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Changing Shakespeare? Female Actors — (Fe)Male Characters?

“Art made tongue-tied by authority”: Re-Gendering Prospero and Lear in Contemporary Hungarian Theatre

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ABSTRACT

On the Shakespearean stage, the actress has always been marked by absence or exclusion. She has had to face rigid social expectations which defined her as subordinate to the authority of the playwright and his fellow (male) actors. Shakespearean performances with an all-male cast have been more accepted than all-female productions, especially in those cases, where it seems to be crucial that the main character is a man/husband/father as well. In my paper, I analyse current Hungarian theatre productions in which the tragic protagonist characterised by hegemonic masculinity and agency is played by an actress. My aim is to explore to what extent female casting challenges mimetic performance and whether it can provoke the perception of the viewer, the authority of the playwright, and the (Hungarian) acting and dramatic tradition generally related to Shakespeare. I also discuss how the representation of political power is transformed in cross-gender performances. With reference to some international examples of tragic characters played by women (e.g., Fiona Shaw, 1995; Vanessa Redgrave, 2000; Harriet Walter, 2016), my paper will focus on *The Tempest* by Subotica Theatre, Hungarian Company (2018) and *King Lear* by Csokonai Theatre, Debrecen, Hungary (2019).

KEYWORDS

cross-gender, cross-casting, female casting, Hungarian theatre, *The Tempest*, *King Lear*

RÉSUMÉ

Sur la scène shakespearienne, l'actrice se définit toujours par absence ou exclusion. Elle doit faire face à des attentes sociales rigides qui la définissaient comme subordonnée à l'autorité du dramaturge et de ses camarades acteurs. Les représentations shakespeariennes qui ont une distribution entièrement masculine ont toujours été mieux acceptées que les spectacles à la distribution entièrement féminine, particulièrement dans les cas où il semble crucial que le personnage principal soit également un homme/un mari/un père. Dans mon article, j'analyse les représentations du théâtre hongrois contemporain dans lesquelles le protagoniste tragique, caractérisé par une masculinité hégémonique et une forte autorité, est interprété par une actrice. Mon but est d'explorer dans quelle mesure une distribution féminine met en question une interprétation mimétique, et de savoir si elle peut provoquer la perception du spectateur, l'autorité du dramaturge et la tradition théâtrale et dramatique (hongroise) généralement reliée à Shakespeare. Je soulève aussi la question de savoir comment la représentation du pouvoir politique est transformée dans des spectacles à la distribution inversée. En se référant à des exemples internationaux de personnages tragiques interprétés par des actrices (Fiona Shaw en 1995, Vanessa Redgrave en 2000, Harriet Walter en 2016, par exemple), mon article portera sur *The Tempest* par la compagnie hongroise Subotica Theatre (2018) et *King Lear* par le Csokonai Theatre de Debrecen (2019).

MOTS-CLÉS

distribution inversée, distribution féminine, théâtre hongrois, *La Tempête*, *Le roi Lear*

In English theatre, cross-gender performances have a long tradition which has a historical reason. The fact that in early modern theatre female roles were played by young boys has an impact on how we look at gender and casting in contemporary Shakespearean theatre, When discussing the historical context of cross-dressing in early modern England Jean E. Howard underlines that wearing the clothes of the other sex disturbed the stability of social order and gender struggles were displayed on clothes.[1] However, cross-dressing was not interpreted on equal terms: wearing female garment for a man was seen as shameful, while a woman dressed as a man signified uncontrolled sexuality and a threat to society.[2] Since the discursive construction of the two sexes in early modern England were different, women who wore men's apparel produced social anxiety.[3]

This historical concern can partly explain that all-male performances and men in the role of women in Shakespeare's plays on the English stages are more accepted than women playing the role of men. Due to early modern theatrical traditions and the connected "original practices", actors playing female roles as well as all-male productions are historically justified, they are the part of cultural memory and theatre history. After remarkable attempts of actresses such as Sarah Siddons, Charlotte Cushman or Sarah Bernhardt, significant female Shakespearean performances in the 20th century started to emerge (and stir up critical response) only after Deborah Warner's *Richard II* with Fiona Shaw in 1995. Warner's staging at the National Theatre caused harsh critical controversy probably because casting a woman in a major Shakespearean role is more provocative on a national stage than in an experimental production. Shaw's acting also created anxiety because the gender of her character was undefinable: critics alternatively labelled it "a homosexual male", "dyke", "an adolescent boy" or "a man-child".[4]

