George Bernard Shaw: a Literary Classic Writer in Hungarian; Hungarian Reception of George Bernard Shaw’s Works from 1956 to the Present

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Abstract. George Bernard Shaw is considered a literary classic writer in Hungarian. This statement serves as the hypothesis of the article which examines Shaw’s reception in Hungary from 1956 to the present. *Arms and the Man* (1893) was the first play performed in Hungary in 1904 which firmly set Shaw in the Hungarian literary canon. There are three volumes devoted entirely to Shaw (Marcell Benedek: *G. B. Shaw*, 1963; Géza Hegedűs: *The World of G. B. Shaw*, 1970; and István Pálffy: *George Bernard Shaw in Hungary*, 1987)\(^1\), which were published a decade apart; all three were published before the change of regime in Hungary in 1989. No critical study on Shaw was published in Hungarian between 2008 and the present, therefore the canonisation gesture was not strengthened. Many critical studies, however, were produced in the last two decades, which led to a significant paradigm shift in the reception of Shaw in Hungary. This paradigm shift reflects a different approach to Shaw scholarship today.

Key Words. G. B. Shaw, Hungarian reception, ideology, paradigm, critical research

According to Márton Mesterházi, George Bernard Shaw’s oeuvre is ingrained in the Hungarian literary canon (2001: 1292). This is not a biased statement since it looks back to the 1950s, when the interpretation of Shaw’s works enjoyed a renaissance in literary history. Shaw’s reception in Hungary is part of a long process that has influenced both literary critics and

\(^1\) The translations of the titles of books and articles on Shaw are my own in the entire article.
directors. He is an endless source of inspiration for every scientific study or stage version of his work that has been updated again and again.

Shaw is one of those renowned playwrights in Hungary whose works enhance the offerings of any theatre season. Thus, it can be said that Shaw’s plays can attract the audiences in the repertoire of any Hungarian theatre, and the plays are always a success. However, the question is always whether the director will keep to the original interpretation of the works relating to the message of the early 20th century theatre, or whether the work is updated to reflect a more modern approach and responds to the social challenges of the 21st century. Thus, this dichotomy questions whether Shaw’s plays can be adapted to today’s social and cultural context at all.

Early sources dating back to the early twentieth century confirm that Shaw’s reception in Hungary was positive from the beginning. According to István Pálffy, the first decades of Shaw’s appearance in Hungary were decisive. *Arms and the Man* (1893) was the first play performed in Hungary in 1904 (Pálffy 1987: 40). The success of the performance ensured that his works spread with incredible speed through Hungarian theatres (Pálffy 1987: 39-57), gained enormous popularity and a cult-like respect in the 1910s. Before each of Shaw’s premieres in Hungary, a rumour would usually spread that the author would be visiting Hungary for the premiere (Pálffy 1987: 91). Shaw was so popular that in 1956, on the centenary of his birth, he was commemorated in a series of speeches and studies (Pálffy 1987: 214-217).

In comparing Shaw’s early popularity with what has been seen in recent decades up to the present, two typical commentaries from 2001 should be noted: “Since Sándor Hevesi, Shaw […] has been a literary classic writer in Hungarian” (Mesterházi 2001: 1292). While another commentary says, “The theatre rarely stages his plays, with the exception of *Saint Joan*, in the 21st century” – wrote László Salamon Suba in *Új Ember* (Suba 2001). There is a very strong dissonance between the two opinions. What connects the 1956 celebrations with the doubts of 2001? This article aims to answer this question by focusing on trends and examining the canonisation strategies of articles published from 1956 to the present.

