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Institutional Identity and Genre Legitimacy

Pál Gyulai and Ballet in the Discourse
of the National Theatre

Abstract

The study discusses the 19th-century ballet reception in Pest, examining the press reviews of the performances of Claudina Couqui, considering the institutional and cultural status of ballet within the context of the National Theatre (Nemzeti Színház). The analysis is based on a previous and thorough press reconstruction, though it presents the findings in an argumentative manner. It reasons how ballet became the touchstone of national art, moral norms and institutional self-definition. The study highlights how the critical discourse surrounding Claudina Couqui is not purely reflected in aesthetic differences and preferences but equally serves as the basis of norm-defining mechanisms. The conflicts surrounding the reception of the Budapest ballet offer insight into the workings of 19th-century Hungarian cultural life.

Keywords: National Theatre, institutional identity, Pál Gyulai, Claudina Couqui, ballet

Introduction and methodological frame

The reception of ballet in 19th-century Hungary (Vályi 1956a; 1956b) is not solely the history of how a fleeting theatrical genre was received, but also a prominent scene for debates on the topic of the National Theatre's institutional identity, the moral function of art, and the norms of the cultural public sphere. Due to

its unique genre, ballet took a particularly unstable position in the aesthetic and ideological self-definition of the national stage (Pukánszky 1940). It was not built on language, such as plays, and it was not the medium for the institutionalisation of national music, such as opera. Theatrical dance, constantly navigating the threshold of legitimacy, with its critical discourse around it, was at stake and became the central question of “national art” and its boundaries.

This discourse did not function simply as a series of aesthetic judgments. In the mid-19th century, the press emerged as one of the most important norm-setting scenes of the cultural public sphere, where ideas regarding the mission of the National Theatre, the moral role of art, and the hierarchy of various theatrical genres were constantly being redefined. Ballet, since it did not fit into this hierarchy, naturally proved to be a particularly sensitive issue. Dance, being tied to physicality, as a nonverbal form of expression, was in a critical discourse often associated with being a medium of entertainment, spectacle, and sensuality, which had to be redefined according to the national institution’s cultural and moral mission. Reactions to ballet therefore went far beyond the evaluation of performances and led to reassessing the function of the National Theatre and the national cultural framework of institutions.

One of the leading figures in this normative discourse was Pál Gyulai, whose work as a theatre critic carried significant institutional weight during that period (Ajakai and Császtray [eds.] 2018; Angyal 1911; Beke 2017; Kovács 1963; T. Szabó 2021). His writings did not only communicate criticism of personal taste but equally the National Theatre’s cultural mission and its articulation of ideas about the moral horizon of the arts. His ballet criticisms (Gyulai 1863a; 1863b; 1908) sharply illustrate how the characteristics of the genre clashed with the priority of the dramatic plot, character description and the expectations towards national representation. The designated spot for ballet, alongside plays and opera, albeit subordinate to them, did not only appear as an aesthetic but an institutional issue.

The study argues that during Claudina Couqui’s guest performances in Pest (1863, 1864) ballet became a zone of conflict in the context of its press reception, in which the National Theatre’s institutional self-definition, the thoughts around the moral role of art and the norms of the cultural public sphere had to be readdressed. The guest artist’s performances were not simply the place to evaluate the artistic achievements of an outstanding ballerina but were the scene for debates about the status of the art form, regarding its legitimacy and institutional place. In the critical comments, ballet received both remarks of admiration regarding its artistic

achievements and being a problematic form of drama which cannot be legitimised with ease, and whose presence on the national stage constantly requires explanation.

The starting point of this study is the assumption that critical reactions to ballet are not solely aesthetic discernments, but rather documents of the norm-forming mechanisms of the cultural public sphere. Publications in the press did not simply describe the performances, but actively shaped the genre's cultural position and institutional standing. Debates around ballet are thus adept at revealing the mechanisms of 19th-century Hungarian cultural public discourse, as well as the development of expectations and hierarchy of values associated with the National Theatre.

