

## **Éva Magné Szaitz: The goals and possibilities of amateur acting through examples from Csongrád-Csanád County and over the border**



### **Introduction**

This study was based on the thesis titled: "The goals and possibilities of amateur acting through examples from Csongrád-Csanád county and over the border" prepared for the master's course in cultural mediation of the Gyula Juhász Teacher Training Faculty of the University of Szeged.

Thanks to my work at the National Institute of Culture, I have been part of the life of rural theater companies for seven years, so during my research work I conducted interviews with representatives of amateur theater companies operating in Csongrád-Csanád county, which I extended with two examples from over the border. Two of the county groups also participated in the Barn Theater Program.

### **Acting and the "flow" state**

Is there an expression that reflects the experience or state actors feel during acting in a single word? Yes. This is the flow. Whether we are talking about amateurs or professional actors, the individual's interest, dedication, and affection for acting is well illustrated by the wording of Mihály Csíkszentmihályi. According to Csíkszentmihályi, the flow state is a situation in which the person can freely devote his attention to achieving his goal, as there is no distraction that he/she should sort out and there is no threat against which the self should protect itself. In this case, the activity itself is the goal: we do it for its own sake, because the given action gives us pleasure and satisfaction, and not for a goal to achieve. Csíkszentmihályi calls this state the "flow", the experience of the stream (Csíkszentmihályi, 2018: p. 67). During the interviews the respondents also reported on this state.

### **The beginning of Hungarian acting**

We consider László Kelemen to be the first Hungarian theater director. His name is linked to the start of Hungarian-language amateur acting in the traditional sense, as he was the first to create Hungarian-language amateur acting groups, which dates back to the end of the 18th century.

Recognizing the importance of Hungarian theater in the fight for the independence of the Hungarian nation and the Hungarian language, Kelemen founded the first professional Hungarian theater company in 1790, whose programs included classic dramas from world literature. Through Ferenc Kazinczy, the company came into contact with the Martinovics movement, which was the first revolutionary attempt to overthrow the feudal power in Hungary. After the fall of the revolution, the authorities removed Kelemen from his position, so in 1796 the company also failed. From 1799 to 1801, he attempted to work with another troupe in the countryside (at that time they played in Nagyvárád, Szeged, Kecskemét, Nagykőrös, Gyöngyös and Losonc). However, this only worked until 1801 (Staud, 1961: p. 77).

*Later, he worked as a lawyer and choir-master, then moved to Makó, and from there to Csanádpalota in 1811, where he established acting groups. He lived here until his death in 1814. His grave can be found in the Kelemen László Memorial Park in Csanádpalota.*

In Csongrád-Csanád County, a cultural center, a foundation, a street, and an acting school were named after him, and the amateur acting meeting held in Csanádpalota also bears his name.

Kelemen's contemporaries were also important forerunners of the foundations of Hungarian-language amateur acting, such were György Bessenyei, the first great figure of the Hungarian Enlightenment, and Ferenc Kazinczy, who became the manager of Hungarian culture after Bessenyei and to whom the Hungarian language reform is also attached.

It is important that the press, books, and printing houses have legitimacy because of the Enlightenment.

One of the most important events of the 19th century was the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867. After the compromise, the demand for informal communities grew stronger in Hungary, that is, clubs and associations were established in large numbers enforcing the right to association. In the age of dualism, although no law had yet been passed on the right of association, it was regulated by a decree of the Minister of the Interior. The scenes of the middle class were civil reading circles and social circles, while the peasantry gathered in farmers' circles, lads' associations, rural reading circles, and farmworkers' reading circles. After Trianon, the self-organized communities continued to operate in the system developed during the dualism. In 1932, there were more than 3,800 social circles, nearly 2,000 cultural, artistic, literary and scientific communities in operation. There were also amateur acting groups among them. The training of the groups was primarily coordinated by teachers.