The corpus of texts reviewed is arranged in two chronologically ordered groups: from 1956 to 1989 and then from 2008 to the present. The first group includes seventeen texts published under twenty-one titles (twelve if we consider the reprints as different versions of the same text). There are three volumes devoted entirely to Shaw (Marcell Benedek: *G. B. Shaw*, 1963; Géza Hegedüs: *The World of G. B. Shaw*, 1970; and István Pálffy: *George Bernard Shaw* 2

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2 Sándor Hevesi was the first to translate Shaw’s plays into Hungarian in 1904.
in Hungary, 1987), which were published a decade apart; the works were published before the change of regime in Hungary in 1989. Hegedüs’ work should be singled out as part of the popular World of Writers series. Two more articles appeared later in 1989 in the volumes One Hundred Famous Plays, and in 77 Famous Plays in 1993.

The chronological distribution of the articles shows that one third of all articles from 1956 to 1989, i.e., six pieces, were written between 1956 and 1970, the rest being spread evenly over the next four decades. If the reprinted articles are backdated to the decade in which they were written, we get nine articles published in the 1960s. Their number therefore decreases, as the works with a stronger canonisation gesture were published in the first half of the period under discussion, while the popularising articles appeared toward the end.

No critical study on Shaw was published in Hungarian between 2008 and the present, which signifies that no article or review that would strengthen the canonisation gesture was published. Several popularising critical studies have been produced, which confirms that a significant paradigm shift in the reception of Shaw in Hungary has taken place. The major databases and library catalogues prove that the three Hungarian monographs mentioned above have not been followed by other complete volumes devoted to Shaw. However, it is important to note that in 2008 a publication titled Bernard Shaw’s Plays I-II was published by Gy. László Horváth. The two volumes do not contain any translations by Sándor Hevesi, but new Hungarian translations by Ádám Réz, Géza Ottlik, Dezső Mészöly and Gy. László Horváth. Another interesting feature of the volume is that it contains the first Hungarian translation of Heartbreak House (1917) by Gy. László Horváth. The selection reveals that the editor chose works, in addition to the traditional and popular Shaw plays, that are less well known. Although the selection is impressive, it is by no means complete since it is questionable whether the target audience should be the average literature-loving public or the public with a deeper understanding and cultivation of literature. If we look at the latter aspect, the selection is not satisfactory, since it lacks plays such as John Bull’s Other Island (1904) and The Devil’s Disciple (1897), which have received more attention in critical studies written in Hungarian and English in the last three decades.

In the last two decades, studies of Shaw published in Hungarian and English in the Hungarian speaking areas have revealed a variety of new critical approaches. This broad spectrum of research offers not only literary and cultural-historical approaches, as in the past, but also studies in the field of linguistics, sociolinguistics, culture, and history, thus emphasising a diversity of interdisciplinary interpretations that tend to reinforce the popularity of G.B. Shaw, rather than the canonisation gesture. As examples, I would like to mention research on G. B. 
Shaw by Zsuzsanna Ajtony, and Gábor Bence Kvéder. Zsuzsanna Ajtony published twenty-three Shaw-related articles between 2004 and 2017, five of which were in Hungarian and eighteen in English. Of the twenty-three papers, two were published in Hungary, eight in online journals (such as Bucharest Working Papers in Linguistics, Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica online journals), and the rest in Romania (Cluj-Napoca, Sepsis, Bucharest, Brasov, Chişinău). Gábor Bence Kvéder’s essay “You are as you speak, the manifestations of linguistics in G. B. Shaw’s early plays” was published in a collection of essays entitled Contact Zones, Boundary Areas along the Theatre, published in 2019.

According to Andrea Papp, the distribution of Shaw premieres between 1956 to 2008 show a weakening trend: thirty-eight performances in the 1950s, thirty-four in the 1960s, then twenty-four in the 1970s, fifteen in the 1980s, eleven in the 1990s, and finally twelve in the early 2000s (Papp 2009: 81). This would indicate that the fervour of the 1950s and 1960s had waned by the early 2000s.