From a methodological point of view, the study of 19th-century dance productions presents unique challenges. Given its performative nature, ballet does not leave behind such fixed primary sources as text-based

genres, meaning that its historical analysis inevitably relies on secondary sources (Boros 2020). In this respect, the contemporary press is not simply a point of reference but works as an interpretive agent. In reviews, descriptions of performances, aesthetic evaluations, and reflections on institutional expectations are thoroughly intertwined (Török 2022). The present study henceforth treats press material not as a chronological reconstruction but as a discursive space in which aesthetic, moral, and institutional perspectives appear in a mutually shaping relationship.

This paper builds on the findings of an earlier study that examines the complete press coverage of Claudina Couqui's performances in Pest (Ujvári 2026),



Image 1. Claudina Couqui around 1863
 (Theatermuseum, Wien, inventory
 number: FS_PV268463alt, <https://www.theatermuseum.at/online-sammlung/detail/582494/?offset=8&lv=list>)

but with a different objective. While the previous work sought to present the historical completeness of critical discourse, this study makes selective use of the sources and reinterprets individual statements in light of the norms defining the National Theatre's institutional self-definition. The emphasis is not on the chronology of performances or as a form of inventory presentation of the reviews, but rather on how ballet is constructed as a problematic genre and how these statements contribute to outlining the boundaries for "national art".

The analysis focuses on critical texts that interpret ballet as part of debates concerning the function and mission of the National Theatre. The study pays particular attention to those statements that define the genre's institutional place and legitimacy from a normative point of view, in particular the writings of Pál Gyulai. In these texts, the ideal of theatre, based on the prevalence of dramatic plot, character portrayal, and moral function, clashes with ballet's visual and body-centred mode of expression. This tension reveals how ballet became one of the most sensitive borderlands of 19th-century Hungarian cultural public life.

Claudina Couqui as a case study

Claudina Couqui's (Cucchi 1904a; 1904b) performances in Pest offer a particularly apt case study of the reception of ballet in Hungary in the mid-19th century, as the artist's performances were not simply the presence of a dancer at the National Theatre but provoked critical reactions that overtly critiqued the institutional and moral status of the genre of ballet. Couqui's performances received focused attention from the press which resulted in a critical discourse on how not to only examine them as a series of isolated remarks but as a web of interconnected remarks. The debates relating to the person of the artist should not be treated as a singular incident but as an increasingly concentrated presence around the structural tension of ballet.

Couqui's stage presence touched upon the National Theatre's self-definition at a sensitive area in many ways. Her performances took place within an institutional context whose cultural mission was described in contemporary discourse primarily through the concepts of national drama, moral education, and cultural-linguistic representation (Gyulai 1863a; 1863b). Ballet, in contrast to this, especially in the case of visiting artists, was difficult to fit into this normative framework: it was not bound by text, did not function on a linguistic medium, and its reception was largely based on visibility, physicality, and the immediacy of the performance.

The performances of Couqui not only pose aesthetic questions but also make visible how the National Theatre can, or indeed cannot, deal with these kinds of genre-based dilemmas.

Immediate press reactions around the artist's performances acutely thematised this alienation. While some critics praised Couqui's technical skill and stage presence, others questioned ballet as a genre being appropriate for the national stage. The focus often shifted from specific assessments of the performances to evaluating the moral and cultural implications of the genre: questions regarding ballet's physicality, spectacle, and emotional intensity were linked to the educability of the audience, the shaping of taste, and the theatre's social responsibility. In this respect, Couqui did not simply become the focus of criticism through her individual performance, but rather became a problematic representative of ballet (Ujvári 2026, 9–15).

The Couqui case illustrates especially aptly how the press functioned as a norm-forming scene in debates regarding ballet. Critics not only reacted to the performances but actively contributed to placing ballet as a genre beyond the threshold of "national art" or on its margin. Critical positions that spoke with institutional authority and normative prerogatives played a decisive role in this process. The discourse surrounding Couqui therefore sets the stage for an examination of how all this was articulated in Pál Gyulai's accounts, in which the medium-specific characteristics of ballet and the National Theatre's moral and institutional expectations clashed most strongly.

