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Déryné on stage for two hundred years

The concept of speaking and acting theatre in the production of *Álmaimban Déryné*

Abstract

The production of *Álmaimban Déryné* (In My Dreams, Déryné) is based on György Lukácsy's script, which he specifically wrote for my master's project for the Doctoral School of the University of Theatre and Film Arts. I wished to present the history of Hungarian-language touring theatre (or travelling theatre), which began with Róza Déryné Széppataki and lasted for more than two hundred years, in a performance planned for an hour and a half, with dynamic space and time management, and character and scene building based on movement. I felt that in order to realise my concept, the actors needed to learn the method prior to the start of the rehearsal process, as it is not enough for them to understand the movement-based methodology, they need to experience it first hand in order to apply it. So I invited the Polish director Grzegorz Bral, creator of the Bral Acting Method (BAM), to give an intensive workshop for the artists. This summer workshop was the direct source of the ritual elements incorporated into the performance. In my case study, I will present the above mentioned performance and rehearsal process, as well as my experience gained during the work.

Keywords: Déryné Company, State Déryné Theatre, BAM (Bral Acting Method), travelling theatre, talking theatre, acting theatre

Introduction

My master's project for the Doctoral School of the University of Theatre and Film Arts was the production of *Álmaimban Déryné (In My Dreams, Déryné)* with the involvement of the Déryné Társulat (Déryné Company). The creation of this production was an unusually long process, embracing aspects of theatre history and theory perspectives. The development of the concept was started in the autumn of 2023, and my fundamental aim was to create a theatrical performance on the theme of "The Periods of the Déryné Theatre," which I analysed in my DLA thesis. I found an institutional partner for this work in the University of Sopron, so on 27 and 28 September 2024, two preliminary premieres took place in the Forestry Museum of Esterházy Palace, which belongs to the university. Given that *Álmaimban Déryné* was the premiere of a script that had not yet been written, the process of creating the text was unusual. I asked the author, György Lukácsy, to focus on the similarities of the three periods rather than solely on the differences between them when studying the Déryné Company. This is how the profession of the actor and the fundamental questions of the social function of the travelling theatre came to the fore. I hoped that by doing so, we would address Déryné's legacy at such an essential point that the result would not be an educational story, but a performance that could also engage the actors. By focusing on the character of the actor, and also leaving room for playing, what we get is a drama in the present time, rather than historicisation. Because of the unusual task, we agreed to produce the text in two parts. After the first section was written, a stage reading was held, following which the author talked to each of the characters individually to incorporate their experiences. The final version of the text was completed in two months. Meanwhile, of course, I also drew on my own experience as an actor-director and incorporated what I found relevant from this introspection. After the second stage reading session, the rehearsals started, and after the completion of the analysis phase, the joint rehearsals began. In this case study, as a creator, I will describe the work process based on three aspects: 1. Talking theatre: the textual-dramaturgical basis of performance, 2. Acting theatre: the background to the movement elements in performance, 3. Theatre as spectacle: the director's creation of the visual world of the performance.

Speaking theatre: theatre history and intertextual references in the performance

Álmaimban Déryné is based on György Lukácsy's script, with a dramaturgy aiming to create a playful space for the themes of acting and theatre arts to explore. The history of Hungarian-language touring theatre (or travelling theatre), which began with Róza Déryné Széppataki and goes back more than two hundred years, can only be presented in a performance planned for an hour and a half with dynamic space and time management. Instead of a plot organisation based on time-travel, the author adopted a different approach: he wanted to evoke the three eras of the companies named after Déryne from a contemporary setting.

This may, of course, evoke the world of 'enchantment' and 'charm' of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. In both works, charm and enchantment play a central role, allowing the characters to transcend the boundaries of reality and wander into a world of dreams and imagination. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, magical elements not only drive the plot, but also reveal deeper human feelings and desires—*Álmaimban Déryné* similarly creates a special atmosphere where past and present, reality and dream, are intertwined. This framework allows the characters to discover their identity, their desire, and to reinterpret their own stories through the mystique of the theatre. They are gateways that lead to the depths of the human soul, linking different eras and the eternal message of theatre.

Álmaimban Déryné is about a travelling company in crisis, held hostage for years by a charismatic but burnt-out company director. The personal drama of the Company Director (Mihály Kaszás) manifests in a particular illness: the unbearable conflict causes him to fall asleep, offering an escape into his dreams. However, the reality thus opened up is not even a dream, since Róza Déryné Széppataki (Viktória Tarpai), who appears to the Company Director in the play, is also present in his state of lucid consciousness. Déryné is thus more a kind of conscience or avatar, who can be identified through her conversations with the Company Director.