Between 2008 and the present, the number of Shaw premieres fell dramatically: two in 2008, one in 2009, three in 2011, one in 2013, one in 2016, three in 2019 and one in 2020, but according to the Hungarian Theatre Data Archive, there were years when Shaw’s plays were not performed at all. Furthermore, it is worth looking into which plays were staged during these decades. Between 2008 and 2020, Mrs Warren’s Profession (1893) was staged twice, Saint Joan (1923) five times, Arms and the Man (1894) once, Pygmalion (1912) three times, You Never Can Tell (1897) twice, and Widowers’ Houses (1892) once. The plays that were performed more than once were not staged in the same theatre, but in different venues in Budapest and in the countryside. The number of reviews of theatre premieres reflect whether a Shaw play was performed in a more prestigious theatre in Budapest or in a theatre in the countryside. Of particular interest is the fact that Péter Valló directed the most Shaw productions (four in total) between 2008 and 2020, so we can say that there are directors who return to Shaw again and again. To understand what has changed in terms of canonisation since the 1950s, it is certainly useful to examine these canonisation strategies in greater depth.

The established ideology that supported Shaw

From the early 1950s onwards, Shaw’s oeuvre was interpreted from a socialist perspective, if only because the author himself was also associated with this worldview and the politics of post-1989 was not supportive of socialism in any form. There is no doubt that Shaw was well-
integrated into the political background that determined Hungarian cultural life, including the theatre, between 1948 and 1989.

According to Miklós Almási’s 1961 study titled *The Roads of Modern Drama*, Shaw’s works depict the untenability of bourgeois life, society, and ethics, criticised from an outsider, socialist view. Almási confirms in his work that the writer was initially a member of the moderately left-wing Fabian Society, but, as he says, “Shaw [...] very soon abandoned the artistic expression of his Fabian ideas and believed in reality” (Almási 1961: 170). Contrary to Fabian political views, Shaw supported the 1917 revolution in Russia which is a recurring element in the discourse until 1989.

Chronologically, Almási is followed by Marcell Benedek’s work. In the chapter dealing with Shaw’s biography, he illustrates how the circumstances of Shaw’s birth, his Irish origins and his position as a civil servant predisposed the writer to a dislike of the established order (Benedek 1963: 10-14). A thought-provoking feature of the chapter is that Marcell Benedek often switches to reported speech while presenting Shaw’s views, so that he does not always separate the views of the author from his own opinions, for example: “If a country’s savings are in private hands, this is capitalism” (Benedek 1963: 25).

Tibor Szobotka’s 1967 article originally served as a preface to the volume titled, *Shaw: Opinions - Reflections* (1958). The title proposes an image of Shaw as a seeker of truth. Szobotka asserts that the stage is clearly the place to speak the truth (implied in the sentence “Shaw’s stage is the pulpit”) (Szobotka 1967: 157-158). Szobotka also argues that although the author pointed out the evils of capitalist society, his works should not be condemned as obsolete pieces, because these evils are problems that still exist in the world (Szobotka 1967: 160-161).

In 1970 Géza Hegedűs continues to analyse Shaw’s relationship with the Fabians (Hegedűs, 1970: 29-31) and points out that the writer was never a member of any party in his life, only societies (such as the Fabians or the Anglo-Russian Society). He also states that Shaw remained an “outsider” among the Fabians as a supra-socialist, and part-Fabian among the socialists (Hegedűs 1970: 29-31). In another volume published at the same time, Hegedűs makes the categorical statement that “Marx’s doctrines clarified the true structure of society for Shaw” (Hegedűs 1970: 57-80); here the same idea is presented as in Almási, which clearly shows that Hegedűs does not break with this paradigm.

István Hermann analysed *Man and Superman* (1903) in an essay titled “The Socialist Millionaire” (Herman 1972: 418-428). This work was followed by a longer break until 1987, when István Pálffy published his critical work on George Bernard Shaw. This book is the last published work on the reception of Shaw in Hungary. Its tone is generally objective; one can
however perceive a mere bias in his claim when he says that the conservative press disliked Shaw and the true value of his plays was essentially only recognized by the left-wing newspapers (Pálffy 1987: 56).