Claudina Couqui's performances in Pest and its critical divide

Claudina Couqui's guest performances at the National Theatre in Budapest in 1863 not only marked the debut of a ballerina with an international career, but also set in motion a series of events in which the place and legitimacy of ballet in the public sphere became the subject of open debate. The press had announced the artist's arrival weeks in advance, and her performances were met with heightened anticipation, partly because the Budapest audience were already familiar with Couqui's name thanks to her successes in Vienna. Her presence therefore exceeded a simple guest performance. The artist represented international ballet practice and was performing at an institution whose cultural mission was being intensely redefined at the time.

The Budapest repertoire clearly illustrates the range of genres Couqui represented: *A szerelmes ördög* ('The Devil in Love'), *Giselle*, *Katalin, a rablóvezérnő* ('Catherine the Bandit Queen'), *Robert and Bertram*, as well as *Farsangi kalandok* ('Carnival Adventures'), which had not been performed in Budapest until then. Contemporary critics consistently highlighted her technical proficiency, virtuosity, and expressive control, yet even among these enthusiastic remarks a certain ambivalence was evident. Károly Zilahy, for instance, emphasised grace and lightness, while emphasising a lack of "fire", and criticised Couqui's constant smile as emotionally distant (Zilahy 1860). This remark was not merely read as a criticism of personal taste but as the sign of the effects and mechanisms of ballet and its problematic critical discourse around emotions and morals.

Reviews of the Budapest production of *The Devil in Love* illustrate this ambivalence exceptionally well. According to critics, the visuals, such as scenes of fire and hell and technical effects, on the one hand signalled a growing interest among the audience, but on the other hand instantly raised the need to differentiate between "nobler ballet" and "sense-astounding" dance forms. In the interpretation of *Pesti Napló* ('Pest Journal'), the reception of ballet became an indicator of the development of artistic susceptibility, yet this development was continuously threatened by the threat of a regression to national dances or to entertainment based on sensual appeal (N. N. 1863). Couqui's performance was in this respect not judged in isolation, but within a broader aesthetic and moral hierarchy.

The critical divide is particularly striking in the reception of *Giselle*. Several reviewers described Couqui's performance as an artistic achievement bordering on dramatic expression, emphasising her facial expressions and the authenticity of her portrayal of madness and death. At the same time, even these assessments revealed the tension that separated ballet, as a genre built on visuals and physicality, from the National Theatre's professed moral and educational function (Ujvári 2026, 12–14). Adolf Dux's review raised this problem to the institutional level when he linked ballet's precarious status to the theatre's repertoire-politics and technical conditions (Dux 1863).

The concluding guest performance of the *Farsangi kalandok* ('Carnival Adventures') acutely presented the moral concerns of ballet. The can-can, the sensual movements, and the loose plot structure appeared in critical discourse not simply as aesthetic shortcomings, but as a phenomenon that crossed the line of what was acceptable to discuss in "respectable society". The lavish spectacle and entertaining nature of the piece precisely embodied the mechanism of influence that

made ballet a morally problematic genre in the eyes of Pál Gyulai and his contemporaries (Ujvári 2026, 14–15). Collectively, these critical reactions suggest that Claudina Couqui's performances in Pest were not merely scenes for the assessment of an artistic achievement, but zones of conflict in which the genre-specific characteristics of ballet, the shaping of the audience's taste, and the National Theatre's institutional self-definition all had to be renegotiated simultaneously.