Alongside Shakespeare, Spanish Baroque theatre was of course also concerned with exploring and depicting the relationship between dream and reality, a central motif of Pedro Calderón de la Barca's classic *Life is a Dream* (*La vida es sueño*). In *Life is a Dream*, Calderón masterfully depicts the blurring

of the boundary between dream and reality, where the deeper meaning and truth of human existence lies. Similar motifs can be found in *Álmaimban Déryné*, where the protagonist suffers from narcolepsy, constantly alternating between wakefulness and dreaming. During the performance, the protagonist speaks to himself while having imaginary conversations with Róza Déryné Széppataki, during which the boundaries between the world of dreams and reality become increasingly blurred. In both works, reality and dreams complement each other, creating tension and drawing attention to what truth is and how it shapes our lives, fuelled by our dreams and desires. The parallel between the two plays lies in the fact that both explore the deeper, philosophical questions of human existence, and push the boundaries of reality using the magic of the dream world.

But contemporary performance art is also keen to unravel the mysterious relationship between these two human states. Traces of this dramaturgical process can be detected in the English film director Ken Loach's film *Looking for Eric* (2009), or in contemporary Spanish playwright Juan Mayorga's play *María Luisa* (2023). Both are based on the same dramaturgical rule: only the title character sees and hears the character who personifies his/her desires and fears. This imaginary friend in the two works has an almost one-way relationship with the real reality of the plot. In *Looking for Eric*, a Manchester postman hallucinates his idol, French footballer Éric Cantona, and the title character in *María Luisa* is a Spanish pensioner who fills the empty spaces of her life with three different men. But in contrast to these, *Álmaimban Déryné* does not carefully define the space of dream/imagination/conscience, i.e., it is not defined in which state of existence Déryné appears before the Company Director. On the other hand, the boundary between dream/imagination/conscience and reality is drawn initially, only to be crossed in an increasingly distinct way. Thus a dynamic relationship is created between the two different spheres.

The former, i.e., the dream world, revives some of the stages of two hundred years of Hungarian-language touring theatre, as well as our national drama *Bánk bán* (Bánk the Palatine), which accompanies the whole performance, subsequently reuniting the theatre company. In the sections below, I will highlight these.

Travelling theatre in Hungary

Róza Déryné Széppataki (1793–1872) was a prominent figure of travelling theatre acting in Hungary. The travelling theatre of the time was characterised by temporary theatres, makeshift stages, hastily painted sets, rehearsals usually lasting a single morning, and premieres every two days due to the small audiences, the only sure thing in the constrained and random artistic conditions of travelling theatre being the personality of the actor. This is the reason why Déryné became the symbol of the “Hungarian actor,” explaining why the public perceives Hungarian theatre art as actor-centred to date. The rough and harsh reality, the everyday life of travelling companies, has been coated with the joviality of reminiscences, romance and anecdotes. But, in return, the response of the audience, sometimes experiencing the theatre for the first time, compensated them with an atmosphere reminiscent of today’s children’s performances: the audience lived and breathed the plot, accompanying the performance with



*Picture 1. Viktória Tarpai in the performance *Álmaimban Déryné* (In My Dreams, Déryné), Déryné Centre, 5 October 2024. (Source: Déryné Programme, photo: Ocean Productions / Károly Tuszinger)*

verbal remarks, crying and giggling, and greeting their favourites at the end of the performance with curtain calls, sometimes even with welcoming poems.

Álmaimban Déryné tells the story of Róza Déryné Széppataki: her marriage to István Déry, her career as an opera singer, her relationship to German-language theatre, the impact of 19th-century stylistic changes in acting on her career. From her diary entries we can learn about her relationship with József Katona, her tense relationship with Ferenc Kazinczy as a theatre critic (Koltai 2008), and the figure of his sister, Johanna Kilényiné Széppataki, also appears.¹

The State Déryné Theatre (Állami Déryné Színház)

The State Déryné Theatre was founded in 1951 and was based in Budapest. Its mission was to play in villages far from the urban theatres of the countryside. It was called the State Déryné Theatre from 1955. The company's eleven troupes toured the country in buses. The sets were transported on trucks. The repertoire included classics of Hungarian and world literature, modern plays, as well as children's and youth performances. During its existence, it presented more than three hundred and ninety plays, in over forty thousand performances, to an audience of around fifteen million.