The last article to deal with the question of Shaw’s reception is Endre Varjas in his 1989 volume titled, *One Hundred Famous Plays*. He assumes that “drama is a Marxist genre”, however he uses a moderate tone. Varjas clearly states that Shaw’s distancing from the Fabians and his support for the Soviet Union was not done out of loyalty to the party, but out of his own socialist conviction. Shaw always investigated each case individually and did not judge based on ready-made theories (Varjas 1989: 369).

The change of regime has now removed the canonisation factor. The *77 Famous Plays*, published in 1993, may have the same objective as *One Hundred Famous Plays*, still it does not deal with Shaw’s worldview convictions anymore. Géza Hegedüs is the only one who mentions this fact among the writings published since 1989. Hegedüs rewrote the 1970 Shaw chapter in 1999 for a new edition of his work on the history of drama. He omitted his statement about Marx, and in a footnote wrote that Oscar Wilde has since been better appreciated and people are not as prejudiced against Shaw anymore (Hegedüs 1999: 217). He condenses the sections dealing with the Fabians and their associates into a single paragraph and speaks about them in a decidedly objective tone.

Over time the ideology embedded in the works disappeared from the articles while the number of publications has decreased. But what about the content of the articles? In the case of an author who has become a literary classic writer, the paradigms through which the author is to be interpreted, the questions on which those who write about him or her must take a stand, form the cornerstones of the image of the author. It is worth pointing out that the systematic recurrence of these phenomena is due to the genre of the texts analysing Shaw. As these are mostly period-spanning works, describing major developments, their discursive situation presupposes a recipient with little or no knowledge of the phenomenon under discussion, so that Shaw’s image must be established at the outset.

**Creating Paradigms**

The most obvious strategy is to juxtapose Shaw with another recognised and canonised author. Péter Egri draws parallels between Shaw and Thomas Mann (Egri 1968: 127). However, the similarity can also be established based on a single work, as in the case of *Heartbreak House* (1919), which was first interpreted as a Chekhovian drama by Péter Egri (Egri 1971: 59).
reason for this comparison may also be the author’s character: for example, Marcell Benedek, in his work, calls the playwright “the Molière of the 20th century” (Benedek 1963: 7).

Since the preface to Caesar and Cleopatra (1898), Shaw has been most often compared to Ibsen. The comparison is rooted in Shaw’s oeuvre — his drama and music criticism are credited with introducing Wagner and Ibsen to the English public. In 1961, Almási defines their relationship in the following: “Shaw has already gone beyond the Ibsenian horizon” (Almási 1961: 172). In a long article entitled “The Unfolding of the Intellectual Satire of Shaw’s Dramas”, Péter Egri compares Vivie, one of the protagonists of Mrs Warren’s Profession to Ibsen’s Nóra, as both break out of their unbearable lives (Egri 1968: 129). Egri analyses the relationship between Ibsenian symbolism and Shaw’s plays, specifically in The Doctor’s Dilemma (1906) (Egri 1971: 51-53). Géza Hegedűs, in his volume English Literature in the Twentieth Century, argues that Ibsen criticises from within bourgeois society, while Shaw does the same from the outside, from a socialist perspective, and thus goes beyond his great predecessor (Hegedűs 1970: 62). The game of comparisons continues until the publication of One Hundred Famous Plays (1989), in which, according to Varjas, Shaw goes beyond Ibsen by seeing truth in its multiplicity, without identifying completely with any of the heroes (Varjas 1989: 369-370). This paradigm, however, does not disappear after 1989, although the concepts are repeated, and the reception becomes open to new insights.