Ballet as a normative problem in the National Theatre

In the mid-19th century, the perception of ballet within the National Theatre was determined not primarily by the quality of individual performances, but by debates over the institution's function. One of the most striking early expressions of this was Mór Jókai's 1856 commentary, which, in an ironic yet incisive tone, posed the question: how exactly do evenings spent watching "foot-twitching" performances contribute to the enrichment of national literature, art, and the Hungarian language, and what role do they play in the moral and aesthetic education of the audience? Here, ballet appears not simply as the subject of an aesthetic objection, but as a normative issue concerning the fundamental mission of the National Theatre (Kakas [Jókai] 1856).

This discourse was consistently present in the press even before Claudina Couqui's guest performances. In 1857, following the Budapest premiere of *Katalin, a rablóvezérnő* ('Catherine the Bandit Queen'), the *Pesti Napló* drew attention to the tensions arising from the coexistence of ballet and prose plays. According to the review, Sunday performances attracted a reliable audience, and for this very reason, the management should have been obligated to schedule "good dramas" on these days, rather than catering to the "easiest-to-please" audience with ballets. Ballet here did not become problematic in and of itself, but rather as a compromise decision by the theatre management, one that catered to the spectator's "dulled senses" (N. N. 1857c).

Similar arguments appeared in the pages of other newspapers. Ballet was described as spectacular but unsuitable for the "hall of art", while pleasing to the eye, could not match the intellectual depth of prose works. The critics' logic is consistent: performances relying solely on visual impact are detrimental in the long run to the reception of serious recitative and dramatic genres, and thus to the National Theatre's moral and educational mission as well. In these statements,

drama consistently appears as the national stage's "primary vocation", while ballet remains at best a tolerated but suspect genre (N. N. 1857a; N. N. 1857b). These normative expectations grew even stronger in the late 1850s. In 1858, the *Vasárnapi Ujság* ('Sunday Paper') repeatedly objected to the fact that ballets were scheduled on consecutive Sundays, while "original dramatic performances" were pushed into the background. The recurring criticism was not directed against individual productions, but rather questioned the programming policy, and through this, the National Theatre's conception of its function (N. N. 1858).

Claudina Couqui's 1863 guest performance in Pest resonated particularly strongly within this already established normative framework. The critic of 'Home-land' defined the National Theatre's fundamental mission as serving the national language, art, morality, and public education, and examined the legitimacy of various genres considering these goals. Although he did not rule out the coexistence of drama, music, and dance in principle, he emphasised that "national" status entails qualitative and moral obligations. It is within this logic that the decision to stage *Farsangi kalandok* ('Carnival Adventures') became problematic twice. The can-can and sensual dance forms appeared in critical discourse not simply as a matter of taste, but as a moral transgression too (X 1863).

In the debates surrounding ballet, a stable set of values emerges, one that regards spectacle, sensory impact, and "hollow entertainment" as incompatible with the mission of the National Theatre (Ujvári 2026, 15–17). Claudina Couqui's performances fit into this pre-structured discourse, and rather than bringing new issues to the surface, they emphasise and make visible the existing normative tensions. It is within this context that the consistency and normative power of Pál Gyulai's ballet critiques can be understood. His writings should not be interpreted as isolated opinions, but rather as part of an institutional and moral discourse that has been taking shape over a long period of time: they are not limited to the aesthetic evaluation of individual performances, but rather demarcate the possibilities for the legitimisation of ballet and the boundaries of the National Theatre's cultural mission.

Pál Gyulai and the normative thresholds of ballet: The case of Claudina Couqui

Pál Gyulai's critiques of Claudina Couqui's guest performance in Pest were not isolated theatre reviews, but rather consistent applications of a comprehensive

approach to dramaturgy and institutional theory. The two essays published in *Koszorú* ('Wreath') in April 1863, which Gyulai later included in his *Dramaturgiai dolgozatok* ('Dramaturgical Essays'), examine the genre of ballet not merely from an aesthetic perspective but embed it within debates concerning the purpose of the National Theatre, the moral function of art, and the norms of the public sphere (Gyulai 1863a; 1863b; 1908). In this respect, Couqui is not only an outstanding guest artist, but a touchstone through which Gyulai clarifies what he considers acceptable, and what he rejects, on the national stage.