Álmaimban Déryné showcases the founding of the State Déryné Theatre, its repertoire structure, its mission, and the circumstances of the change of directors, through the character of Déryné, but in an ironic, playful form.²

Bánk bán as a national drama

The genre of *Bánk bán* is historical drama. The fundamental questions of Hungarian existence are addressed in this work of Shakespearean proportions, which after the death of its author, was exalted as our "first national drama" and has been considered a national drama ever since. For the Company Director,

1 The diary of Róza Déryné Széppataki was edited by József Bayer and originally published by Singer and Wolfner in Budapest: *Déryné naplója*, 1890. The volume has been available in digital format at the Hungarian Electronic Library (Magyar Elektronikus Könyvtár) of the National Széchényi Library (Országos Széchényi Könyvtár) since 2019. *Ferenc Kazinczy's* critical comments are taken from the collected volume titled *The Correspondence of Ferenc Kazinczy*, mostly written to his friends, János Kis and Gábor Döbrentei, among others.

2 The facts and quotations in this sequence—which are my own translations—are taken from the book *Állami Déryné Színház* (The State Déryné Theatre), edited by Ferenc Katona and published by the Hungarian Theatre Institute in 1975—in a dramatic form and context, of course.

the protagonist of *Álmaimban Déryné*, Katona's drama is important precisely because of the role it plays in Hungarian culture, which transcends its theatrical significance. I would like to outline its significance only insofar as it is defined by *Bánk bán* for the Company Director, and insofar as the person of József Katona is familiar to Déryné.

József Katona, to whom we owe one of the most outstanding works of Hungarian drama, *Bánk bán*, was a famous native of Kecskemét. Although he studied law and philosophy, Katona found great joy in the theatre and acting. As an amateur actor himself, he performed, dramatised, translated and wrote plays. His works represent a transition between Classicism and Romanticism and show the influence of Schiller and Shakespeare. As a dramatist, Katona readily addressed historical themes, although these works of his were not allowed on stage due to the censorship of the time.

The author himself could not see the first staging of *Bánk bán*, because it only took place only after his death, in February 1833 in Kassa, when his former actor-colleague Miklós Udvarhelyi chose the title role of *Bánk bán* as a reward.

The previously almost completely ignored play was brought to the attention of Hungarians in 1845 by Márton Lendvay, the giant actor of the time. The seventeen performances that he starred in at the National Theatre were seen by nearly twenty thousand spectators. The audience rewarded both Petur and Tiborc with a great round of applause, especially people who advocated the idea of national unity and the unification of interests in the Reform Era. 15 March 1848 is an important date in the subsequent history of drama: that evening, Hungarians celebrated the victory of the revolution with this play in the National Theatre.

The opera version of the drama was published in 1861. The music was composed by Ferenc Erkel to Béni Egressy's libretto.

In the play *Álmaimban Déryné*, Déryné raises the importance of József Katona's play *Bánk bán*, which becomes one of the most important elements of the troubled Company Director's reflection, as *Bánk bán* has a plot-organising power. As is well-known, Róza Déryné Széppataki first played the role of Melinda in József Katona's tragedy in 1833, marking a significant milestone in her life, as her performance won the approval of the contemporary audience.

Bánk bán is thus both a role and a challenge for the characters of *Álmaimban Déryné*, and also a story of an attempt to hold together a large community (the nation). For the Company Director, the character of Bánk teaches about

community leadership, because his gesture of resignation and sacrifice sheds light on the only real way to hold a community (in the case of *Álmaimban Déryné*, a company) together.

Text and direction

Álmaimban Déryné's plane of reality depicts a contemporary sequence of events: a travelling theatre company in crisis, their classic repertoire titles failing. The Company Director, however, does not want to meet the demands of the "market" and refuses to fill the repertoire with entertaining productions—thus equating the importance of *Bánk bán* with his own situation. His cynical, incompatible personality is a test for actors who have experienced a series of difficulties and failures, and one that many have failed. Those who remain are the "holy remnant." The dramatic story is set in their final hours. As this performance was tailored to the Déryné Company, we had to avoid specific parallels so that the performance would not assume a therapeutic character, but would leave room for the actor to find their own way.

In order to avoid confusion or conflation on both the part of the actors and the audience between the company in the play and the Déryné Company, performing the play, strong gestures were needed: one of the means of this was the almost exclusive reference to dramas by foreign authors (Chekhov, Shakespeare, Turgenev or the authors of the musical *Singing in the Rain*). In addition to these, classics of Hungarian drama (*Csongor és Tünde* [Csongor and Tünde], *Bánk bán*), which are not in the repertoire of the Déryné Company, founded in 2020, are also mentioned. As is customary to say, any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons is coincidental.