## **Legislation on amateur acting**

When dealing with the topic of amateur acting, it is essential to talk about the legal aspects, the role of theater agencies and the basic services of cultural education as well. These are not discussed at all or only marginally in the groups. That is why it is essential for them to be aware of their opportunities as well as their obligations. Two laws are worth mentioning in the subject, they are the following: CXL Act of 1997, Act on museum institutions, public library services and cultural education, LXXVI of 1999. Law on copyright.

## About copyright

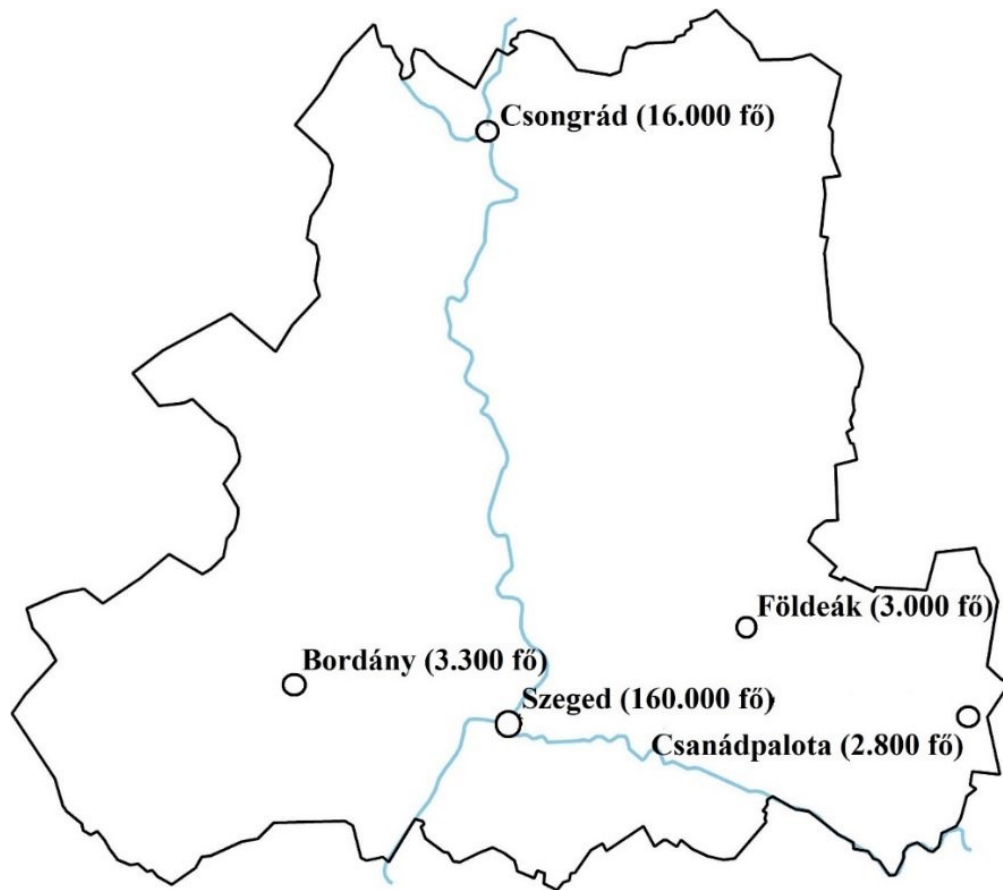
The role of theater agencies operating in Hungary is also noteworthy. The Theatrum Mundi Theater and Literature Agency, the Hofra Theater and Literature Agency, and the Proscenium Literary Agency are known among others. The agencies convey the rights of the works of stage authors and translators for Hungarian and cross-border theaters, book publishers, and film producers. Some agencies deal with American works in the first place, while others deal with the representation of Anglo-Saxon, French, German and other European authors.

According to Miklós Lekli, an expert of the Hofra Theater and Literature Agency, Tamás Vereb's writing on copyright well reflects how the issue of copyright affects amateur actors. According to Vereb: "the majority of the Hungarian theater profession considers the institutional system of copyright in Hungary to be an opaque and impenetrable purple fog. Others consider copyright itself to be strange and to be circumvented, to be ignored, to be mentioned only in whispers, or an unnecessary shackle - if they are aware of it at all" (Színház Kritikai és Elméleti Folyóirat, Volume XXXVIII, No. 1, 2005:43).