Gyulai's critique begins with unequivocal praise. In his view, Couqui, even during her very first performance, "made a much deeper impression on our audience than dancers usually do", and the reason for this impact lay not simply in her virtuoso technical skill, but in her exceptional dramatic expressiveness (Gyulai 1863a). Gyulai emphasises that although famous ballerinas had previously graced the stages of Pest, like the National Theatre, none of them could express "ideas, feelings, in short, an entire dramatic action" through dance, movement, and facial expression to the same degree as Couqui (Gyulai 1863a). This observation is crucial, as Gyulai did not reject ballet as a genre, only its forms which did not meet the expectations of dramatic expression.

At the centre of his thoughts on ballet lies the concept of "dramatic action". He does not evaluate a dancer's performance in isolation, based on technical feats, "neck-breaking figures", or virtuoso jumps, but rather from the perspective of whether it is capable of vividly portraying the human psyche, emotions, and ideas. He does not grasp the difference between ballet and drama in an ontological sense, but rather as a difference in medium. While drama is built on words and speech, ballet conveys narrative through music, dance, facial expressions, and pantomime. These four factors constitute the toolkit through which ballet can rightfully claim artistic status.

Considering this normative expectation, Gyulai's ambivalent yet consistent stance regarding the National Theatre's ballet performances becomes understandable. On the one hand, he makes it clear that the National Theatre's "primary purpose has nothing to do with ballet", and that neither the financial nor the institutional conditions exist for the independent, regular cultivation of the genre (Gyulai 1863a). On the other hand, however, he emphasises that in the case of exceptionally talented artists, it is a duty to recognise their achievements, especially when they represent aspects, such as dramatic expression in this instance, that Hungarian ballet practice had not considered before. In this respect, Couqui

is not a means of legitimising ballet, but rather proof that the genre can only find a place on the national stage under strict conditions.

Gyulai's second review, which focuses on the performance of *Farsangi kalandok* ('Carnival Adventures'), strikes a far more critical tone and, at the same time, clarifies the limits of this system of norms. According to his verdict, the problem with the staged production is "not that it is a bad ballet, but that it is not a ballet" (Gyulai 1863b). In his view, the fundamental problem with the work is the lack of plot. The succession of scenes does not form a coherent dramatic arc, so behind the spectacular sequence of dances "the whole thing makes no sense" (Gyulai 1863b). Gyulai finds it particularly problematic that the cuts and alterations made to the play resulted in a "distasteful compilation" that should not have been listed as a ballet on the National Theatre's program (Gyulai 1863b).

This criticism was not directed at Couqui. On the contrary, Gyulai's reproach stemmed from the fact that the artist's exceptional dramatic abilities could not be realized in this piece. "What could she have expressed, since there was nothing to express?" he writes, making it clear that the cause of the failure lay not with the performer, but in the absence of genre and dramaturgical frameworks (Gyulai 1863b). In Gyulai's reading, *Farsangi kalandok* is nothing more than a loose string of dances, which could have been acceptable at most as a tasteful compilation, but not as a ballet, especially on the national stage.

Gyulai's ballet reviews are organically integrated into his dramaturgical thinking. Its central element is the close unity of plot and characterisation. In his view, true drama cannot do without that internal connection in which the hero's character unfolds through action. He rejects the "cheap sensationalism" of Romantic dramaturgy, the piling up of unexpected twists, and the mere pursuit of effect (Gyulai 1863b). These principles also apply to ballet. The world of fairy tales and fairies is acceptable only if it offers not simply spectacular effects, but a coherent emotional and moral arc.

Considering this system of norms, Couqui's portrayal in *Giselle* and *A szerelmes ördög* ('The Devil in Love') takes on particular significance. According to Gyulai, in these works the ballerina achieved a degree of soft intelligibility and dramatic authenticity unprecedented on the Budapest stage. He specifically praises the death scene in *Giselle*. Couqui portrayed death in a way that remained true to nature while avoiding materialistic sensationalism. In *A szerelmes ördög*, she was able to express the demonic character's nuanced emotional range, from mischief to vengeance and seduction to transformation.