Monologues about actor idols are also an important element of the present-day events of the dramatic plot. Since *Álmaimban Déryné* is itself a reference to theatre history, personal traits cannot be left out. Speaking about their great predecessors, the actors talk about Iván Darvas, Margit Bara, Zoltán Fábri, Zoltán Latinovits and Lajos Óze.

During staging the production, I tried to make the different planes of time and space as permeable as possible (with the help of masks, to be mentioned later), because the performance was not meant to be a theatre history guide, but a kind of initiation into the world of acting. More important to me than the differences in time and space was what connects all these planes: the matter

of acting. What is the theatre after all? Every event, recollection, story focuses on this question. To what has always been valid in the theatre, regardless of the specifics of the period. That is why I make the actors combine the different planes, trusting that the spectator will also be concerned with the general question of the existence of the theatre, rather than with the facts. At the heart of the question is, of course, the actor himself. This is textually underscored by the performance: in addition to the polemics scattered across the dialogues—about the acting profession—we pay tribute to Antal Németh, who was the head of the National Theatre between 1935 and 1944, with a literal quotation. In her monologue at the end of the play, Róza Déryné Széppataki interweaves the beliefs of the epoch-making theatre artist with her own personal thoughts: “Theatre is finding its way back to itself. The primordial core of the theatre, the depersonalising actor, in his irreplaceability, forever secures what I believe in...” (Kávási 2018, 103).

Even though the theme of the performance may lead to the conclusion that it is about the real problems of the current Déryné Company, and that the members of the company portray themselves, this is not the case. We are also a theatre company, and we talk about problems that sooner or later arise in this environment, just like in any closed community. György Lukácsy, the writer of the play, had short conversations with the characters, but these were only incorporated into the play at the level of impressions.

By the end of the performance, the problems of the company and the community are resolved, helping the audience find a way out of similar situations.

Déryné’s spirit plays a major role in the company’s renewal—in both a concrete and figurative sense: in the Company Director’s vision, the role is portrayed by a flesh-and-blood actor (Viktória Tarpai), and the other sense is that the centuries-old values that Déryné represents help the Company Director to take the right direction. So Déryné is both present and absent—no one but the Company Director can see her or speak to her, but at the same time, her impact greatly contributes to forging the company together. Her portrayal therefore differs from all her previous representations, as she appears here as a ghostly figure who, through the Company Director, helps the Déryné Company to live on.

According to the play, the Company Director suffers from narcolepsy, which means that he spontaneously falls asleep even in the middle of a conversation. At first, Róza Déryné Széppataki appears in the Company Director’s dreams, but after a while she is also present when he is awake, as a kind of invisible



Picture 2. Viktória Tarpai and Mihály Kaszás in the performance *Álmaimban Déryné* (In My Dreams, Déryné), Déryné Centre, 5 October 2024. (Source: Déryné Programme, photo: Ocean Productions / Károly Tuszinger)

friend/helper, thus blending the phases of reality/dream, wakefulness/sleeping. The aim is to put us, the viewers, in a kind of “narcoleptic” state, blurring the line between dream and reality. Viktória Tarpai, the actress who plays Déryné, helps to evoke this feeling by being both inscrutable and approachable. Despite her statuesque appearance, her gestures befitting a 19th-century prima donna, her old-fashioned (and sometimes even authentic) use of language, in our performance Déryné is a living conscience, and as such, she is easy-going and likes teasing people. In this way, she counteracts the depressive, self-pitying melancholy of the Company Director. In our production, Déryné is not portrayed in the same way as Attila Vidnyánszky made her out to be in the production of *Déryné ifjasszony* (Mrs Déry is a Young Woman), based on Ferenc Herczeg’s work (also played by Viktória Tarpai), which launched the Déryné Programme in 2020. For him, Déryné is a great artist, but at the same time a person of extraordinary ingenuity. *Álmaimban Déryné*’s hero is wise and serene, almost

omniscient: she only loses her bonhomie when the Company Director confronts her with the problems of contemporary theatre. (Gyula Maár's 1975 film classic *Déryné, hol van?* [Mrs Déry, Where Are You?]) is an important cultural history antecedent, but it was not relevant for us, since the Déryné played by Mari Törőcsik is melancholic and tends to philosophize, but the most important difference from our approach is that Maár's Déryné is lonely, while in our film she always appears as the Company Director's helper and spiritual companion.)

