

Star prima donnas as lieux de mémoire at home and abroad *

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In 1934 the leaders of the Budapest Theater Directors' Association decided to determine a maximum daily payment of actors and actresses.¹ Why was such an agreement necessary? Because the managers of the competing private theaters were willing to pay ruinous sums for those stars who could guarantee the profitability of their theaters or save them from bankruptcy. After a debate, the directors agreed on a daily maximum of 70 pengő² for actors and 120 pengő for actresses. However, they permitted an exceptional category for “actors and actresses with international value” for whom no pay limit was established. Among the six stars listed by name in this category, I intend to examine three actresses in respect of their status as cultural icons: Sári Fedák (“Zsazsa”) (1879–1955), Marika Röck (1913–2004), and Franciska (“Franci”) Gaál (1904–1973). These actresses were chosen both because their main province was entertainment (operetta and musical comedy) and because, of those listed, they had the longest and most remarkable international careers across very different sociocultural settings. The transcultural trajectories of their careers will be analyzed from two aspects. I will examine how their cross-border popularity was facilitated by particular agents of the international theater and film industry network. Then, looking at the wider cultural context, I will discuss how the Hungarian press (and more closely, the extremely popular and widely distributed theater weekly, *Színházi Élet*) mediated their fame and contributed to the construction of their personae as transnational icons. The most important mediator between Hungarian and foreign entertainment to be mentioned in this essay is Imre Roboz, managing director of Vígszínház (Comedy Theatre) and president of the Budapest Theater Directors' Association. During their careers, all three star prima donnas had professional relationships with Roboz, and his intense activity within the international business network greatly shaped their international careers. This process will be illustrated with documents retrieved from the records of Vígszínház held in the Theatre Collection of the National Széchényi Library.

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METHODS AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Up until the 1990s, the transcultural business relations of commercial theaters were not considered an important research topic in Hungary. This is because after the nationalization of theaters in 1949, Budapest's cosmopolitan entertainment industry was, from the perspective of the state-sponsored and -controlled cultural politics introduced in the new socialist society, viewed as a negative counterexample. For the record, however, the topic of "theatrical commodification" was not in the forefront of theater studies anywhere. This subject field was introduced by newer scholarship on cultural history and has only recently become popular. Christopher Balme proposes to study the dynamics of theatrical commodification because:

It is possible to observe the passage of theatrical goods across time and space and the changes they undergo. The term "theatrical goods" encompasses any aspect of a production that might enter economic circulation: texts, production concepts, songs, dance routines, costumes, and of course, the performers themselves. It is important to stress that theatrical goods be understood as a wider concept than just the run of the play, although this is invariably the beginning of the commodification process (2005, 4).

Within this perspective I will interpret famous prima donnas as "theatrical goods" marketable abroad. Drawing on Imre Roboz's English-language business correspondence, I aim to explore the recognition of these stars within international business circles by focusing on a group of professionals – composed of both Hungarians and foreigners – whose prior interest was selling theatrical items, including actresses, in an open market. For understanding the intensely international relations of Vígszínház in the 1920–1944 period, it is indispensable to consider that it was the only theater in Budapest under foreign (here, American) ownership. Ben Blumenthal, president of the New York-based United Play Corporation and Central-European representative of the Paramount Corporation, bought Vígszínház after the First World War. In 1921, he appointed Imre Roboz – a young businessman socialized in the Hungarian silent film industry – managing director of Vígszínház. The man behind all the theater's transcultural relations was Adolph Zukor, the Hungarian-born president of Paramount, who wanted access to the Central and East European market, where the Germans had long-established distributor contacts and where the Americans were still relatively weak. The ties to Paramount enlarged Vígszínház artists' international career chances, as Zukor and his colleagues attended their performances several times. Zukor came to Pest in 1930 to prepare a new Paramount European business strategy related to the appearance of the talkie. He assigned Imre Roboz to coordinate the shooting of the Hungarian versions of some Paramount talkies in the Paris studio of the company. Since then, Roboz became a broker of ideas, a driving force behind collaborations between the Budapest theater market and the talking film industry. In 1932 he was commissioned by Paramount to send a synopsis of all plays opening in Budapest theaters and assess their performances (Heltai 2015). His correspondence reveals the argumentation by which Hungarian stars were promoted to the decision makers of cosmopolitan show business.