Therefore, for Gyulai, Couqui's art served as a lesson in two respects. On the one hand, it demonstrated that ballet, given the right artistic and dramaturgical conditions, can convey dramatic values. On the other hand, however, it was precisely this exceptional nature that highlighted the structural limitations of the National Theatre. The limited repertoire, the insufficient stock of sets and costumes, and the uncertainty in programming policy, which failed to consistently make use of the artist talents of such calibre.

The press controversies surrounding Couqui further reinforce the image that ballet appeared as a fundamentally contentious genre in 19th-century Hungarian cultural discourse. The stakes of the debates were not whether Couqui was a good dancer, there was hardly any dissent on this point, but rather under what conditions, with what repertoire, and according to what institutional priorities could ballet have had a place on the national stage. The recurring critical tropes, the "sweet hollowness", pure spectacle, and the lack of plot suggested that ballet was judged by the standards of drama, and based on these standards, it consistently fell short.

The ultimate lesson of this long and multifaceted discourse is not the rejection of ballet, but its subordinate, exemplary status. For Gyulai and his contemporaries, ballet could only be acceptable at the National Theatre if it did not violate the superiority of drama, did not withdraw excessive funds, and did not prioritise sensuality at the expense of moral and aesthetic education. The case of Claudina Couqui considering these norms became an emblem of possibilities and displayed the limitations that ballet held. Its art portrayed what the genre could achieve within an ideal setting, while its performances displayed the structural hindrances which the 19th century Hungarian stage did not permit.

The remains of the conflict: Claudina Couqui's 1864 return

Claudina Couqui's return to Budapest in the spring of 1864 was not merely a repetition of the previous year's successes, but also served to reinforce the persistence and structural nature of the normative debates surrounding ballet. This time, the artist performed with a more limited repertoire. Her program included *Farsangi kalandok* ('Carnival Adventures'), *A szerelmes ördög* ('The Devil in Love'), and *Esmeralda*, presented as a new work, yet the tone and stakes of the critical discourse remained fundamentally unchanged. Press commentary continued to

focus not only on evaluating individual performances, but on the question of ballet's institutional place and legitimacy.

A recurring theme in critical reactions was the problematic nature of the program selection (Ujvári 2026, 21–28). Several reviewers expressed bewilderment at the decision to restage *Farsangi kalandok*, and the piece was still not regarded as a true ballet, but rather as a plotless compilation of dances that failed to meet the basic requirements of dramatic expression. These criticisms, however, did not call Couqui's artistic qualities into question. On the contrary, they emphasised that the abilities of an artist of such calibre, including character portrayal, nuanced facial expressions, dramatic gracefulness, could not be fully realised in works built solely on spectacle and visual delight. Critical logic therefore consistently shifted the emphasis towards genre and programming policy. The issue was not the performer, but the institutional framework.

In contrast, *Giselle*, *A szerelmes ördög*, and especially the reception of *Esmeralda*, confirmed the normative expectations, in that ballet can only expect to gain presence on the national stage if it can offer coherent play and character depiction. The reviews highlighted Couqui's facial expressions and acting talent, which conveyed emotional and moral meaning through her nonverbal communication and play. Dance was not a self-indulgent virtuosity, but the "poetry of the body", which, with the right dramaturgical framework, could be understood as an alternate expression of a play. However, alongside this, ballet, being visually oriented and building on sensual appeal, continued to be viewed with suspicion, especially when they were associated with the can-can or other forms of movement that bordered on vulgarity.