A theatre company finds itself in the middle of a forest at night. They have arrived in the forest at the request of one of their companions, but no one understands why they have to stay there, awake. During the rituals, conflicts unfold and the peculiar situation forces the company in crisis to confront itself. It is getting colder, the forest is getting darker, and the company seems to be disbanding for good. After all, what else would still connect them? One thing is certain: the dawn brings the answer.

It is a performance about theatre, life and death, conflicts lurking in the dark, the theatre company of the day, the ordinary days and uncommon secrets of company existence, centuries-old values and the never-changing human fallibility.

Acting theatre: theatre history and contemporary movement principles in performance

The actor's job consists of more than just saying words, of course. As a director, I aimed to incorporate training and movement theatre exercises into the performance that show the actor as an artist using his body as a language.

Álmaimban Déryné is not typically a performance based on Western tradition, but rather a medley of Western and Eastern theatre.

The use of the two theatrical methods did not come up against any obstacles during the creative process, since the two methods do not differ fundamentally, each starting from the actor, placing him at the centre of the performance. While the Eastern tradition approaches acting from the body, Western acting tries to provide the means to achieve the role from the psyche. Since the answer to the same question (How can an actor establish a strong presence on stage?) is sought in so many different ways, I think it is particularly useful to use both in the rehearsal process.

I followed the Western theatrical tradition in that some scenes were based on realism and psychological authenticity, while others relied on the stylized movement, symbolic meanings and rituals of Eastern theatre, which I incorporated into the performance according to the Bral method, as explained later.

Álmaimban Déryné as in Eastern theatre, physical expression, music and dance are integral to the performance, and these elements have cultural and religious meanings for us too. At the same time, I also relied on improvisation and emotional memory, typical of Western theatre, rather than simply following predetermined movement forms and rituals. To achieve psychological authenticity, we talked a lot about the play and the characters, building psychologically accurate, flesh-and-blood characters who engage in real dialogue (Csehov 1997), and experience real conflicts on stage. But I also placed a special emphasis on movement and rituals, which play an important role in the performance, as they can generate deeper emotional and spiritual experiences for the audience. These are ritual acts that promote interaction and teamwork among actors. These ritual elements not only serve the plot, but also deepen the symbolic meaning of theatre, reminding us that theatre is not just entertainment, but a communal experience that also passes on culture and traditions. Ritual acts create a special relationship between the audience and the actors, enriching the performance and creating a lasting experience (Barba 2023).

During the rehearsal process, some parts of the performance were based on movement, while other scenes were constructed purely through the means of psychological realism (Sztanyiszlavszkij 1949).

Both are authentic and valid paths, as both the Western and Eastern theatre traditions share a common belief that theatre is a universal art form capable of expressing the deepest layers of human experience.

From the pulsation of the two, an exciting dynamic performance emerged that is more likely to maintain the attention of today's viewer than a static performance that has its sole focus on the text. The ritual elements, which include dance, movement and song, complement the dialogues based on psychological realism.

Theatre professionals and theatre trends that have influenced the production

I felt that the actors needed to learn movement-based character building before the rehearsal process began, as they were all socialised in the Western theatre tradition and it was not enough for them to understand the movement-based method, they needed to experience it first hand in order to be able to apply it.

So, I invited the Polish director Grzegorz Bral, head of the *Song of the Goat* company, to give an intensive workshop for the actors. This summer workshop was the direct source of the ritual elements incorporated into the performance.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the Polish language area has such a long tradition of ritual elements, since religion has played and continues to play a major role in the lives of Polish people. While in other European countries, culture has been profanised, detached from religion, its beliefs and rituals, the Polish theatre world has retained the ritual and cultic elements that elevate the theatrical performance to the level of a sacred activity. Polish playwrights provide excellent material for this, as they often put myth and its realm at the centre. As did György Lukácsy, the author of *Álmaimban Déryné*, who wrote his play about the traditions of Hungarian theatre: the notion of sanctity and religious motifs play a major role in his text. In order to ensure that the theatricalisation of everything was not didactic, but retained its playfulness, the actor's most ancient, ritualistic instincts had to be awakened. What does this mean? If we strip the three periods of the Déryné Company of their age-specific characteristics, we get a man ready and willing to change, the actor. An actor's vocation is to be able to take on roles that are both appropriate to his or her personality and different from it. I present this specificity in the performance when the characters recite Miklós Radnóti's poem *Tétova óda (A Hesitant Ode)*—in a situation. The medium of the love poem is precisely inadequacy: I assign the recital of the poem to the characters who seem to be the least suited to it. It is precisely this that draws the viewer's attention to the fact that acting is not about identifying with a particular character, but is much broader than that: the actor is capable of taking on roles that are contrary to his or her personality, because that is the essence of the acting profession.