Since the 1980s, the reason for actresses playing male roles in Shakespearean plays is underscored by various circumstances. One of them is the lack of job opportunities for women in theatre not only in the leading roles, but also in artistic or stage directors' positions.[5] Another aspect is the changing perspective on gender roles, identity, and the Shakespearean canon. In other words, the favourable reception of female casting and cross-gender performances in different theatrical cultures depends on cultural-historical legacy, dramatical traditions and practices as well as the position of Shakespeare in the literary canon.

The most famous examples of cross-gender performances on the English stage were collected and analysed by Elizabeth Klett. In her book *Wearing the Codpiece: Cross-Gender and English National Identity* (2009), she discusses performances between 1995 and 2009, and convincingly argues that female casting is treated with doubt since it is assumed to threaten Shakespeare's authority and English national identity.[6] At the same time, the remarkable endeavours Klett writes about do not necessarily concur with a radically different dramaturgy or acting style. Most performances remain within the realm of classical acting: based on a thorough knowledge of Shakespearean poetry and the examination of the characters' psyche/motivations, acknowledged actors play major Shakespearean roles. Female performances seem to respect the classical dramatic tradition and do not dare to challenge Shakespearean acting perhaps this way they claim to be legitimate successors of great (male) actors. Also, apart from some invigorating exceptions, in their concept, these performances remain traditional and protest against being labelled feminist theatre or involved in political or gender issues. However, it is beyond doubt that re-gendering or cross-gendering in theatre is a political act in itself especially if it concerns national drama.

I agree with Sarah Werner who—when writing about feminist approaches to Shakespearean acting—makes a very important observation: voice work, which is the key of classical actors' training "sets up a falsely universal notion of character that relies on a male norm of interpretation, ignoring the problems that character reading has for Shakespeare's female roles".[7] Voice work is thus quite ambivalent from a gendered perspective because, on the one hand, it is seen as a female territory given how its theorist and teachers were mostly women, but on the other hand, it is subordinated to (male) directors and the author as its serves the text, the very source of understanding and accessing the character's psyche to be played by an actor.[8] This might explain why Shakespearean actresses are willing to play as if they were their own male counterparts and why such performances insist on being neutral, ideology-free and concentrating purely on so called neutral universality and eternal human values.

In my paper, I am interested in what female casting can challenge or offer in cases when male rulers (not just any roles) are played by actresses, and whether they include any feminist perspective or intention. I will analyse contemporary Hungarian Shakespeare productions in which the tragic protagonist is played by an actress. The reason why I chose Prospero from *The Tempest* (Subotica Theatre, Hungarian Company, 2018) and *Lear* (Csokonai Theatre, Debrecen, 2019) is not only that on Hungarian stages, there are rare examples of cross-gender casting in the main roles, but also because of my interest in the possible transformation of political power in a play where male authority is given to a female actor. Moreover, I want to examine whether cross-gender performance challenges mimetic acting, the perception of the viewer and the authority of the playwright and if it affects the Hungarian acting/dramatic tradition generally connected to Shakespeare.

But before I expound the Hungarian context in contemporary Shakespearean performances, as a way of comparison I would like to indicate what actresses in the English-speaking world think of playing leading male roles and Shakespearean theatre. Harriet Walter (acknowledged actress working with the Royal Shakespeare Company from the 1980s) in her article in *The Guardian* writes about the opportunities of middle-aged actresses and the proportion of male and female roles in Shakespearean plays. As she puts it, her Shakespearean acting life has been mercifully extended by the 2016 Donmar Warehouse staging of two Shakespeare plays with an all-female cast directed by Phyllida Lloyd. "Shakespeare's words empower the speaker, and it is a wonderful novelty for us to feel that power (and responsibility) and to hear our own and other female voices speaking mighty verses about freedom, leadership, destiny etc.".[9] She also adds that the all-female Donmar adaptations she plays in gives voice to the voiceless in many different ways, and with an all-women cast, one can "look beyond gender to our own humanity", because "Shakespeare expressed this humanity better than anyone".[10]

Another example is Lisa Wolpe, the leader of Los Angeles Women's Shakespeare Company, who—in an interview with Terri Power—draws a trajectory from a love of Shakespearean poetry to playing male roles as a part of her work in order to reach empowerment of women and diversity on the stage. At the same time, she contradictory claims that the gender question is only a part of the job, it is not in the focus of her work.[11] Beyond the mission of creating performances outside the heteronormative spectrum, it is interesting to note that she plays major male characters dressed as a man while her interpretation of these characters is rather conventional and text-based.

