

Balázs Véghelyi

Literature and art in the cabaret of
Pest

Thesis booklet



Pázmány Péter Catholic University
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Doctoral School of Literature
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I. Background to the research, problem definition

The cabaret of Pest was first staged in the first year of the 20th century, on 16 November 1901, on the Nagymező Street stage of the Budapest Orfeum. However, the Tarka Theatre Company did not achieve the success that would have ensured its long-term operation: it only managed six performances in Hungarian. This failure occurred despite the fact that it featured well-known actors of the time, and the authors Pista Dankó, Géza Gárdonyi, Jenő Heltai, Ferenc Herczeg, Jenő Huszka and Ferenc Molnár, among others, were all committed to the cause of cabaret, which at the time was primarily aimed at creating Hungarian-language theatrical entertainment. It was not to be continued until 1907. This was the time when the Cabaret Bonbonnière and the Modern Theatre Cabaret were created, which were already operating with much greater success and a noticeable social impact.

The aim of my dissertation is to record the development of the cabaret in Pest up to the First World War, to examine its literary and musical characteristics, its public reflections, the relationship between the stage and the audience, and to determine the artistic and social significance of the early Hungarian cabaret.

As only educational summaries have been published on the subject, I would like to fill the gap in the literature.

In the introduction to my thesis, I formulated four basic questions:

1. What is the significance of the cabaret in the history of Hungarian culture?
2. What are the interactions between cabaret and the social conditions of the time?
3. What role did cabaret play in the work of the major artists of the period?
4. How does cabaret work (in other words: how does it make in impact)?

These were the questions I was mainly looking for answers to in my research.

II. Research methodology

My dissertation is basically a cultural history approach, so I tried to outline the events of genre history in a historical and literary history context, but I also considered the theoretical analysis of the topic important: I examined the Hungarian cabaret of the turn of the century primarily in terms of theories of humour, the relationship between the verbal and the literary, the encounter of registers, and the representation of urban space, illustrating and

supporting the historical data and theoretical theses with quotations from cabaret texts.

Cabaret is typically a combination of stage productions that use humour to great effect. Among the theories of humour, I have mainly taken as a basis the relevant studies of contemporary Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson, *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*, and *The Laugh*, comparing their main theses and groupings with the humour-inducing mechanisms of the productions performed in cabaret. I also consider it essential to examine the general nature of the Pest jokes that form the basis of cabaret humour, since their influence can be seen in the clown texts, stage scenes and the introductions.

I consider it essential to examine the relationship between the registers in order to understand the intertwining of the entertainment, artistic and political relevance of cabaret and the intentions of the prominent creators who participated in the performances. In my view, the intentions and activities of cabaret directors, creators and performers in the period under study were all, to a large extent, equally weighted towards this triple aim.

The connection between urban space and cabaret texts is obvious from the texts. The common knowledge of reality shared by the artists on stage, the creators they voice and the

audience is typically the result of the identity of the experience of space. Of the many approaches that can be offered, I consider the method of Kevin Lynch to be the most effective for this thesis, who introduces the concept of a *cognitive map* in order to systematise reflections. This allows us not only to perceive but also to 'read' the city. Lynch argues that the individual images of urban space also have general characteristics that derive from shared culture, common experiences and strategies, and the physical form of the built environment. The public spaces of the city take on a representative significance beyond themselves in the cabaret texts, which have a distinctly urban theme, evoking the upscale and the impoverished of contemporary Budapest, offering a glimpse into a variety of spaces from elegant cafés to tiny servants' rooms, and populated with people: from the ladies chatting on the terrace of the cafés to the maidens dreaming and dreaming in the corridor.

As part of the research I also looked at the history of cabaret in Pest. Partly with foreign examples, partly with direct domestic antecedents.

Of the foreign precursors - from the point of view of the development and evolution of cabaret in Pest - I consider the French and German cabarets to be the most important. It is a well-known fact that cabaret was born in Paris through the work of the organiser Rhodolphe Salis, who opened his venue for

writers, musicians and artists in 1881 under the name Chat Noir. As a result, but with a different concept, Ernst von Wolzogen's Buntes Theater, the German cabaret known as Übrebrettl, opened on 18 January 1901. Subsequently, more and more cabaret theatres opened across Europe. The cabaret in Pest drew primarily from these two sources, but also differed from them in its individual characteristics and tone, as well as from Austrian, Polish and Czech cabaret. Generally speaking, the different historical experiences, social structures and cultural codes were more significant in the tone and programme structure of cabaret theatres, which were more strongly linked to current events and reflected the audience's awareness of reality, than the local differences of traditional drama and music theatres. The comparison therefore shows differences rather than similarities.