In his work, Géza Hegedűs explains in detail Szobotka’s analogy in which Shaw treats the stage as a pulpit. Hegedűs follows the dramaturgical convention where the stage cannot stand lengthy discussions as a temporary rule. Hegedűs points out, that Shaw’s work deals with issues that are a contemporary concern for the spectator, and he is therefore forced to follow the debates with a tense attention, as in medieval morality plays, where the battle for the spectator’s salvation was fought on stage. Hegedűs asserts that Shaw, by breaking the dramaturgical rules, created a bridge between nineteenth-century drama and the theatre of the twentieth century, the theatre of Brecht, Pirandello and O’Neill (Hegedűs 1970: 57). The theory formulated in 1970 surfaces in paradigm headlines as “Shaw’s stage is a pulpit” and “he follows the model of the moralities”. This theory has not been challenged since.

Another conflicting point is the question of Shaw’s insensitivity. The issue was triggered by Shaw’s cynical literary viewpoint, which constantly questioned values. One of the extremes here is represented by Benedek, who, at a rhetorically very important point in his monograph, states that “[Shaw] did not love man” (Benedek 1963: 91). At the same time, Marcell Benedek in Book and Theatre refers to a Shaw preface, which says that “Woman (at least the English woman) is ninety per cent an asexual being” (Benedek 1963: 452). Tibor Szobotka takes a
completely opposite view. In his book, *Shaw’s Opinions - Reflections*, he selects from various letters and prefaces of Shaw’s plays with the intention of providing insight into the writer’s views and private life. He argues that a good writer is always interesting as a person (Szobotka 1967: 168) and explains this by drawing attention to Shaw’s biography and the intimate tone of his letters written to Ellen Terry. Similar ideas emerge in 1989 with Varjas, who highlights the role of compassion in *Pygmalion* (Varjas 1989: 375-376). These views prevail until the most recent article by Márton Mesterházi in 2001, who analyses the play *John Bull’s Other Island* and describes how it can be described as distinctly lyrical in several points. Mesterházi cites as examples Larry’s meeting with his sweetheart of fifteen years, and the characterisation of Keegan’s ex-servant (Mesterházi 2001: 1298-1300).

The Shaw paradigm is based on elements that are repeated everywhere; these are generally biographical, and therefore any description is bound to refer to them precisely because of their summarising character. Thus, we learn, again and again, that Shaw was born into an Irish Protestant family; except when he is incorrectly identified as an English Protestant, as in the *77 Famous Plays* (Szentmihályi Szabó 1993: 226), but this is often the origin of his cynical, outsider view. His mother and father are also viewed as transmitters of irony and insensitivity, and in several places as a foreshadowing of Alfred Doolittle and Mrs Higgins. On the model of *Man and Superman*, the studies generally draw up a list of figures considered superior, and here, in addition to Tanner John, Caesar and Napoleon, Mrs Warren and Eliza Doolittle have been included (the latter by Egri, the former by Benedict, though Warren’s is only mentioned with a question mark). Moreover, as with all authors who treat serious subjects ironically, Shaw has been credited with the merit of “holding up a mirror to reality”.

**New paradigms**

The studies that have emerged over the last two decades are very diverse, but all of them strive to be objective. It is not appropriate to generalise, but the more frequent aspects of analysis focus on the following broad themes: humour and its language, different aspects of irony, English and Irish attitudes and stereotypes, linguistic and ethnic identity, ethnic diversity, and linguistic and national self-identity. These recent studies employ in-depth methods of inquiry that go far beyond canonization and, unlike the reviews and studies of previous decades, emerge with a new paradigm that already popularizes the author.

This paradigm shift reflects a different approach to Shaw scholarship. In his works, Shaw not only draws on facts, but also discusses through his characters, on a conceptual level,
the current definitions relating to Shaw’s era such as identity, nationality, social inequalities, the position of women in society and religious differences. His action evokes the past, but speaks to the people of the present, and this human-centredness prevails in his dramas. This echoes Tibor Szobotka’s 1967 theme that “Shaw’s stage is a pulpit” (Szobotka 1967: 157-158), for Shaw’s characters speak the unspeakable and thus “find ways and forms, beyond conventions of theme and style, to redefine the complex positionality of the modern subject” (Kurdi 2003: 120).