A further remarkable experiment was Adjoah Andoh's *Richard II* (co-directed with Lynette Linton) in Shakespeare's Globe, Sam Wanamaker Playhouse in 2019. Andoh has explained her approach to the play and the role in several interviews, and what I find interesting is the way she

resolutely refuses a possible feminist interpretation and the gender aspect of the performance: "So, no playing gender. We just needed to think about who this human being is […] I didn't want us to think about male or female, because who goes around thinking about that? […] I wanted us simply to play the person".[12] If we look at the play, however, it cannot be denied that being the first company of women of colour on a major UK stage has political/ideological significance as well. So, the question is why these artists when explaining their work intend to keep a careful distance from the idea which is the core to their mission?

In the examples I am going to discuss below, there is also hardly any admitted or direct sign of feminist theatre or political purpose, however, the cultural atmosphere in which Hungarian theatre is presently set is deeply politicised. Consequently, in my approach, I need to refer both to the status of Hungarian theatres and the dramatical-historical tradition which affects how cross-gender performance or cross-casting is considered or seen. In Hungarian theatre history, breeches roles existed mainly in the 19th-century entertaining genres such as the opera or the operetta. Lujza Blaha (1850-1926) or Sári Fedák (1879-1955) celebrated actresses of the era regularly playing male characters which—since they wore skin-tight pants and costumes bringing out their curvy figure—was a real pleasure for the male gaze. At the beginning of the 20th century, breeches roles started to disappear.

Contemporary Hungarian repertoire theatres (especially out of Budapest) work rather conventionally, they produce classical plays with standard characterising and dramaturgical interpretation. Classics are played with modesty, predominantly following the track of psychological realism. The artistic concept is created by the director, consequently collective creation is rare and unique, the actors' ideas remain inferior. As for cross-casting and gender issues, especially since the so called "anti-LGBT law"[13] was approved by the Parliament in 2021, theatres are extremely cautious with their artistic decisions. This results in outdated repertoires, in lack of contemporary plays and in elimination of progressive tendencies in state theatres.[14]

Alternative companies and ensembles—which, in Hungary means theatres not funded by the government but eligible for grants or supported by civic patronage—are more experimental in every sense, however, they continuously have infrastructural and financial difficulties meaning lesser numbers and variety of performances.[15] So, on the whole, cross-casting is not a novelty in 21st-century Hungarian theatre, but it is a sensitive topic, so much so that one can hardly ever see gender-swapping or cross-casting especially in a classical plays.[16] Shakespeare is definitely a classical and canonized author, his plays have been much respected and frequently played from the 19th century on, and major Shakespearean roles like Hamlet, Lear or Othello were the peaks of some renowned actors' careers such as Tamás Major (1910-1986) or Miklós Gábor (1919-1998).

This is why it is interesting that recent Hungarian stage productions experiment with casting actresses in leading roles. The main themes in both *King Lear* and *The Tempest* are political power, authority, and aging. Lear and Prospero are rulers whose personal actions and public deeds are motivated by the loss of their high status. My main questions are whether Hungarian cross-gender performances can challenge mimetic theatre or alter the reception of the viewer, and whether it changes how political power is represented on stage. I was also interested to what extent such performances can be subversive or progressive in theatrical and political terms.

The Tempest directed by György Hernyák starred Natália Vicei, the leading actress of the Hungarian Company of Subotica Theatre. The location might be significant in this case, because

although the ensemble belongs to Subotica Theatre in Serbia, they form an autonomous (Hungarian) artistic community. Nevertheless, not only are they more independent from the institutionalised theatre system of Hungary, but they are also on the margin of the attention of the Hungarian cultural politics which implies that they do not need to fulfil alleged or concrete political expectations.