For describing the special attractiveness of the three prima donnas, I find the theatrical model constructed by Marco de Marinis the most convincing. He stated

that “traditional comic acting” represents an alternative to the realistic-imitative acting style. It is linked to special popular genres (revue, variety and operetta) and emphasizes the unique expressive personality of an actress. Stars sporting this acting style have a different attitude to the dramatic material, a special performance technique, and a very intense relationship with the audience (De Marinis 1994, 175).

The above-mentioned characteristics are applicable to the star prima donnas. Originally, the sopranos of opera were called prima donnas but later, and especially in Hungary, the leading ladies of operettas monopolized the name. The first operetta prima donna who could be seen as transcultural icon was Hortense Schneider, the star of Jacques Offenbach’s Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiens. Thanks to their charismatic on-stage presence and “eternal youth,” the celebrated prima donnas became meaningful, and sometimes contested, elements of cultural memory in different socio-cultural contexts. They were objects of desire for men, role models for women. Their seductive personalities inspired novels, articles, operettas, and further plays. Due to their status as cultural icons, their stage appearances often inspired politicized interpretations and sometimes had political consequences.

In my earlier discussions on the topic (Heltai 2004, 2014), I found that in the second half of the nineteenth century, in the period of Hungarian nation building, there were two competing types of prima donna images in the country. Lujza Blaha (1850–1926) was the first national prima donna and in this capacity, she can certainly be regarded a cultural icon: a personality whose importance is recognized by a considerable number of members of a culture, to whom positive values are attached, and who represents shared cultural experience. Blaha, who was called the “nightingale of the nation,” embodied desired cultural characteristics mainly in folk-type musical plays (*népszínmű*) but also in operettas. She was the star of Népszínház (“popular theatre”/“Volkstheater”), which had been opened in Pest in 1875 first and foremost for staging musical entertainment genres. On the other hand, in the less privileged field of show business (variety, revues) the “cosmopolitan prima donna” fascinated male audiences. Opposed to the dignified “national prima donna,” she ignored taboos: she was sexually provocative both on stage and in her private life. An archetype of the latter was Carola Cecília, the star of Somossy Orfeum. These differing prima donna characters often reappeared in operetta librettos as fictional figures, this practice further strengthening the cult around real-life prima donnas. The net of references related to the history of Pest show business became even richer by the convention that new star prima donnas (Hanna Honthy, Sári Fedák) usually performed as their predecessors on stage. In doing so, they accumulated and perpetuated cultural meanings associated to their elder colleagues. These plays were very popular and financially rewarding in the Pest theater market. In the twentieth century, the sharp differentiation between national and cosmopolitan prima donnas no longer existed.

SÁRI FEDÁK (“ZSAZSA”) (1879–1955)

Sári Fedák’s cultural icon status originated from her very long and successful stage career and was closely linked to regime changes in twentieth-century Hungarian history. She began her career during the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, in the theater

of Pozsony (now Bratislava) in 1899. However, around the turn of the century she was already the number one operetta star of the capital, playing leading roles in new Hungarian operettas (*János vitéz* and *Bob herceg*) performed in the two legendary operetta theaters of Pest (Király Színház and Népszínház). Her exceptional popularity continued even after 1920; she was able to save theaters from bankruptcy because her audiences followed her anywhere. Her status as a cultural icon can be substantiated by the fact that the boulevard press has covered the events of her personal life for decades. The transcultural trajectories of her career were connected to the fact that her professional activity coincided with the most successful export period of the Budapest cosmopolite theater market:

By the end of the nineteenth century, Paris, Vienna, and London were the capitals of operetta, with hundreds of operetta troupes playing other cities throughout the world. After World War I, Berlin, Budapest, and New York increased their exports to such an extent that they joined the list of principal operetta cities (Traubner 1983).