Zsuzsanna Ajtony has an outstanding body of Shaw studies published between 2004 and 2020. Most of these are in English, while a smaller number in Hungarian. The author’s research on Shaw focuses on major themes such as the language of humour, irony (verbal and non-verbal), British stereotypes, Anglo-Saxon attitudes, identity, and paradox. Ajtony concentrates on certain Shaw plays, like John Bull’s Other Island, Pygmalion, The Devil’s Disciple, Major Barbara, and Caesar and Cleopatra.

Humour and irony are central themes in Shaw research; these concepts are also reflected in Ajtony’s studies. One of the specific functions of humour, as Ajtony writes, is “to create solidarity and in-group identity” (Ajtony 2009: 175). The aim of her study is to “illustrate the extent to which humour becomes or can become a flexible discursive strategy for constructing certain aspects of social identities, focusing on one of the so-called ‘social identities’ of the general theory of verbal humour” (Ajtony 2009: 175). She highlights two characters in the play, Caesar and Britannus, who have “two faces of the same ethnic stereotype, [and are] integral parts of each other” (Ajtony 2009: 184); while Britannus has typically exaggerated British traits that make him ridiculous, Caesar is calm and strong, with an ironic sense of humour that “elevates his human greatness and originality” (Ajtony 2009: 184).

Other typical analytical factors in Ajtony’s studies are stereotypes and stereotypical attitudes. Ajtony’s 2011 essay, “‘You odd little islanders’: Britishness through an Irishman’s eyes”, examines Shaw’s drama Caesar and Cleopatra from a new angle. Here, Ajton delineates the stereotype traits of Caesar and Britannus, while pushing their limits, projecting the “excessive and rigid morality of the British middle class”, and describes how “a much freer morality and ethos is confronted in this play” (Ajtony 2011: 156). Like many of his dramas, this is shaped by Shaw’s Irish identity, which allows him to view the world, the British and “within it, the English stereotype, with a certain detachment, since he [Shaw] himself was not of them” (Ajtony 2011: 156). Shaw is thus the elusive figure who, because of his Irish origins, always felt himself a stranger, as Ajtony writes, an “outsider” in England (Ajtony 2011: 156).
Shaw’s critical perspective and detachment affected his Irish origins and his own identity, since only as an outsider could he create meticulously accurate and objective characters that refer to their “ethnic identity and Britishness” (Ajtony 2011: 138). Identity and, in this context, stereotype, is also discussed in Ajtony’s, “The Paradox of the British Stereotype in G.B. Shaw’s play The Devil’s Disciple”. Ajtony evaluates the play from a micro-sociolinguistic approach, where she focuses on “the face-to-face relationships of the characters in interaction” (Ajtony 2011: 138). Thus, she examines linguistic devices such as speech patterns, forms of politeness, social roles, and humorous and ironic attitudes. Accordingly, Shaw “reveals two alternative British identities and, in this character construction underlines the schematic nature of the stereotype, that can be stretched to extremes and yet remain intact” (Ajtony 2011: 147).

Recent critical paradigms include linguistic and sociolinguistic studies that assume the existence of character-forming functions on accent and dialect in Hungarian translations of Shaw’s dramas. Gábor Bence Kvéder’s 2019 study, “You are as you speak, the emergence of linguistics in G. B. Shaw’s early plays”, analyses the differences between the generally accepted forms of Englishness and Cockney accent. The early dramas on which the study is based are Captain Brassbound’s Conversion (1900), Man and Superman (1903), John Bull’s Other Island (1904), Major Barbara (1905), and Pygmalion (1912). The aim of Kvéder’s discussion is to assess the means and style Shaw used to make accent and pronunciation differences clear to both his readers and his actors. His question as to what extent the “linguistic value of accents and dialects” (Kvéder 2019: 177) is compromised and how this comes across in the Hungarian translation is justified, since early translations like Hevesi’s ignored these dialectological and cultural features, whereas Kvéder argues that the pronunciation features are an integral part of the work (Kvéder 2019: 182). The fact that Shaw retained his Dublin Irish accent until the end of his life reveals that Shaw had a “sociolinguistic and dialectological creed” (Kvéder 2019: 177), which he added as an additional note to his play Captain Brassbound’s Conversion. Spoken language and its use is extremely important to Shaw, as Kvéder writes, “in a modern society, everyone is what the people around him think he is — the way that an individual speaks” (Kvéder 2019: 180). The “contact zones”, as Kvéder mentions in the title of his study (Kvéder 2019: 189), can be seen as a paradigm that may be considered a new entity. This is an issue that had not been addressed in the decades before the change of regime, yet it cannot be said to be new, because the interconnection and overlap between the fields of linguistics and literature can already be found in critical works from the late 19th century.