The script of Hernyák's *The Tempest* was based on Ádám Nádasdy's modern translation, and the performance itself was rather short, 1 hour 40 minutes in time. In terms of genre, it was defined as a "comic-tragedy with music" as the director put significant accent on the comic scenes and effects, the songs, and the background music. Direct humour was involved: for instance, in the first scene, Ariel appears in spotlight while doing a pantomime and some tap dance, and soon after provides a professional weather forecast signalling the forthcoming storm. The text contains several additional passages from other Shakespearean texts: Caliban, for instance, recites *Richard III*'s opening monologue in the last act to Prospero, and Ariel says goodbye to the audience with *Sonnet 66*. These passages make the atmosphere dark and morose, while jokes and improvisational episodes strengthen the entertaining effect. These features and directorial decisions, however, do not explain why the role of Prospero is given to Natália Vicei.

The production uses grotesque and unexpected elements in its dramaturgy and concept. Since it is a short staging, events follow in rapid succession. Ariel, by announcing which act is coming seems to urge the events. Beside the references to other Shakespearean plays, Hungarian folk music, additional lines, and passages from Hungarian poetry are added to the playscript. Ariel (Ervin Pálfi) is not an airy spirit here, but a cynical master of ceremony wearing a bowler hat. He frequently announces which act is coming and communicates with the audience directly. He makes ironic comments regarding the actions, and he is on stage almost during the whole play. Although he is invisible for the other characters, his presence for the audience is very dominant emphasised by his songs, jokes, jigs and dances. In a sense, it seems that instead of Prospero, he is the central character in the play.

Saša Senković, the creator of the scenery placed a large tree laid horizontally in the centre which had several functions, but in most scenes, it symbolises the desolation and the loneliness of the main character, Prospero. Besides, the whole (bare) stage represents a desert land which can be associated with Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and in the play, the gestures of waiting and disappointment also become crucial elements. The stage is always in semi-darkness occasionally lit up and disturbed by sharp flashes and sparkles. The scenery represents Prospero's seclusive behaviour as well as her physical distance from the other characters. It is mostly Ariel who interferes with the others. The protagonist here is shown as a rather introvert figure which might have to do with the fact that she is a woman and a mother.

As Eckart Voigts points out, *The Tempest* is conventionally a masculine play with Prospero representing a father, a magician, an author and a colonizer.[17] This is strengthened by some very famous interpretations by Giorgio Strehler (1948), Peter Greenaway (1991) and Stefan Pucher (2007). The best-known female "Prospera" was performed by Helen Mirren in Julie Taymor's 2011 film, which was probably the culmination of earlier attempts such as, for example, Vanessa Redgrave in the New Globe (2000).[18]

Directed by Lenka Udovicki, the Globe production with Redgrave was intended to be authentic and historical. Redgrave did not play a female Prospero, but her stage presence was androgynous and complex. She simultaneously represented authority, generosity, sentiment, and power. She "did not make any effort to walk like a man. Nor did she attempt to sound

authentically masculine; she lowered her voice a bit to achieve a deeper sound".[19] The significance of the performance was that it was set in the Globe, which definitely stressed the play's strong connection to the English theatrical tradition as well as to Shakespeare's canonized position as a national playwright. Helen Mirren in the film, however, played a mother and a duchess, thus, altering the dynamics of the parent-child relationship in the plot further. She left the Milanese throne after her husband died, being accused of witchcraft. With this altered backstory, Taymor offered "a feminist critique of patriarchal power."[20]

The Subotica Theatre production, to some extent recalls Taymor's film, because although the original name Prospero is kept, Vice plays a woman and appears as a mother. Other characters refer to her as a "rough woman" or a "silly cow", which is rather humiliating, but it quite suits the depiction of the character. Her appearance does not suggest power or authority, she is small, weak and short-haired. She wears ragged clothes, a hooded jacket and fingerless gloves with the impression that she is a solitary vagabond, not a ruler. After the tempest in Act 1, she mops the floor carefully. At the same time, she refers to herself as "the Duke of Milan", but she is not sublime or imposing at all.

The whole play is centred around Prospero's personal connections and pain over the loss of her family relationships. The grief and the anger she feels and expresses is not for losing the land, but an expression of being deeply disappointed with her brother who betrayed her. Miranda (played by Andrea Verebes) is a childish and naïve young teenager who shares several private moments with her mother. Prospero—since she is the only one her daughter can rely on—is a caring parent who imprisons Caliban mainly because he had tried to rape Miranda, not because Prospero wants to enslave him. She protectively wants to keep the painful events of the past a secret for her daughter, and when family history is eventually revealed, the audience can see a mother cherishing her child who had to grow up without a real family.

