicle of its becoming a town in a larger historical perspective. That way, its true value, its rays of hope that still shape our lives today, would be apparent. I remember it was on Christmas Eve that I got the idea of commencing the writing of the play with an Iron-Age funeral, with a burial mound that people would enter at the centre of the stage. Then, at the piece’s conclusion, the same burial mound had to become a symbol of life and resurrection. Hence, it had to transform into the Makovecz church, from which, following one of the Summerfest’s ecumenical services, heroes of today and the past would step forth to proclaim the love of life in a grand, communal celebration’ (Kovács 2021).

Through the means of realism, director János Bozsogi guides the viewers through time. Meanwhile, the piece’s mosaic nature allows actors to create multiple roles. Thus, in the span of a performance, Irén Bordán can be Maria Theresa, an old village woman and a stern Party functionary. Bernadett Gregor plays a teacher, a museum-founding archaeologist and an author working in Százhalombatta. Zsuzsa Vathy and Márta Brunner portray a kind-hearted teacher and an outspoken tavern-keeper.

Dance makes up an integral part of the performance, establishing a rhythm to the scenes and the narrative. In Százhalombatta, dance culture established serious traditions in the past three decades. Since 1994, the town has hosted the Summerfest International Folk Dance Festival. Many of the local children and youths choose folk dancing as a leisure activity, while a ballet studio and modern dance ensembles also operate in the town. They also feature in the performance.

Still, the dance numbers do not merely serve as filler or dividing elements. They strengthen the sense of local colour. We must also mention the role of music in the production. Sándor 'Süendi' Csoóri, Jr., has composed secular folk music that suits the atmosphere of the scenes and subtly supports them.

In a televised statement a good ten years ago, Miklós Hubay spoke of István Fazekas as a possible reviver of Hungarian history drama. *Town of Great Times* is a worthy continuation of his works: *Károly Kis*, which examines the causes of Hungary's discord; *Ilona Zrínyi*, a monodrama with a lively modern format; *The Night of Pilate*, which analyses the human requisites for the phenomenon of Christ in a realistic manner; and the historical dramas entitled *Charged with Crime*. The piece *Town of Great Times* premiered on 23 October 2021, and it can be viewed by the public at the The Friendship & Cultural Centre (Barátság Kulturális Központ).

### Works Cited

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