Grzegorz Bral's acting method is a unique method of actor training that Bral has gradually developed over the years. This is based on understanding that all the means of acting, such as voice, gesture, rhythm, imagination and energy,

are interconnected. At the centre is the performer himself, whom Bral sees as a complex instrument. The BAM (Bral Acting Method) focuses on exploring the organic connection and integration of sound, movement and imagination within an actor, as well as researching and developing group dynamics.

In his training session for actors, Bral started from movement, bringing ritual elements and exercises to release creative energy. I have included several of these in the performance, partly because the play itself is about a theatre company whose members are trying to keep the team together by their own means, and they are trying to do this through the exercises mentioned. On the other hand, the exercises also work well as an element of effect in the performance. Not only are they spectacular, but they require an actor's concentration, which makes the actors' stage presence much more powerful. The exercises acted as a kind of suggestive force. Thirdly, it also created a state for the actors to build the character from their body, from movement, relying more on their instincts. The use of text and movement together opened up deeper layers of character.

"As soon as the master [Grzegorz Bral] arrived, there was a sense of calm. The kind of serenity that comes with masters of truly profound content. The last time I felt something like this was during the rehearsals of *Mrs Déry is a Young Woman*—directed by Attila Vidnyánszky—and before that in the master classes at the university, led by László Marton. Attila Vidnyánszky's approach to directing is also defining for me in other respects: on the one hand, it is well known that he sees text as only one of the means of effect, in his theatre, text, visuals and music support each other to achieve a new and unknown meaning that did not exist before. Another similarity: Attila Vidnyánszky's recurring creative method, the fragmentary dramaturgy *Álmaimban Déryné*, was—let us say—a necessary concept. Fragment dramaturgy is a principle that subordinates all textual and musical motifs to an imaginary performance and arranges them into a unified form. Because the creation of *Álmaimban Déryné* was itself a process: a combination of quotations, actors' experiences, literary excerpts, and musical motifs. I would probably not have dared to undertake this daring process if I had not seen on several occasions how fruitful thus procedure was for Attila Vidnyánszky.

Bral tried to scan the company as much as possible, in terms of emotional and physical fatigue. I did not feel it was necessary, as I went there to see and experience something new in pedagogy. In the end, it turned out that I could not have been more wrong. The assessment of the level of fatigue was a testimony

to the master's excellent sense, as it was through this mapping that he was able to schedule the series of exercises with maximum efficiency.”³

The practices in the performance always have two meanings: the concrete practice, since we are in a “theatre in the theatre” situation, and the more abstract plane that is always connected to it in the play.

The Bral method exercises presented in the lecture

Bamboo/wood throwing

This is basically an exercise in concentration. The actors move around the space and throw a bamboo branch to each other without dropping it. The task requires a high degree of concentration and attention to each other. In the performance,



Picture 3. Viktória Tarpai, Mihály Kaszás, Barnabás Janka, Barnabás Kárpáti, Katalin Losonczy and Gabriella Gulyás in the performance of *Álmaimban Déryné* (In My Dreams, Déryné), Déryné Centre, 5 October 2024. (Source: Déryné Programme, photo: Ocean Productions / Károly Tuszinger)

3 Barnabás Janka's notes on the workshop of Grzegorz Bral (17–23 June 2024, Budapest, Déryné Centre).

this is presented as a “theatre in the theatre” type of exercise—the actors, who have to survive the night in a forest, throw tree branches to each other as a team-building exercise, so that the other has to catch them.

“The bamboo was a tangible tool for how we give each other cues or attention on stage. Multi-directional attention is essential, as this is not a pre-choreographed dance, but attention and presence without contradiction was the key to the successful execution of the exercise. Of course, after the initial failures, the master shared some very important ideas. We should focus not on the action, but on the other, just like on stage. For me, the bamboo was a very beautiful tangible expression of how we give and receive cues, attention and real presence from our colleagues, and how we reciprocate it later.”⁴

Rhythmic passing of bamboo/wood around

This is also an exercise in concentration, which is built on teamwork and also works well as a theatrical effect. Stamping to the rhythm and passing the branch around is like an ancient ritual coming to life. The performance also includes music during the exercise, which adds to the magic of the moment, and enhances the effect when the company rebels against the Company Director. They stand around, creating a threatening and ominous presence with their rhythmic drumming. So this is the moment of rebellion.