I will briefly introduce two domestic predecessors of the Pest cabaret: the show café and the orfeum. I will outline the history of the development of Hungarian café culture, focusing on those cafés that offered a background performance to accompany the drinks and food they served. The orfeum was the most distinguished form of these, which flourished in Budapest in the years before the turn of the century, especially the Fővárosi Orfeum, founded by Károly Somossy, which hosted the first Hungarian-language cabaret troupe in Nagymező Street. Both the show cafés and the orphanages presented German-language

performances, but cabaret was Hungarian-language from the very beginning. At first, a police decree requiring that at least half of the entertainment programmes be in Hungarian played a leading role as an external factor, but over time the general spread of the Hungarian language in Budapest also triggered the change.

Cabaret can be described as a mixed-genre theatrical anthology, so I have dedicated a separate chapter to the most typical genres of the performances: the chanson, the couplet, the bluet and the introduction, with quotations and interpretations of typical passages.

The backbone of the thesis is the presentation of the cabaret companies that I consider to be the most significant. I reconstructed the circumstances of the formation, operation and dissolution of the Tarka Stage, the Cabaret Bonbonnière of Budapest, the Cabaret of the Modern Theatre, the Cabaret of the Modern Stage Nagy Endre and the Medgyaszay Cabaret on the basis of press reports, individual recollections and interviews. I have also tried to authenticate their artistic and public orientation by analysing a few important and characteristic works that have been staged, both short and long.

I have written only sketchily about other cabaret theatres operating at the same time as the featured companies, and about the history of cabaret's development after the First World War,

highlighting the most important venues and trends - to give a sense of the broader context in time and space.

III. Results

As a result of the research, the systematisation, evaluation and interpretation of the sources, I have obtained answers to the four questions quoted above. Based on these, the main achievement of the cabaret in Pest is that it laid the artistic foundations for Hungarian-language popular culture and the entertainment industry that developed from it. It has also developed a public humour that satirically points out political anomalies and social anomalies. Early cabaret in Pest was a curved mirror of Hungarian society and contemporary public life, shaping public taste and public thinking.

Among the authors of the cabaret are some of the most prominent writers of the era, including the leading members of the first generation of the West: Endre Ady, Mihály Babits, Frigyes Karinthy, Dezső Kosztolányi, Zsigmond Móricz and Ernő Szép. Their motivation was that they were motivated by the financial aspect, i.e. the high fees of the cabaret theatres, but many also saw cabaret as a "cause", partly by the need to entertain in the Hungarian language, partly by the promotion of

art and the elevation of public life to the podium. For these writers, the cabaret provided a new forum to raise their profile and receive direct feedback from the recipients of their work. Their presence gave prestige to the cabaret and, in turn, the authors became increasingly prestigious for their participation in the cabaret.

I believe that I have succeeded in establishing a literature base that can be the basis for further, more detailed research in the future. I have also attempted to define cabaret, building on and partially overriding several previous attempts at definitions. In my opinion, the best way of defining it, based on the characteristics identified, is as follows: cabaret is a mixed-genre theatrical anthology, typically performed by singers and actors, which is essentially an entertaining performance of a locally topical nature, using the tools of the arts. The individual programmes are separated and linked by an introduction. The medium of the cabaret is the city, the primary audience is the urban bourgeoisie, and the texts are in the national language.

To sum up, the cabaret in Pest was able to impress the audience with humour, topicality and art, all of which were combined in a single entity: the entertainment art of the moment.

IV. Related publications and conference presentations

I became acquainted with the early period of cabaret in Pest while writing my book *Zene nélkül (Without Music)*, which deals with the history of Hungarian songwriting in a social context. It was while writing this book that I conceived the intention to work on the subject in detail, with a scientific approach. During my doctoral studies, I also published and gave conference presentations on other topics.

My publications closely related to this topic were:

1. Publications

Balázs Véghegyi, *The cradle of the Hungarian chanson: the cabaret of Pest. Chapters from the History of Hungarian Songwriting*, Úveghegy Publishing House, Százhalombatta, 2017, 41-49.

Géza Gárdonyi and the cabaret in Pest, *Agria*, 2022/3, 220-225.

2. Conference presentations

March 11, 2022, University of Pécs: conference of the Institute of Literary Studies of the University of Pécs entitled "Fogriders Yesterday and Today".

4 May 2019, University of Debrecen: the Spring Wind Conference of the National Association of Doctoral Students.