A distinctive feature of the press coverage of the 1864 guest performance was the heightened focus on the theatre's technical and institutional conditions. Critics repeatedly noted the



Image 2. Claudina Couqui around 1865, in civilian attire (Theatermuseum, Wien, inventory number: FS_PV216829alt, <https://www.theatermuseum.at/onlinesammlung/detail/612111/?offset=20&lv=list>)

worn-out state of the sets and costumes, the limited ballet repertoire, and the fact that the National Theatre's programming policy failed to actively make use of the presence of an internationally renowned guest artist. These remarks, however, were not intended to strengthen the institution of ballet, but rather to reinforce its limited, exceptional status. Ballet could only be given space to the extent that it did not threaten the superiority of drama and opera.

Therefore, the debates surrounding Couqui did not come to an end in 1864, but rather stabilised. A relatively unified position emerged in the critical discourse. Ballet, as an independent genre, did not belong among the fundamental tasks of the national stage, but in the case of exceptional artistic achievements, which were subject to strict dramaturgical and moral conditions, it was tolerated, and at times even worthy of recognition. In this respect, Couqui's second guest performance in Pest did not generate new conflicts, but rather reinforced the normative framework within which ballet could be situated in 19th-century Hungarian cultural discourse, as a potentially valuable but always problematic and institutionally subordinate genre.

Summary

Claudina Couqui's guest performances in Pest (1863, 1864) and analysis of press reception shed light on how normative ideas regarding the function of the National Theatre and the place of ballet as a theatrical genre took shape in 19th-century Hungarian theatre criticism, crucially in the writings of Pál Gyulai. The Couqui case is not simply the story of the reception of a guest artist, but a conflictual situation in which the institutional, aesthetic, and moral tensions arising from the forced coexistence of drama, opera, and ballet became simultaneously visible.

The study highlights that the reception of ballet at the National Theatre always began from a subordinate position. The superiority of drama was unquestionable, while musical stage genres, especially ballet, could only meet the expectations placed on the National Theatre to a limited extent. The tasks of language cultivation, national literature, and moral education were inherently problematic due to the specific characteristics of the ballet genre, which led to a constant need for the genre to justify itself in critical discourse.

Pál Gyulai's ballet reviews played an important role within this discourse. Although he rarely addressed musical stage genres in his dramaturgical writings, Claudina Couqui's first guest performance in Budapest was an exception. In his

reviews, he not only evaluated individual performances but also articulated a strong stance on the status of ballet and the purpose of the National Theatre. For Gyulai, ballet could only be acceptable if it could portray a dramatic plot. He strongly rejected mere technical virtuosity, spectacle, and the pursuit of sensual effects, especially elements associated with the can-can.

An analysis of the reception of Couqui shows that the dramatic quality of the ballet was a conclusive criterion in Gyulai's evaluation. In the case of *Giselle* and *A szerelmes ördög* ('The Devil in Love'), she measured the artist's acting skills, the richness of her facial expressions, and the nuanced portrayal of emotional states against the performances of the most distinguished actresses. In contrast, regarding *Farsangi kalandok* ('Carnival Adventures'), he emphasised the lack of plot and the "sweet hollowness", and did not even consider the piece a true ballet. He did not spare the prima ballerina either. In his reviews, he reproached her for poor program choices and the squandering of dramatic expressiveness.

The study argues that Gyulai's ballet reviews are an integral part of his dramaturgical thinking. He regarded the unity of dramatic plot and characterisation as a fundamental requirement of the performing arts and extended this principle to ballet as well. For him, dance was not movement for its own sake, but a means of visually expressing states of mind and ideas. Charm, grace, and technical skill only made sense if they served a clear dramaturgical structure.

The reception of Claudina Couqui's performances in Pest, thus offers a model example of how the norm-forming mechanism of the 19th-century Hungarian theatrical public operated. The debates surrounding the ballet did not merely reflect differences in aesthetic taste but were part of a broader discourse concerning the National Theatre's institutional self-interpretation, the boundaries of "national art", and the moral legitimacy of entertainment. Consequently, the Couqui case is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather one of the characteristic areas of conflict in 19th-century Hungarian cultural public life.

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