Another act of protection is that as soon as she discovers Miranda falling in love with Ferdinand, she feels betrayed as a mother, not as a ruler, and becomes furious because she does doubt Ferdinand being an ideal candidate for her daughter. The presentation of the relationship between Miranda and Ferdinand fits this idea, because although Miranda is honestly surprised by the appearance of men on the island, her interest is not spiritual or compassionate at all. When she first meets Ferdinand—who is obviously a womaniser here—he woos her in Italian, and they immediately have overheated feelings towards each other. Later in a comic and prankish episode—in which Miranda suddenly becomes very self-assured and conscious about what she wants—, they finally seduce each other with Ariel's invisible assistance providing romantic music and gently directing their movements. After briefly commenting on the scene ("sexual education is done") and confining them in a shelter, Ariel, while loudly imitating the sounds of their lovemaking, leaves them alone.

It seems that Miranda's rebellion against her mother as well as their only conflict in the play is mainly motivated by her attraction towards the young prince.[21] When Prospero realises that Miranda and Ferdinand were involved in an intimate relationship, she gets furious, and they have a very heated argument. She blames Ariel and herself for her previous deeds which led here, but it is obvious that she is desperate as a mother, not as a duke. She breaks her wooden staff right after this episode, which is neither a pathetic moment nor a political act, then she collapses as her daughter comforts her. At the end of the scene, she offers Miranda to Ferdinand for marriage although still worried about the prospect and tries to escape the situation very clumsily. This is not a pathetic moment either, but a comical one.

In his play, Prospero's relationship with Ariel is also quite personal. Ariel is not only a servant, but apparently, he is the only person (moreover, a man) whom Prospero, as a lonely woman can rely on. Although she single-handedly tries to control her whole environment, she is not able to do so, and needs (male) support. At the same time, she attempts to rule over him many times: for instance, she does not let him smoke, but then in the final scene, they have a cigarette together. In their last scene, when the master liberates her servant, they hug each other, and because of the sudden intimacy of the moment, the situation becomes embarrassing for both of them.

1. Ervin Pálfi (Ariel) and Natália Vicei (Prospero) in *The Tempest* (2018).
Crédits. With the permission of Subotica Theatre, Hungarian Company.
Photograph by Attila Kovács.

Ariel disappears very quickly, but he returns in the last scene when Prospero, after forgiving her enemies, almost commits suicide with a rope she prepared for his enemies. They have a conversation about the destructive power of ruling and say goodbye. Thus, the finale is not ceremonial or solemn, but bitter and depressing. As an eventually abandoned mother, Prospero almost destroys herself, but since Ariel is still there, she changes her mind.

As reviews of Hernyák's *The Tempest* also note, the choice of Prospero being played by an actress is more of an interesting detail than a directorial intention with a direct message. Vicei definitely plays a vengeful woman who shows more anger than wisdom.[22] She does not have a magic wand and rarely refers to her previous studies, her only treasure is her daughter. She does not analyse the events or shares her knowledge, instead she concentrates on her personal loss and revenge. Vicei's acting is classical, but moderate and sensitive, she hardly ever raises her voice. The concept does not explain why an actress was chosen to play Prospero, and there is no sign

of any political message either. Being the leading actress of the company, Vicei's stage presence is charismatic, but it is overshadowed by Ariel's much more dominant stage presence. So, there is a woman Prospero who loses her reign and finally her daughter as well, then returns to her land, but, in fact, no one really cares or pays attention to it all.

2. Natália Vicei (Prospero) in *The Tempest* (2018).
Crédits. With the permission of Subotica Theatre, Hungarian Company.
Photograph by Attila Kovács.

Ariel concludes with *Sonnet 66*: "And art made tongue-tied by authority, / And folly (doctor-like) controlling skill, / And simple truth miscalled simplicity, / And captive good attending captain ill" (9-12).[23] Even if the last two lines are missing, the audience is left in contemplation, there is no relief.