Two of the 7 basic cultural education services set out in the Culture Act are extremely important for amateur theater groups:

- facilitating the foundation of cultural communities, supporting their operation, assisting their development, providing a venue for cultural education activities and cultural communities. (This must also be provided in the smallest basic unit of community activities, the community scenes).
- providing the conditions for amateur creative and performing arts activities (Act CXL of 1997 on museum institutions, public library services and cultural education (<https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=99700140.tv>, [ 31.10.2020])

Figure 1: the interviews with the leaders of the amateur theater groups in Csongrád county by settlement with the number of inhabitants



## About the conditions and results of the empirical data collection

I conducted the interviews in November and December 2019. 4 were carried out face-toface, two via Messenger, and one over the phone. The interviews in person lasted for 2-2.5 hours and the others for about 1-1.5 hours.

I interviewed the director of the Kelemen László Amateur Theater Company (KLASZ) in Csanádpalota, the retired teacher Mrs Andrásné Szügyi, in Bordány, the director of the Bordányi Amateur Theater Circle (BASZK), Roland Börösök, the director of the Csongrád Theater Company, the retired teacher Katalin Ferentzi, in Szeged, the director of the Genéziusz Theater, István Horváth and Katalin Boros in Csíkcsomortán in Szeklerland.

In Földeák, Ilona Szabó, a teacher answered my questions. (The Földeak group was no longer working at the time of the interview.)

I conducted one more interview with a different method from the above. I spoke with Tamás Varga, who works at the Vojvodina Institute of Hungarian Culture. Tamás is an actor, besides, thanks to his work, he supports the Hungarian theater circles operating in Vojvodina in Hungarian.

The group leaders of Szeklerland and Csongrád-Csanád county were asked 33 questions, divided into 6 units. After the introductory questions, I asked them about the group and directing, internal and external contentment and feedback, conditions of operation, needs and forms of support, and then, as closing questions, about their vision of the future.

And I asked Tamás Varga about his activities in the field of amateur acting in the Vojvodina Hungarian Cultural Institute as well as the situation of Hungarian amateur actors and the forms of support available in Vojvodina.

## **The launch and the core data of the companies**

Experience has shown that the formation of amateur theater companies is mostly initiated by the head of the local cultural institution, but in several cases, by 2 or 3 community-oriented local residents and local patriots. It is also typical that a local teacher is entrusted with the tasks of the director or group leader.

The examined settlements all have a history and traditions of acting.

Founded in 2001, the KLASZ of Csanádpalota is the company with the oldest history. The Bordány group was founded in 2002, Földeák in 2009, Csongrád and Csíkcsomortán in 2010, and Genéziusz from Szeged in 2011.

In Csanádpalota, László Kelemen, the first Hungarian theater director, formed groups at the beginning of the 19th century. Later, acting was also present in the 20th century. Most of the time teachers patronised acting, but sometimes it occurred that an art-loving shoemaker or a room painter took over the role of the director.

In the meantime, the groups broke up and new ones were formed. Most recently, in 2001, István Ádók, the former director of the Kelemen László Cultural Center, started the reorganization. Mrs. Andrásné Szügyi, a retired teacher, has been directing the group since then.

The group has been operating in Bordány since December 2002. The role of Roland Börcsök as group leader is multiple, at the beginning, he only helped the work of the group from the outside, later he even performed.

However, at present he is unable to take on a role, because he cannot reconcile the tasks of running the Village Hall with rehearsals.

They regularly recruit new actors by advertising in the local newspaper, on Facebook and on posters.

In Földeák, Judit Búzásné Vízi, who was then the head of the cultural center, kept a very close relationship with Csanádpalota. Thanks to this, KLASZ performed in Földeák with two plays in 2009. They were packed houses, which meant about 250 people, that is, nearly 10% of the population. After the performance in Csanádpalota, some people decided to form the local acting group in Földeák as well. Its leader was Ilona Szabó, cultural manager and teacher. First, they tried to recruit people from the circle of acquaintances and only staged small cabaret scenes.