Fig. 1. Sári Fedák as Kukoricza Jancsi.
Photo: Strelisky

Although Fedák's career was mainly based in Hungary, she had a parallel international career. Encouraged by Max Reinhardt, since 1908 she regularly performed in German in Vienna and Berlin. After the dissolution of the Habsburg monarchy, Fedák was not only the number one entertainer in Hungary, but also a cultural icon of a politically insecure and economically shrunken nation-state. The society and political class of Hungary struggled with the consequences of the Trianon Peace Treaty that reduced the country's territory by two thirds and its population by one third. Significant numbers of Hungarians found themselves as minorities within neighboring countries. Being personally affected by these border changes (Fedák was

born in Beregszász, now Beregovo, Ukraine), she often tackled questions related to the Trianon Treaty in her memoir (Fedák 1928) and articles. She considered it her mission to perform regularly for Hungarian minorities abroad. What is more, the theater weekly *Színházi Élet* represented Fedák's 1922 tour in the United States as an event linked to Hungarian cultural diplomacy fighting against the decisions of the Trianon Peace Treaty despite the fact that Fedák's tour was not related to any state organization or institution.³ From December 1926 until January 1927 Fedák made another tour of the US, one which already had less politicized interpretations in the theatrical press. With her own company, she played the title role of *Antónia* by Melhior Lengyel in New York, Pert Amboy, South Bethlehem, Philadelphia, Newark, Passaic, Buffalo, Pittsburg, and McKeesport (Bodó 2001). She had already performed the role in German in Vienna and Berlin. Based on Fedák's domestic cult and her international experiences, it was a logical decision that Imre Roboz wanted to enlist Fedák for a Paramount movie. His letter reveals the kind of financial and symbolic importance Roboz attributed to Fedák's presence in the Hungarian version of the film *Paramount Parade*:

On basis of my discussion with Mr. Földes I cabled you today that I gave orders by telephone to Mr. Hegedűs who is still staying in Paris to take up communication with Mrs. Fedák whom I should propose as the best for this role. Mrs. Fedák is not a young woman, but she is one of the most popular and finest actresses of our country who gets the greatest salary on stage here in Budapest. This summer she visited several times our studio and has shown an extraordinary interest for the talkie. I hope that Mr. Hegedűs will succeed to win Mrs. Fedák for our matter.⁴

Fedák did not accept the role in the talkie. However, in 1933 she co-financed *Iza néni* (Miss Iza) and played its title role. The plot touched on the sensitive question of Hungarian minorities abroad, but the film was not a hit. Nevertheless, *Miss Iza* already anticipated Fedák's new stage and screen image. It was connected to revisionism, the main intention of the Hungarian interwar governments, as they worked for the revision of the Trianon Treaty conditions, especially its frontier clauses. Fedák had inspired and encouraged the writing of new operettas whose leading parts no longer belonged to the conventional prima donna type (a young, beautiful soprano) but to a wise and still-attractive middle-aged lady of the Hungarian gentry (Fedák). These plots generally referred nostalgically to those regions that, after the Trianon Treaty, did not belong to Hungary. Although they were not propaganda plays, their popularity surely owed a lot to their political context. In 1938, Germany concluded treaties in Munich and Vienna according to which Southern Slovakia and Northern Transylvania were returned to Hungary. While Fedák's new operettas were big hits in Budapest, these plays – and Fedák's Hungarian status as a cultural icon – got an especially emotional and cultural meaning when she performed these roles in cities that once again belonged to Hungary (Kolozsvár/Cluj and Szabadka/Subotica, for example). The theatrical press regularly depicted the emotional reaction of local Hungarian audiences while it kept silent about the reaction of Romanian, Serbian, and other communities. The entanglement of Fedák's image with political issues tainted by nationalism was the main reason why she could not continue her career in the changed political context

after 1945, when even nostalgic longing for the lost territories – which now belonged to “friendly states” in the socialist Bloc – came to be a taboo. Also during that time, the locally and internationally recognized Hungarian boulevard theater tradition of the 1920–1944 period was forcefully discredited as “bourgeois.” Hungary became part of the Soviet Bloc and socialist realist aesthetics invaded even the practice of musical theater. It was precisely for her status as *lieu de mémoire* that the Communist political campaign of counter-propaganda could choose Sári „Zsazsa” Fedák as a symbolic figure of the cultural heritage of the interwar Horthy era, stigmatized as fascist (Heltai 2011). The Communist press ridiculed the boulevard tradition in order to undermine Fedák’s popularity. Well-known lines taken from her legendary operetta songs were very often parodied with an ideological tinge in the Communists’ humor magazine *Ludas Matyi* (Mattie the Goose-Boy) between 1945 and 1947 in an effort to alienate audiences from the actress. Furthermore, Fedák was condemned to prison in 1946 by the people’s tribunal, subsequently banned from the socialist stage forever, and forcefully displaced from Budapest. Fedák did not commit any crime; she was sentenced because of the cultural and political meanings connected with her image; in 1995 a court posthumously cleared her of all charges. Three detailed secret service reports from 1955 reveal how, despite the deliberate erasure of the actress from public view, the Communist Party was afraid of the reactivation of her memory, even nearly ten years after her banning from the stage (Heltai 2004). On the other hand, the actors and spectators who organized her 1955 funeral used its occasion for contesting the official depreciation of Fedák and emphasizing her *lieu de mémoire* status.