Lear premiered in 2019 in Debrecen Csokonai Theatre and was directed by Ilja Bocharnikovs. Debrecen (after Budapest) is the second biggest town in Hungary, and its theatre—just like in the case of other rural towns—mainly serves educational and entertaining purposes. Regular repertoire in such theatres include classical plays, musicals, operettas, and youth programmes for students. The director's concept, just like in the case of *The Tempest* discussed earlier, puts the mother figure and the parent-child relationship into the limelight. The dramaturg András Kozma used the 19th-century canonical translation by Mihály Vörösmarty as well as more contemporary versions by Miklós Mészöly, András Forgács and Ádám Nádasdy. In the text, Lear is referred to as a king, however, Anna Ráckevei, the leading actress of Csokonai Theatre, played a female ruler. Also, the role of the Fool and Oswald (Goneril's steward) is given to actresses, Fool being played by a woman has a long theatrical tradition,[24] so it is not surprising that it does not have a special relevance here, however, it changes the relationship between (female) Lear and her clown. They seem to be close friends at certain points, but at the peak of her black despair, Lear loses control and throttles her Fool who is her last connection to normal life and sanity.

The stage is rather dark during the whole play, and characters wear black and grey costumes. The exception is Cordelia, who is dressed in white from the beginning, but later, as the consequences of her decisions become clear, Lear gets a white gown as well. In the first scene, when the ruler divides her land between her daughters, the central prop on the stage is a table which also looks like a large double bed. The map is replaced with a double bed sheet (or

perhaps a blanket) which, at a certain point, Lear tears apart. This symbolizes the lost unity of the family, the corruption of the place of birth and the home. Later the same sheet is blown away by the wind in the storm. There is tense electronic music in the background which becomes more intense as the events progress.

Most of the reviews point out the lack of direct explanation or suggestion why an actress was chosen to play Lear. They highlight the dramaturgy's focusing on the parent-daughter relationship, viciousness, and indignity, however, this itself does not prove explanation for the choice.[25] Indeed, the concept remains neutral and weightless, it lacks political concerns and aspects. It is not made clear why Lear divides the kingdom, and their daughters do not seem to be greedy for wealth in the first place, they are driven by their desire to move far away from their despotic mother. As the plot is reaching its climax, the older daughters turn more and more despotic seemingly in direct consequence of what temperament they inherited from their mother and how they had been treated by her.

The dynamics of family relationships are definitely different as Lear is a mother here. In his interviews the director Ilya Bocharnikovs made it clear that his intention was to show toxic parental behaviour, ignoring King Lear's political themes. Relying on his own personal experiences, he wanted to make a play about the strong, dynamic, and painful emotions between a mother and her children. Thus, Lear in the play is an abusive mother harassing her daughters who are apparently afraid of her. This is made obvious at the outset of the play, when the land is divided, and the daughters must confess their love to their mother. Goneril and Reagan tell their speeches with rigid, anxious faces and gestures. As soon as they had done their parts, they look relieved as if the confession of their affection was merely a painful way to escape their mother's proximity. It is only Cordelia who tries to behave sincerely, alas, merits punishment and cruelty.

In this interpretation, rudeness and aggression are dominant in each character's behaviour. In the first scene, when Lear crudely disowns and disinherits Cordelia, the older sisters display honest worry and pity for their youngest sibling which suggests empathy based on experiencing a similar ill-treatment earlier. However, after receiving land and power, Goneril and Reagan transform from fearful to vengeful, angry characters increasingly cruel to their mother and to each other as well. Thus, the major cause for Lear's decline in the play is her pain, disappointment, and ultimately her failure as a mother, not the loss of her realm. Act 1 ends with Lear running up and down desperately on stage between Reagan to Cordelia while cursing the heavens.

After the storm scene (III.2), the four women appear as a family in a flashback vision of the past, Lear seeing her daughters as they were when small children. This is an idyllic episode with toys, games, a playground, some laughter, nostalgia, and soft piano music in which the young girls are competing for Lear's maternal attention and affection. Already, in these flash-back childhood scenes we can detect the signs of hierarchy, reward, and penalty indicating to the audience the reasons why parent-child relationship could have deteriorated. Behind the harmonious setting, there is a presentiment that intense situations within the family rooted in the past, and there is an emotional distance between the mother and her daughters. So, it is no surprise that in the first scene when the daughters must admit how much they love their mothers they seem frustrated and scared.