“This rhythm-based exercise was very easy for me. I did not see any depth in it. However, the master made me sense that the practice was wrong. I did not understand this at all. What can go wrong with a perfectly executed rhythm exercise? My bored face tightened, making it look like an angry man had slammed the bamboo stick to the ground. Then, after stopping for the umpteenth time, the master told us not just to do the task, but to have the intention to do it. Then I understood. What we were doing is not a rhythm exercise. It was more than that. An actor without a purpose on stage is like a robot in a factory. He performs the task with perfect precision, even in the execution, but if the intention itself is not sufficiently deepened in the actor, his existence on stage is completely empty. From then on, I felt that this exercise was also a challenge.”⁵

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

Driving each other

One performer closes his eyes and lets the other take control. It is a confidence game and a test of letting go. The performance is about this, and also about the lack of it, as the members of the company have lost faith in the Company Director and in each other, so they need to find their way back to the ancient core of the theatre, to themselves and to their fellow actors. A further elaboration of this exercise also appears in the performance. In the play, a sentence from *Bánk bán* is repeated several times: "Who is the king?" Here it refers to the fact that someone has to take the lead and lead the company. With Déryné's help, the Company Director is finally able to reunite the company and lead them.

"Unconditional trust. This is reflected in our everyday lives. In road traffic, it is called the "trust principle." I trust my partner, even if I cannot see anything. I trust in his decisions, in his leadership and that whatever bad feelings I have inside, I cannot get hurt. This kind of trust develops in a community of actors who have been working together for many years, during the process of successive rehearsals. However, if someone makes a mistake in a line or misses a beat, they can still be sure that a partner will help them out. The master could sense this in us. Everyone performed the exercise with a high degree of concentration and exceptional attention. Of course we felt the weight of what it means to have the unconditional trust of a colleague."⁶

Rope untying

The members of the team stand in a circle, grab a rope, and knot it around themselves only to later untie themselves by a collective effort. It is very intense teamwork and works as a great visual element, with a meaning that is also obvious and easy to decode: the rope that was knotted together can only be untied together. It is a symbol of team spirit, of togetherness, and of thinking in community. We are one in both hardship and success. This moment is the climax of the play: the team reaches the point where they are able to collaborate again, i.e., they can untangle the tangled threads with the help of the Company Director.

"Once we are on the path of unconditional trust in pairs, we upped the ante with the master's next exercise. For me, the rope symbolised the problems arising in a play and during the rehearsal process, and also the body of the drama itself.

⁶ Ibid.



Picture 4. Viktória Tarpai, Mihály Kaszás, Barnabás Janka, Barnabás Kárpáti, Katalin Losonczí and Tímea Erdélyi in the performance of *Álmaimban Déryné* (In My Dreams, Déryné), Déryné Centre, 5 October 2024. (Source: Déryné Programme, photo: Ocean Productions / Károly Tuszinger)

Of course, every rehearsal process involves constraints and compromises. These are not constraints in a pejorative sense, but rather the fulfilment of the concept of the play. Thus, the director's vision and my vision of the play meet in the resulting production. This can be accomplished through a collaborative work in which the rope is meant to visualise personal relationships, and which can arise in any rehearsal process or activity of performing arts. Despite their human and artistic differences, the actors are driven by one goal: to create something new. It is a symbol of team spirit, of togetherness. Thinking in community. We are one in both hardship and success."⁷

7 Ibid.

Energy ball

The energy ball compressed between two hands is one of the most basic imagination exercises, the basis of everything. The collected, condensed energy can then be sent to friend or foe. In the play, the Company Director directs this exercise, at the end of which one of the actors burst into laughter, causing the others to lose concentration. So, I used this exercise as both an integral part of the text and a trigger of conflict.

“Here the master tried to illustrate for us the existence of an indisputable superior power by a very simple physiological exercise. By the way we shook our hands, only to stop and feel how the oxygen caused a sensation in our hands very similar to numbness, he sought to demonstrate that just as we affect the world, so does the Superior—call it what you will—affect us invisibly, both in life and on stage.”⁸

Theatre as spectacle

The non-realistic forest set of the performance was designed by Kázmér Tóth, who says that “the forest both calms and excites you. Our senses are heightened, for example to different kinds of noise.”⁹ This is the idea behind the system of rolling trees, which suggests both permanence and variability (Kerékgyártó 1997). As the Déryné Company is a travelling theatre, the ability to adapt to changing spaces is an important aspect of the set design. In most cases, we have to hold the performance in venues that are completely unsuitable for theatrical productions. An important professional criterion for me is that quality must not be compromised either in sight or sound. I share this dedication to quality with the company’s artists. For this reason, we designed a set that also functions as a lighting fixture. Thus, I solved the lighting of the performance with so-called internal lighting. It was also important to me to use only LED floodlights, to ensure that the visual world is realised everywhere, even if the venue does not have the power supply to light a typical theatre performance.