They worked continuously until 2014, with a packed house of 250 people here as well. Then between 2014 and 2015, 3 members of the group died unexpectedly, which meant the end of the group itself.

Acting groups have been operating in Csongrád for decades, with several groups working at the same time, for instance, a group of the Furniture Factory and the Cultural Center. These were

stopped after a time, and in 2010, Tamás Bedő, the mayor then and now, asked Katalin Ferentzi, a teacher, to revive adult acting in Csongrád. Their headquarters were the Cultural Center and the City Gallery.

Katalin has been organizing the group and performances since the beginning. She is responsible for their work, she searches for the plays and directs them. She is particularly proud that the use of the name "Csongrádi" has officially been registered.

In Szekelerland, acting plays an important role in the lives of the inhabitants of Csíkcsomortán. Written data prove that in 1911 the village already had an acting group. At that time, primary school teachers worked as directors and they forged the community as well. They prepared plays for bigger holidays and balls. Veronika Birta, a kindergarten teacher, took charge of acting. After her death cultural life collapsed until 2010, when István Bartalis initiated the revival of acting in the village of Csíkcsomortán. István's work was later taken over by Katalin Boros.

The youngest company I examined, the Genezisz Theater of Szeged, was founded in 2011. Its founders graduated as actors at the László Kelemen Theater in Szeged, in the class of László Barnák.

István Horváth, who is in his thirties, works as a founding member and company leader, he also writes, plays and directs them.

Just as there are similarities, there are also differences between the groups. One similarity is that the tours and transportation of the companies always demand serious logistics and financials. The same applies to the preparation, acquisition and often the delivery of the stage-sets. Technical issues are solved collectively in each company (drilling, carving, installation, painting).

The differences are most noticeable in terms of tenders. Several leaders mentioned that they could no longer concentrate on the tenders besides their voluntary group leader duties.

Two of the seven interviewees were not familiar with the Barn Theater Program of the National Institute of Culture, while the other five believe that it is a great opportunity for any amateur company. (In the previous years, Csánádpalota and Bordány have already participated as performers).

The amount of local government subsidies differs among the studied groups. Some group leaders stated that the annual support of HUF 20-30,000 means a lot, while in another settlement HUF 350,000 per year is considered to be little amount.

## **Seasons and plays**

At the Csongrád Theater Company and the Genezisz Theater of Szeged, we can talk about the seasons in the traditional sense. The others do not consider this aspect. It is interesting that the groups, whose performances can be visited by purchasing a ticket, have seasons. The permanent staff in Csongrád is 10-12 people. Mostly adults who are active workers act in the group, but there are also some retired members.

In Csongrád the Cultural Center launches a series of theater passes consisting of 5 performances every year. The 5th performance of the series has been played by the Csongrád Theatre Group for

many years.

In 2015, the Association for Acting in Csongrád was established, which is a registered organization working alongside the theatre group. For more outstanding plays, they have to make and buy serious stage-sets and furniture. And they also have to pay a lot for copyrights. These expenditures are coordinated by the association. There are two engineers in the group, who can design the technical things and stage-set elements free of charge as voluntary workers.

Tuesdays and Thursdays are their regular rehearsal days in Csongrád at the Cultural Center. They start rehearsing for the full-length plays in October, November at the latest. For smaller plays rehearsing usually takes 2-3 months.

In Szeged, the Geneziusz Theater has 25 employees between 19-35 of age. At Geneziusz the theater season lasts from September to June. They choose the plays together, but they also have their own plays, written mainly by István, such as the musical cabaret "Sanzon Izé" or "Good day today", which dealt with the topic of child abuse.

Unlike in the case of the above groups, the opportunity for developing speech techniques, singing and movement is available here. Each play has a rehearsal period before the performances, which is 2 or maximum 2.5 months.

The group currently operates with 18 people in Csánádpalota. The youngest is a fourth-grader student and the eldest are pensioners, 3 of whom have been playing since the beginning.