MARIKA RÖKK (1913–2004)

Marika Rökk started to perform on the stages of Paris and Broadway as a child revue dancer. She returned to Hungary in 1929 with skills and experiences acquired in international show business. Not surprisingly, she almost immediately became a very successful, in-demand and demanding, prima donna in Pest. Very quickly, she also became an international movie star via German musical films made by Universum Film AG (UFA)⁵ during the Nazi period. Unsurprisingly, her German movie star image acquired a range of meanings before and after the fall of the Nazi regime. After the war, Rökk was attacked as a propagandist of Nazi ideas, banned from her profession in Germany, but later rehabilitated in 1947; she then had a long and very successful prima donna career in Viennese musical theater and the German film industry. However, her image remained forever tainted by her career ties to the Third Reich. Rökk did not live in Hungary during the Communist period, but her acting style and pronunciation preserved some Hungarian flavor.

I do not intend to discuss the meanings or consequences of Rökk’s presence in the UFA films or her responsibility as an entertainer for the crimes of the dictatorial regime. (As their countries suffered under different types of dictatorships during the twentieth century, Central European celebrities of the time often faced the danger of cultural appropriation.) I would rather offer some documents for better understanding the dynamics of theatrical commodification and the decisive role that theater and film business networks may have played in determining the direction of

a career abroad. Using archive material related to Rökk's planned engagement by the Paramount Publix Corporation, I want to point to the fact that Marika Rökk could have easily become an American film star. The association of her image with the UFA comedy musicals was paradoxically due to the financial troubles of Paramount. Imre Roboz was also involved in the Paramount's search for "new feminine personalities." His instinct worked well, and immediately after Rökk's first stage success in Budapest, Roboz proposed her for the company in one of his letters addressed to Frank Farley, the Paris representative of Paramount:

Yesterday was the general dress rehearsal of the operetta *Katze im Sack* in one of the minor theatres. In this play a new actress earned a great success: Marika Rökk. She is quite young, 20 years old, very pretty, can dance excellently, and has also a pretty good voice, which could be properly developed. As I understood, the girl, lived for years in New York, and is speaking English exceedingly well. I do not know whether she has abilities for the screen, but after her success of yesterday it is undoubtful, that she is the new prima donna candidate. Under the hands of a good director she will become the first star in 1–2 years. I feel it to be my duty to call your attention to her. Next time, when you or Mr. Ike Blumenthal will stay in Budapest, I shall introduce her to you.⁶

Farley's answer reveals the cautiousness of the company that had endured a considerable financial loss in 1932:⁷

Will you please find out how much money Marika Rökk would want to go to Hollywood? We are, as you know, looking for screen personalities who speak English well and who would not want too much money for the first year or so in Hollywood. If Marika Rökk would go to Hollywood to say 100.00 \$ a week for the first six month, \$ 200.00 a week for the next six months, etc. we should like you to have an English speaking motion picture test made in one of the Studios in Budapest.⁸



Fig. 2. Marika Rökk. Photo: Baumann

Roboz's proposition seems to have interested Paramount because, only one day later, he got a new assignment: Roboz became the Budapest coordinator of the "new screen personalities for Hollywood" program. From the written instruction he received, it is clear that for the studio the female body was a commodity and the actresses were treated as theatrical goods:

At the present time the Hollywood Studio is more in need of women than men, and the "sex-appeal" type of women is more in demand than the 'Janet Gaynor' type. The artist to be tested must, of course, have youth, good-looks, proved ability and, above all, personality. In your best judgment she should be definitely of Hollywood caliber. The artist must speak English well. This is absolutely essential. We are searching particularly for young artists who have not yet become well enough known to be able to demand large salaries and who will be willing to go to Hollywood for a reasonable amount of money.⁹

Marika Rökk did not accept the low-cost offer of Paramount. Roboz warned Farley in vain:

In my opinion it is quite impossible that she would be willing to leave for Hollywood for the proposed 100 dollars – a week. As I informed you, she has now a great success here and in fact she is the first young star on the field of musical theatres. She receives now in a little theatre, where she is playing now, a fee of pengő 80 a night, about 100 dollars – for a week. With her new contract, she will be engaged by the Fővárosi Operetta Theatre, where she will get P 120 a night, that is 50% more. I do not think she would be contented even with this amount.¹⁰

The company hesitated, despite the fact that a famous Hollywood director also realized Rökk's talent, and her potential market value. Thereupon Farley replied:

Mr. Lubitsch told me that he liked Marika Rökk when he saw her in Budapest. As I understand, she wants at least 500 dollars to go to Hollywood. Do you know of any picture, either Hungarian or German in which she had appeared?"¹¹

Besides higher pay, Rökk also had other stipulations, as Roboz reported:

Mr. Ike Blumenthal rang me up today in this matter and told me that in his opinion it is impossible to accept the two conditions made by her besides the financial terms, namely that the contract is to be made merely for one year and secondly, that she would undertake main roles only.¹²

Although a test was made in Budapest, Rökk finally accepted the offer of UFA, which probably was more rewarding financially and professionally. Rökk's international success in the 1930s and 1940s was appreciated in Hungary, but her German musical films never turned her into a prima donna icon comparable to Fedák. In an article published in *Színházi Élet*, Rökk is represented as a facilitator of cultural exchange between Hungary and Germany. In a public-relations type of promotional event, Rökk taught modern dances to the members of a village dance group who, in return, taught her Hungarian folk dances and songs. The last sentence of the article says:

Finally, a chap taught Marika original, beautiful Hungarian songs. The prima donna noted down the text of some of them. Who knows, perhaps we will meet some of these songs in one of Marika's future German films.¹³

In the article, Rökk was not represented as a traitor of traditional Hungarian values, but rather someone who enriches the cosmopolitan culture by Hungarian folk-songs. As this was a period of Hungarian politics having an increasingly German orientation, Rökk's growing popularity in German-speaking films fit into the general trends of that period.

FRANCISKA GAÁL (1904–1973)

The third prima donna icon with a transcultural career trajectory was Franciska Gaál. She rarely played in operettas, rather in comedies and musical comedies. Otherwise, she possessed all characteristics attributed to prima donnas: very intense on-stage presence, “Hungarian temperament,” capricious personality, and scandals during rehearsals. She was demanding, talented, and very popular. In the 1920s she played leading roles in Vígszínház where, because of the “long runs” she had made, her extravagant behavior was tolerated. Her most admired stage character was the teenage boyish girl, often in drag. Gaál was a star, and the agents of Vígszínház were looking for plays suitable for her. As Adolph Zukor and other Paramount bosses regularly saw the shows of Vígszínház, they discovered Gaál's star potential and wanted to recruit her in 1927. She was an unkind negotiator and did not accept the offer. Later it was a rival US company, the Berlin branch of Universal Studios, that next discovered Gaál. The production manager of Deutsche Universal-Film AG, Joe Pasternak, had Hungarian origins and was persuaded by Gaál's talent, but his decision to hire her was not welcomed at first. Gaál did not speak German (or any foreign language), was very small, and wasn't particularly young. However, she had extremely strong willpower and her very first German language comedy, *Paprika* (1932), produced by the Berlin unit of Universal, would make her a star not only in Germany but in many countries where the Universal sold the movie. Before Hitler came to power, a whole group of Hungarian entertainers worked in the German capital. Unfortunately, Gaál did not have a long time to enjoy her international fame. As she was Jewish, her films were banned and she had to leave Berlin. She continued shooting German-language comedies in Wien and Budapest. After the Anschluss, Gaál had to move again. In the summer of 1938, she accepted the offer of Paramount. Roboz, as in the cases of Fedák and Rökk, spoke well of Gaál, pointing out her high commodity value on the Hungarian entertainment market:

I was glad to learn from your letter that Franciscska Gaál is leaving for Hollywood through Paris. I hope that Paramount's expectations in connection with her contract will come true. Undoubtedly, for the Budapest office, i.e. for the Hungarian Distribution a Gaál Picture will be a big hit. She is very talented actress, and though not quite young, I wouldn't be surprised if she would make a big career in Hollywood.¹⁴