The costumes were designed by Nóra Árva, who developed a special dramaturgy for them: at the beginning of the performance, the actors appear in their rehearsal clothes and gradually take on their costumes—and thus their roles.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See <https://deryneprogram.hu/2024/09/13/interju-toth-kazmer> (last visited: October 11, 2024).

They progress from ordinary clothes to costumes evoking *Bánk bán*. The ritual gesture of dressing up has been hidden to draw the viewer into the situation of the actors rehearsing *Bánk bán*. The musical register of the performance was developed by the composer Gábor Kerülő, who created a range of sounds from authentic folk music (the ballad beginning *A fényes nap...* [The Bright Day]) to art song (*Hamvadó cigarettavég* [Smouldering Cigarette], *Manuela*) and computer-composed modern music. While the realistic time of the performance is one night, I strived for a balladic structure because of the changes in space and time, which I have made apparent through the use of lights and smoke machines in addition to the musical effects.

Masks have a very easily coded role in the performance: whenever there is a time jump, when we move from the present to a past moment in the story of the Déryné Theatre, the actors use masks. It is an easily decodable signal that both makes what we see timeless yet past tense, and also ensures that we can jump between time periods in a simple way that the audience can understand.

The play is set in one space, in the forest, and the set changes are achieved by moving the position of the trees, by knocking them down, by setting them up, and at the end, the set is completed: by joining the trees together, the characters create an arcade, a kind of sanctuary, through which Déryné leaves the scene, having completed her mission and saved the company from disintegration.

Conclusion

We have had a very complex rehearsal process that enriched us with experience, and the resulting performance has entailed a lot learning for all the creators and contributors. It was not only the theme choice of the play itself and the workshop with Grzegorz Bral that offered lessons to learn from but also factors such as the fact that the performance had two premieres: a preliminary performance in Sopron and a second premiere a week later in Budapest, at the Déryné Centre. Between the two occasions, I had the opportunity to correct minor mistakes based on feedback about the preliminary show. The actors could achieve a much more relaxed presence at the Budapest performance, because by then they had done the whole show so many times that their routine made them more confident. A production is said to be complete in the fifth or seventh performance after its premiere—we were lucky enough to see a technically and artistically mature performance at the Budapest premiere.

Considering that my dissertation is mainly about the modern cultural funding system of the Déryné Programme, my task was not easy, as there had been no work in the Hungarian dramatic literature to fit this system. This is why I asked György Lukácsy, an artist who is familiar with the Déryné Programme, to write the play. The performance provides a historical overview of the companies formerly run by Róza Déryné Széppataki, as does my dissertation.

An important parallel is the way a Company Director fights with himself, his fellow artists and the audience for the noble goal, which is “theatre for all” in this case. These questions were equally raised in the 1800s, in the era of Róza Déryné Széppataki, in the 1950s and today. The Company Director’s struggles often come across as self-confession, and at other times as fiction, which is why many theatre professionals may relate to the questions raised.

A further parallel between the essay and the master’s project is that both discuss that in all three periods, theatres had to perform on stage in similarly difficult circumstances, and each era had its own difficulties in engaging and holding the attention of the audience. Of course, everyone sees their own problems as the biggest, so, for us, the challenges of our time are the hardest as they are the one that we have to deal with. However, the burden must have been equally heavy in the other two periods.

It is also a coincidence that the company in the play performs in different parts of the country, as the company did in the first period, the second period and the present, i.e., the third period. The only difference is the size of the company, as there was one company in the first period, eleven in the second, and now there are two hundred and seventeen organisations.

The fact of cultural funding can be found in Déryné’s time, as it also exists today, except that then companies were sponsored by patrons while nowadays it is the Hungarian state that supports not only the Déryné Company, but all the organisations participating in the programme.

Álmáimban Déryné (In My Dreams, Déryné), a performance by the Déryné Társulat (Déryné Company)

Written by: György Lukácsy

Directed by: Domonkos Márk Kis

Cast: Viktória Tarpai

Mihály Kaszás

Tímea Erdélyi

Gabriella Gulyás

Kata Losonczi

Barnabás Janka

Barnabás Kárpáti

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