As it is argued by Kate Aughterson and Ailsa Grant Ferguson, in *King Lear*, Shakespeare "deconstructs the father-ruler" who loses patriarchy and parentage at the same time.[26] In

Bocharnikovs' *Lear*, however, authority is displayed in a different way, since there is no gender hierarchy between the mother and her daughters. What we see is parental and social hierarchy and the tyranny of a woman. In probably the most famous female stage interpretation of *Lear*, the protagonist was played by Kathryn Hunter directed by Helena Kaut-Howson in 1997. This production was affirmed to be "completely genderless" in which it was managed to switch the focus from gender to age.[27] For both the director and the actress the production was rather personal, but the production wanted to lay stress on the "universal meanings" of the play. Yet, with her physical and vocal performance, Hunter, as Klett remarks, managed to show a multifaceted and composite character which was androgynous, but not genderless, and destabilized both masculinity and femininity.[28]

When she was asked about the character, Ráckevei said that for her as an actress it did not really matter that Lear is a male role, because in the first place, he is a human being. She also added that the play represents the complexity of human nature with all its extremes, and the central figure is a strict and initially rational person whose decisions later become emotional, and thus, necessarily misguided and fails. In *Lear*, there is character development as well, because finally, the king is able to show regret and apologizes to Cordelia.[29]

As for her appearance, Ráckevei's Lear, with her short, slicked back hair and long black gown, is rather masculine. She is unquestionably a mother and a queen, strong-minded and strict in all of her functions. Her emotions on stage include anger, despair and regret, but she never seems to be too gentle or caring to anyone. Ráckevei's acting is passionate and emotional, she uses wide gestures and apparently concentrates on the clear articulation of Shakespeare's poetry. She uses vivid facial expressions, when she needs to put accent on an emotion, she makes her eyes wide open and stares tensely at the audience.

3. Anna Ráckevei (Lear) in *Lear* (2019).
Crédits. With the permission of Debrecen Csokonai Theatre.
Photograph by András Máté.

She often grabs her head while shouting thus emphasising the outburst quality of her voice. She shows how her heart breaks (I.4) with putting her palm on her chest while her body twitches as if she had real physical pain. With the soliloquies, she addresses the spectators. Her acting, at several points, recalls the romantic theatrical tradition of the 19th century which is in contrast with the production's modern scenery and gloomy atmosphere. The electronic music between

the scenes, the bizarre costumes, and some unusual objects on stage (a piano, for instance) create a modern vision in which this conventional, stylized acting is out of place, and hence, foregrounded. It seems as if the actress aimed at following some unwritten rules meriting the poetic text of Shakespeare.

4. Anna Ráckevei (Lear) in *Lear* (2019).
Crédits. With the permission of Debrecen Csokonai Theatre.
Photograph by András Máté.

As a conclusion it can be stated that in the examples discussed, there is nothing specific or political about the artistic/creative intention or the choice of an actress, it is rather a matter of curiosity. Due to the strict theatrical canon, cross-gender (Shakespeare) performances in Hungary are not only rare, but they do not facilitate any political or radically feminist interpretation. Re-gendering strengthens the norm and ensures that Shakespearean plays can remain within the well-known and comfortable mimetic setting. Even if there is the opportunity to reflect on the gender aspect of cross-casting or to challenge the ideas of femininity and masculinity, character interpretation and acting are kept in habitual framework. In *The Tempest* and the *Lear,* I discussed, male characters are acted and understood as if they were women, and their womanness is accentuated by bringing their personal narratives, emotions and the loss of their high status into the foreground. This proves how difficult it is to rewrite gender norms on the Hungarian stage, and also the way it looks at Shakespeare.

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Notes

[1] Jean E. Howard, "Cross-dressing, the Theatre and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England", in Lesley Ferris (ed.), *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing*, London and New York, Routledge,1993, p. 23.

[2] Jean E. Howard, *op. cit*., p. 25.

[3] On Mary Frith and "the gender enigma" in Renaissance England, see Lesley Ferris, "Introduction: Current Crossings", in Lesley Ferris (ed.), *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing*, London and New York, Routledge,1993, p. 5-8.

[4] Elizabeth Klett, *Cross-Gender Shakespeare and National Identity: Wearing the Codpiece*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 33.

[5] An impressive selection of texts and interviews about the engagement of women with Shakespeare is collected in Gordon McMullan, Lena Cowen Orlin and Virginia Mason Vaughan (eds.), *Women Making Shakespeare: Text, Reception, Performance*, London, Bloomsbury, 2014.