Twice a year they perform for the locals. They choose the plays together.

There is a rehearsal on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The rehearsal period of each play before the performance depends on the play and the free time of the actors.

In Földeák, the group consisted of 15 people when it was the biggest, but in the end, only 10 members remained, who finished acting in 2014. The youngest were 19-20-year-old girls and the oldest was a 75-year-old lady.

In the first year in Földeák they managed to stage 2 and then 4-5 performances a year. Everyone had a say in the selection of the plays. At first, they found scripts on the Internet, and then exchanged them with troupes operating in the surrounding settlements.

They received help from the municipality with the stage-sets and costumes. They provided the material for the stage. The planning and implementation were carried out by the members. The rehearsal period before the performance was maximum 2 months.

In Csíkcsomortán, a settlement with 500 inhabitants, the group has 8 active members between the ages of 20 and 60. This troupe does not have a season, they learn a play for holidays and major events. About twice or three times a year.

They collect the stage-sets themselves, they sew or transform the clothes.

The rehearsal period of each play takes 2-3 months before the performance. They rehearse 2-3 times a week.

There is no theater season in Bordány, they prepare plays only for the Culture Day in March. The group currently has 12 members aged 15, 18, 35, 40 and 60. They always choose plays together,

which they mostly search for on the internet. The stage-sets and costumes are assembled by the group. There is a rehearsal once a week, on Mondays. The rehearsal period of each play takes 1-3 months before the performance.

The amateur acting groups I interviewed, typically rehearse once or twice a week, and they can perform a play after 1-3 months of rehearsals. It is also typical that the leaders of the groups are entrusted with the casting and often the selection of the plays. This method worked out most successfully, but of course anyone can have suggestions for pros and cons. However, in most cases, farces and cabarets are in preference. Two groups mentioned packed-house performances, but it is difficult to compare as for one troupe this means 60 people, and for the other 350 people.

## **Hungarian-language amateur acting in Vojvodina**

Summary of the interview with Tamás Varga<sup>1</sup>, a staff member of the Vojvodina Hungarian Cultural Institute:

Currently, 18-20 Hungarian amateur theater groups are active in Vojvodina, but there are even more. They can ask for the help of the Institute (Hungarian Cultural Institute of Vojvodina) and the Hungarian Cultural Association of Vojvodina 3 times a year free of charge. In this mentoring program, the Institute sends a professional (actor or director) to them free of charge, who provides professional assistance during rehearsals.

Rozália Brestyánszki Boros, dramaturge of the Szabadka Folk Theater, György Hernyák, teacher of the Academy, Tímea Lőrincz, actor of the Zenta Theater, and Margaréta Táborosi, an actor, have already mentored the group.

These 3 times are not for them to direct the play for them, but to show them how to direct it. So they are shown the methodology.

According to Tamás Varga, in Kupuszina (Bácskertes) the acting group sing, play, dance, and work as if Vojvodina had another professional theater.

The amateur theater groups of Vojvodina usually know each other. There is an organization called "Négyesfogat"(Coach-and-four) in which theater groups from 4 settlements take their performances to each other. It is self-organised, the Institute plays no role in this.

They also go "neighboring", for example, Magyarcernye was happy to take his own performances to other places, but this group has just ceased to exist because all its members have moved abroad. Tamás believes that acting groups can end up having the same fate in several places if there are not at least two people supporting the group - a leader and an assistant - who direct the group. If something happens to one of them, the group should not be stopped.

In Vojvodina, the KSZFD (Film and Theater Competition of High School Actors) is organized in Zenta for student actors, and there is a Children's Actor Workshop in Feketics (Bácsfeketehegy) for elementary school students. Adult amateur actors take part in the Vojvodina Hungarian Amateur Actors' Meeting.

According to Tamás, performing and acting primarily have a team-building and community-building power. In this genre, personalities meet personalities. Acting is a social game to meet each other

most deeply, it is a kind of self-discovery.