The above-mentioned studies by Ajtony and Kvéder are just a few examples of the range and depth of work on G.B. Shaw and his plays that have been produced in the last two decades.
These articles no longer reinforce the canonisation gesture but provide a deeper understanding of Shaw and Shawian expression. To say that Shaw’s art consists merely in “holding up a mirror to reality” does not fully cover the truth, because the Shawian approach is a complex creed that even these articles have not been able to fully exploit.

**Paradigms on the modern stage**

How has Hungarian theatre changed regarding Shaw’s plays? In the following, I draw on the archival material of the *National Theatre History Museum and Institute* to illustrate the critical response inspired by Shaw’s plays. The number of stage performances of G. B. Shaw’s plays in the period from 2008 to the present, compared to the 1950s and 1960s, has drastically decreased. However, it should be considered that the reason for this is not a turning away from Shaw, but a change of era, which resulted in an influx of multicultural, global, and international trends to Hungary. At the same time, the number of Shaw productions has declined, but every theatre that considers itself prestigious has a production of a Shaw play on its programme. Over the decades, Shaw’s works and his message have become a concept that always engages audiences. It is just a matter of dramaturgical interpretation as to how and what perspective the director wishes to highlight this in the theatrical performance.

The most often performed play of the last two decades was *Saint Joan* (1923). The play was staged five times: three times in the countryside (Székelyudvarhely, Eger, Szolnok) and twice in Budapest at the National Theatre. The Budapest performances were directed by Róbert Alföldi at the National Theatre and Iván Hargitai at the Merlin Theatre. While the number of reviews of provincial productions is low, the National Theatre’s production received 15 reviews in 2011. These show that a prestigious venue and a well-known director are a definite advantage. The Merlin Theatre’s production of *Saint Joan* in 2008 received unanimously bad reviews, some of which I will quote: “With a lot less dramaturgical fuss, they could have made more serious Shaw arguments” (Tamás Tarján 2008: *Népszava szép szó*); “it is particularly topical, (...) it simply needs to be well acted to make it speak” (Tamás Koltai 2008: *Élet és Irodalom*); “... when the authors [of the reviews] have nothing at all to say about the play, the subject or theme they have chosen, but would like to pretend that they have an original idea” (László Zappe 2009: *Critical Lapok*).

The 2011 production of the National Theatre, however, received a favourable review: “...the play is still relevant today; (...) chaos, hatred, fierce enmity is the order of the day” (Gábor Bóta 2011: *Népszava*). Critics also wrote favourably of the 2013 production at the Géza Gárdonyi Theatre in Eger, referring to the “timeless truth” which “brought to the fore
manipulation, unscrupulous politics that is not the 15th century” (Gábor Bóta 2011: Népszava). Saint Joan performed in 2016, was also an “attractive, exciting performance”, which is permeated by a “timeless concept: life given for the sake of others is exalted” (Ildikó Jámbor 2017: Szoljon.hu).