[6] Elizabeth Klett, *op. cit*., p. 29.

[7] Sarah Werner, *Shakespeare and Feminist Performance: Ideology on Stage*, London and New York, Routledge, 2001, p. 19.

[8] Penny Gay, "Changing Shakespeare: New Possibilities for the Modern Actress", in Maggie B. Gale and John Stokes (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Actress*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 321.

[9] Harriet Walter, "On the Donmar stage, all Shakespeare's players are women", *The Guardian* (15 October 2014). **URL**. Accessed 3 May 2023.

[10] *Ibid*.

[11] Terri Power, *Shakespeare and Gender in Practice*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 166-171.

[12] Kate Aughterson and Ailsa Grant Ferguson, *Shakespeare and Gender: Sex and Sexuality in Shakespeare's Drama*, London, Bloomsbury, "The Arden Shakespeare", 2020, p. 70-71.

[13] Jennifer Rankin, "Hungary passes law banning LGBT content in schools or kids' TV", *The Guardian* (15 June 2021). **URL**. Accessed 15 February 2024.

[14] In a recent article, Judit Csáki, a leading Hungarian theatre critic analysed the repertoire of Hungarian state theatres in 2023/2024. She came to the conclusion that, despite the numerous new plays written, there are still not enough contemporary dramas on Hungarian stages, and the scene is haunted by the spirit of the 19th-century. See Judit Csáki, "Hányat írunk? Hol élünk? A kőszínházak bemutatói a 2023/2024-es évadban", *Revizor Online* (4 October 2023). **URL**. Accessed 18 February 2024.

[15] The situation and the status of Hungarian independent theatres is appropriately summarised by theatre critic Tamás Jászay. See Jászay Tamás, "Finita la Commedia: The Debilitation of Hungarian Independent Theatre (Hungary)", *Critical Stages/Scènes Critiques* (n°8, June 2013) (2013). **URL**. Accessed 18 February 2024.

[16] A recent example of cross-casting in a national drama was *The Tragedy of Man* directed by Kriszta Székely (Katona József Theatre, 2023) in which both Lucifer and God were played by actresses. According to my knowledge, this has never happened on Hungarian stages before. The reason that this is approved is that—just like in the case of Shakespeare's clowns—the biological sex of these roles is not as significant as their function.

[17] Eckart Voigts, "A Theatre of Attraction: Colonialism, Gender, and *The Tempest*'s Performance History", in Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan (eds.) *The Tempest: A Critical Reader*, London, Bloomsbury, "The Arden Shakespeare", 2014, p. 39.

[18] *Ibid*., p. 52.

[19] Elizabeth Klett, *op. cit*., p. 99.

[20] Virginia Mason Vaughan, "'Miranda, where's your mother?': Female Prosperos and What They Tell Us", in Gordon McMullan, Lena Cowen Orlin and Virginia Mason Vaughan (eds.), *Women Making Shakespeare, op. cit.,* p. 350. On Helen Mirren's Prospera, see also Elizabeth Klett, *op. cit*., p. 87-114.

[21] Sándor Fazekas, "Vihar Gyulán", *Bárka Online* (25 July 2019). **URL**. Accessed 12 March 2024.

[22] Balázs Urbán, "Varázspálca nélkül", *Színház.net* (9 May 2019). **URL**. Accessed 12 March 2024.

[23] William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 66", in John Dover Wilson (ed.), *The Sonnets: The Cambridge Dover Wilson Shakespeare* (3rd ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 35.

[24] Penny Gay, *op. cit*., p. 317.

[25] See Gerda Seres, "Mindegy, hogy melyik nem?", *Színház.net* (8 May 2019), Accessed 1 March 2024, **URL** or Gábor Bóta, "Embertelenség", *Népszava* (15 September 2019), **URL**. Accessed 1 March 2024.

[26] Kate Aughterson and Ailsa Grant Ferguson, *op. cit*., p. 153-154.

[27] Elizabeth Klett, *op. cit*., p. 58.

[28] *Ibid*., p. 71.

[29] "Női Lear királlyal találkozhatnak a debreceniek a Csokonai Színházban", *Dehir.hu* (8 March 2019). **URL**. Accessed 1 March 2024.

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