VMMI also pays a lot of attention to amateur acting groups. They organize trainings and professional days for group leaders, and invite drama teachers, directors or actors.

As part of his work, Tamás digitizes the drama libraries of professional theaters, so they have all the scripts of the performances of the Újvidéki Theater up to now.

The Vojvodina Hungarian Amateur Actors' Meeting would have been held for the 25th time in 2020 (this year it would have been in Szaján) if the coronavirus epidemic had not intervened. Every year a different settlement hosts the meeting. One year it is held in Bácska, another year in Bánát. And the Bácska-Bánát balance is also monitored from other aspects. One of the prizes of the acting meeting is that a group can perform in a professional theater.

The meeting is a one-week parade with 2-3 performances a day. The main organizer of the event is the Cultural Association, which is a branch institution of the Vojvodina Hungarian Cultural Institute.

Their other important and popular program is MAdT. The MAdT camp is the Vojvodina Hungarian Amateur and Student Theater Camp. Its primary goal is to train acting groups, directing groups and movement groups in the camp. It is of key importance that those who take part should get professional training that they can then use later. The camp lasts for one week and it always takes place in Zenta.

On May 15, 2019, Színtér, the Society of Actors of the Carpathian Basin was established in Lakitelek, and according to the points laid down, the amateur theater groups operating in the Carpathian Basin will perform at each other's place. Accordingly, Kupuszina went to perform in Slovakia on the Elijah Days. Then, the hosts took one of their performances to Kupuszina. They have tendering opportunities, but it is primarily managed by the Cultural Association.

Tamás believes, if there were fixed state norms for amateur acting groups, or a source, target support that could easily be applied for, it should be spent on technology, but there are groups where there is no heating in the rehearsal rooms.

They have a good relationship with professional theaters and if they need something, they lend them the equipment (free of charge). They help amateurs like this. It is of key importance that they should have a heated place to rehearse, the right technology and if they have to sew something, there should be support for that as well.

Tamás Varga says that apart from the amateur and professional sectors, there is also a third one that is not in the spotlight, they are the students at the Academy, who are no longer amateurs, but not yet professionals. The future plans of VMMI include involving the students of the Academy in the mentoring activity in such a way that together with their teachers, they could hold an open class in each settlement.

Another goal is to operate the Színtér (Stage) established in Lakitelek in May 2019, coordinated by Tamás, which brings together the amateur theater groups of the Carpathian Basin. The Carpathian Basin Amateur Acting Camp could be a planned further program.

## **Experience, lessons learnt and facts based on the interviews**

As part of my thesis, I conducted 7 interviews, which took almost 20 hours, including conversations and travelling to the location.

The leaders of the groups proudly reported on their success, about the packed-house performances in the countryside, which meant 60 to 350 spectators depending on the settlement.

Two interviewees mentioned that it is not possible to hold rehearsals in the cultural center in winter because there is no heating (one was in Vojvodina, the other was in Szeklerland).

My interviewees can be grouped into two, ones who like the competitions at meetings or qualifiers, and those who prefer only the meetings.

I received almost the same answer to the question about what the amateur company meant to them and to the members. They think that it is like a big family, where everyone helps each other in their private life as well.

I still follow these groups, I am in contact with the group leaders, therefore, I plan to visit them again to compare what happened after 1 year. Furthermore, it would be useful and informative to conduct interviews with the leaders of amateur theater groups of all the counties to be able to report on the present state.

In Csongrád-Csanád County, amateur acting has been present in several forms. László Kelemen, the first Hungarian theater director, formed acting groups in Csanádpalota, and later he died here as well. Antal Páger was born in Makó. A high school with drama major classes operates in Szentes.

In addition to the good relationship with the county groups, our board maintains good professional relations with the actors of Vojvodina and Szeklerland. Therefore, amateur acting remains an important segment of our profession. It has legitimacy and a role in forming the community.

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Image 1: Actors of Földeák in 1915  
(the photo is owned by Zsuzsa Tamásiné)



Image 2: Actors of Földeák 100 years later, in 2015,  
(photo: Anikó Paraginé Monostori)