Although Gaál's Paramount movies were not particularly successful, Roboz continued to back her career in Hollywood by proposing plays suitable for her: “George Marton handed me over a book by Ludwig Hirschfeld, *Das ist nicht für Kinder*. Marton thinks this would be a very good vehicle for Franziska Gaál.”¹⁵ He reassured the company that its plans related to Gaál would be financially rewarding:

I presume it will be of interest for you to learn that the opening of Jacques Deval's *Soubrette* took place last Saturday in the Vígszínház. I understand this story has been purchased some time ago for Franciska Gaál by Paramount. I think it is my duty to inform you that the play is a very great success here and the press as well as the public is enthusiastic about it.¹⁶



Fig. 3. Franciska Gaál. From the artist's personal collection. Courtesy: Anna Geréb

However, as it can be seen from Farley's letter on 27 October 1938, Gaál's position became insecure at Paramount: "Incidentally, we are now making the play [*Soubrette* – G. H.] into a picture and the title will be said in French. Olympe Bradna is going to play the girl's part instead of Franziska Gaál." Gaál's contract was not prolonged at Paramount so, because of her professional disillusionment and her mother's illness, Gaál returned to Budapest in 1939. It was a bad decision. Due to the new anti-Jewish laws,¹⁷ she had few professional possibilities. Later, when the German army invaded Hungary on 19 March 1944, Gaál and her husband had to hide in the Balaton region. When, roughly a year later, the Soviet Army reached Balatonföldvár and freed them from hiding, it happened that the Soviet soldiers knew and appreciated her. They had seen *Peter* (1934) and *Kleine Mutti* (1935, Little Mother) that were extremely popular in the Soviet Union. (Under Stalin, very few films were shot and even fewer imported from the West.) Some of Gaál's musical comedies were evaluated as progressive art in the USSR: in *Peter*, for example, a young woman masquerades as man in order to find work. Anna Geréb, a Hungarian film historian, writing in her book published in Russian on Franciska Gaál, reveals that a Soviet politician participating in the 1934 Venice film festival saw and liked one of Gaál's films (Geréb 2014, 100). Later, three of these movies would be bought by the USSR. Their extreme popularity arose from the fact that these were the first Western-type musical comedies shown there. Gaál

was the first Hungarian actress invited to the Soviet Union in 1945. She spent three months there, visited Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev and Odessa, and met many artists and the enthusiastic audience of her films. Returning to Budapest, she received a film assignment presumably because of her Soviet connections. But the movie (*Renee XIV*) remained uncompleted. Although she played two roles in *Vígyszínház*, she wanted to return to the US. For Fedák, the Soviet Army and Communist rule meant the end of her career, while Gaál's unanticipated popularity in the Soviet Union brought about a new artistic start for her in Communist Hungary. The always-helpful Imre Roboz could no longer give Gaál his professional advice as, at the end of 1944, he was killed by the Arrow Cross (the Hungarian fascist party). In 1947, Gaál chose the capitalist theater and film industry. Although members of the Hungarian community of artists in New York tried to help her, she only got one role on Broadway, and had one cabaret show for the Hungarian émigré audience in 1951 in New York.¹⁸ Her film hopes disappeared, and she died in isolation.

CONCLUSION

In all three cases discussed here, there seem to have been different relations between the prima donnas' home popularity and the transcultural trajectories of their careers. This becomes even more obvious if we examine their afterlives. Although her popularity on the German and US stages was emphasized in the Hungarian press of the first half of the twentieth century, Fedák appears to have remained first and foremost a Hungarian cultural icon. She has almost been forgotten outside Hungary, her cult abroad only active in her native city Beregszász/Beregovo. On the other hand, Fedák's cult was reborn in Hungary after 1990. She is now remembered as a prominent representative of boulevard culture and as a victim of Communism. Her secret memoir, *Te csak most aludjál, Liliom* (Please sleep, Liliom) was published in 2009. Based on its text, a monodrama entitled *Fedák* has been written and is on the program of the National Theatre. Fedák has become a legendary prima donna on par with Lujza Blaha.

Marika Röck's Hungarian career was shorter than her German and Austrian popularity. In Germany she got the Bambi prize in 1948, 1968, 1987, 1990 and 1998, the Deutscher Filmpreis in 1981, and the Bavarian Film Award in 1987. However, her German language films are not shown in Hungary, and there is no Hungarian book dedicated to her career.