The second most frequently performed Shaw play in Hungary is Pygmalion, an evergreen play of its kind. The play was staged only three times between 2008 and 2020, twice in the countryside and once in Budapest at the Radnóti Theatre, directed by Péter Valló. Pygmalion premiered in 2011 at the Radnóti Theatre in Budapest and at the Weöres Sándor Theatre in Szombathely; this version of Pygmalion was based on the Hungarian translation by Ádám Nádasdy. Lívia Ölbei wrote a mixed review of the two performances: “it places the story in a stylized contemporary setting”; “a pleasant evening at the theatre; before dinner, after dinner” (Ölbei Lívia 2011: Ellenfény). The problem, however, is not the play itself, but the fact that Hollywood has turned the play into a world-famous musical, popularly known as My Fair Lady; as a result of the huge success and popularity of the musical, it has overshadowed the original work.

Shaw’s most controversial work, Mrs Warren’s Profession, has been staged only twice in the last twenty years, in 2008 and 2019. The 2008 production, directed by Péter Valló using a translation by Ádám Nádasdy, received negative reviews. Why did the critics protest? Is the subject of the play still a taboo in the 21st century? Or did the audience expect more? According to critical opinions “there is little point in producing this play today”, “this play is outdated” (Éva Mikes 2008: www.kultura.hu); “the actors are weak”, “they don’t dramatize”, “they are powerless” (Gábor Bóta 2008: Magyar Hirlap); “despite the new Nádasdy translation, the play has not been able to prove that it is alive in today’s world” (Tamás Koltai 2008: Élet és irodalom); “Over the decades, the critical edge of this Shaw play has faded, its truth has faded into the unstratified social image” (Tamás Tarján 2008: Népszava szép szó); “Today, the Kitty Warren career is not a piquancy, but a boom” (Judit Csáki 2008: Magyar Narancs). The 2019 production was staged in Eger at the Géza Gárdonyi Theatre, directed by Balázs Blaskó. The production received a lot of publicity, perhaps because of its rural location, but the number of negative reviews was small. In the review of the Shaw play, the author of the article conveyed the following thought: “Shaw has faith in youth, believes in changeability, and expresses the hope that with the right moral grounding and firm perseverance one can turn one’s back on vile and gallant social prejudices”.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted that the 1956 perception of George Bernard Shaw has gone through major changes. Márton Mesterházi’s assertion that Shaw has not lost his credibility as a literary classic writer in Hungarian is still valid. The ideological foundation on which his canonisation was based and promoted has now disappeared, but certain recurrent themes remain even after the regime change in Hungary. Compared to the 1950s and 60s, current literature deals with the subject of Shaw not less, but in a different way. Shaw’s importance persists, as evidenced by the writings of literary historians and critics. The playwright’s importance is also reflected in the fact that in 2006, on the 150th anniversary of his birth, the magazine 168 Óra published an article of anecdotes in tribute to the great writer (Juhani Nagy 2006: 38-39). The last two decades have seen a paradigm shift, resulting in numerous scholarly critical studies on Shaw’s plays. These works, which bring together a wide variety of research methods, have been able to unearth profound interpretations. The case studies on Shaw by Zsuzsanna Ajtony and Gábor Bence Kvéder are just two excellent examples of current critical research by Hungarian scholars.

Shaw’s journey on the Hungarian stage has also changed since the 1950s and 60s. According to the database of the National Theatre History Museum and Institute, the staging of Shaw’s works has been rather marginalised in recent decades, but this is the result of a global and international era to which Hungarian theatres have opened their doors. A wide spectrum of works by international contemporary authors has been added to the repertoire of theatres, but the classics, whether they be Shakespeare, Ibsen, or Shaw, are still on stage. Shaw’s work and plays are deeply embedded in the international and Hungarian literary canon. His comedy is an evergreen genre in the Hungarian theatre that has a huge audience appeal and is still able to evoke mixed emotions and criticism. Shaw therefore cannot be forgotten as he is now a literary classic writer in Hungarian whose credo is deeply embedded in the public consciousness.

Works Cited


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