Franciska Gaál's afterlife is most surprising. As I have already mentioned the boulevard tradition of the 1920–1944 period was depreciated for decades. So the exceptionally talented actress and prima donna Franciska Gaál has been forgotten in Hungary. Her German and US films are not shown. However, Gaál still has found continuous popularity in Russia. In addition to Russians keeping her memory alive through fan clubs, Russian theater scholars also examine and appreciate her, and an exhibition commemorated her in the prestigious A. A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum in Moscow (*I Am Here! Relics, Documents, Photos*, 2014). Hungarian film historian Anna Geréb curated the exhibition and she also published, in Russian, an award-winning first book on Gaál's career (Geréb 2014). This long-lasting linkage

has been unique, because despite fifty years of common history in the Soviet Bloc, we know of few common interests in the field of mass culture.

NOTES

- ¹ OSZK SZT Irattár Budapesti Színigazgatók Szövetsége (Theatre Collection of National Széchényi Library, Papers of the Budapest Theater Directors' Association) 219 2594 – June 1, 1934.
- ² Pengő was the monetary unit of Hungary between 1927 and 1946. In 1937, 1 dollar equaled 5.40 pengős. The average monthly payment for an employee was about 200 pengős.
- ³ She performed in popular Hungarian plays in New York, Bridgeport, Philadelphia, South Bethlehem, Trenton, New Brunswick, Passaic, Pittsburg, Duquesne, Detroit, Lorain, Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Chicago. For a full list of her US repertoire, consult Bodó 2001.
- ⁴ OSZK SZT Irattár Vígyszínház 374, Roboz to Robert T. Kane – August 26, 1931. I am citing here the original English-language correspondence.
- ⁵ For example *Hallo Janine!* (1939), *Frauen sind doch bessere Diplomaten* (1941).
- ⁶ OSZK SZT Irattár Vígyszínház 374, Roboz to Farley, November 2, 1932.
- ⁷ In the period of the Great Depression, “[t]he loss [...] was a staggering \$21,000,000. Paramount-Public stock dropped rapidly. This was particularly embarrassing because in purchasing many of the theaters we had paid with stock which we had agreed to repurchase at a liked high sum” (Zukor – Kramer 1953, 262).
- ⁸ OSZK SZT Irattár Vígyszínház 374, Farley to Roboz, November 17, 1932.
- ⁹ OSZK SZT Irattár Vígyszínház 374, Farley to Roboz, November 18, 1932.
- ¹⁰ OSZK SZT Irattár Vígyszínház 374, Roboz to Farley, November 21, 1932.
- ¹¹ OSZK SZT Irattár Vígyszínház 374, Farley to Roboz, December 30, 1935. Ernst Lubitsch (1892–1947) German American film director and producer. In 1935 he was the head of production at Paramount. His most famous movies were: *Monte Carlo* (1930), *The Merry Widow* (1934), *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife* (1938), *Ninotchka* (1939), *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940), and *To Be or Not to Be* (1942).
- ¹² OSZK SZT Irattár Vígyszínház 374, Roboz to Farley, January 14, 1933.
- ¹³ N. N.: Naponta kínálnak külföldi szerződéseket a Gyöngyösbokrétának. In *Színházi Élet*, 25 (1935), 35, 10–15. (Translation G. H.)
- ¹⁴ OSZK SZT Irattár Vígyszínház 374, Roboz to Farley, October 10, 1936.
- ¹⁵ OSZK SZT Irattár Vígyszínház 374, Roboz to Farley, December 31, 1937.
- ¹⁶ OSZK SZT Irattár Vígyszínház 374, Roboz to Farley, October 19, 1938.
- ¹⁷ The second anti-Jewish law (May 5, 1939) defined Jews racially and restricted their numbers to six percent of theater and movie actors.
- ¹⁸ April 14, 1951 – New York, Kaufmann room (Bodó 2001, 228).

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Star prima donnas as lieux de mémoire at home and abroad

Operetta. Prima donna. Theatrical commodification. Theater industry. Paramount. Imre Roboz.

This paper examines the changing cultural meanings attached to three Hungarian prima donnas: Sári Fedák, Marika Röckk, and Franciska Gaál. All of them were locally and internationally recognized and reached the status of cultural icons during their long careers. Due to their charismatic personality and "eternal youth," legendary prima donnas carried particular meanings and sometime became contested elements of cultural memory in changing socio-cultural contexts. Given their national/ized icon status, their stage appearances abroad often inspired politicized interpretations or had political consequences.

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