

Domestic Space and Professional Identity among Hungarian Actors in the Late 19th Century

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the social and theatre-historical significance of actors' homes within the broader framework of research on the social dimensions of the acting profession in the 19th century. Focusing on Hungarian-language theatre, it examines the intersection of performers' lifestyles and their homes, using the career of Kornélia Prielle as a case study. It explores how the internal structure of an actress's home (with its defined values, microstructures of power, and reflections of lifestyle patterns as both material frameworks and spatial experiences) can be linked

to the contemporary construction of professional identity. In this context, the findings contribute to understanding the embodied performative practices of the actress in question. Drawing from the correspondence and archival records of Kornélia Prielle and her husband, actor Kálmán Szerdahelyi, the study reconstructs their shared domestic space, revealing insights into their standing within the professional community, their living and financial circumstances, and performative aspects of Kornélia Prielle's career, including her repertoire and specific type-role.

KEYWORDS:

domestic space, professional identity, Hungarian theatre, 19th-century actors, Kornélia Prielle, Salon Actress, embodied practice

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC REALITIES OF 19TH CENTURY HUNGARIAN ACTORS

In the second half of the 19th century, the social status of actors across Europe was highly differentiated. Over the course of the century, the perception and societal evaluation of the profession underwent significant changes. Theatre histories often highlight the potential for social mobility, suggesting that previously marginalized actors gained increased recognition and respectability, along with more stable livelihoods and improved income, driven by rising theatre attendance. However, such advancements in social esteem were limited to a select few. While this narrative is present in Hungarian and Anglophone historiography, it remains subject to critique and reinterpretation.¹ The social background of Hungarian actors has so far been only partially explored. Despite the partial availability of statistics, surveys, and analyses, comprehensive studies in this area are lacking. Available resources, such as theatrical encyclopaedias, theatre yearbooks, professional journals, archival documents, city monographs, and memoirs, offer valuable insights, but no systematic assessment of the evolving composition of this professional group has been conducted. Studies on social mobility, including the origins of actors from middle-class, intellectual, or theatrical families, or the entry of nobles into the profession, require further research.² While theatre historiography often concentrates on prominent, exceptional actors, case studies, archival sources tend to remain silent on the broader, less visible professional majority.

Efforts to quantify the profession have been more successful. By 1873, 32 Hungarian theatre companies employed around 850 actors, categorized by company size. This grew to 40 companies and 1,419 performers by 1897.³ Despite this growth, stratification persisted, with disparities in income, housing, and prestige. While some leading actors in Budapest achieved wealth and recognition, lesser-known provincial actors, auxiliaries, choristers, and dancers remained in precarious conditions.⁴

1 DAVIS, T. C. in her excellent work *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London, New York: Routledge, 1991) employing multiple methodologies challenged the previously dominant narrative of social mobility among actors, as presented in earlier studies such as: SANDERSON, M. *From Irving to Olivier: A Social History of the Acting Profession in England 1880–1983*. London: Athlone Press, 1984; BAKER, M. *The Rising of the Victorian Actors*. Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978.

2 Csilla Kiss examined the social background of 19th-century Hungarian actresses; however, neither the selection criteria nor the proportional representation of her samples across different periods can be considered representative. This highlights the gaps and limitations in the research of this subject. KISS, Cs. "Királynő vagy te a művészet országában!" A színésznői szerepkör vizsgálata a 19. századi Magyarországon. In FÁBRI, A. –VÁRKONYI, G. (eds.). *A nők világa: Művelődés- és társadalomtörténeti tanulmányok*. Budapest: Argumentum, 2007, pp. 89–108.

3 LENHARDT, E. (ed.). *A Magyar Színészet Évkönyve, Névtár 1873-dik évre*. Budapest, 183 p.; PACZONA, A. (ed.). *A Színészek Naptára és Évkönyve 1897-dik évre*. Budapest, 1897. On the data of the National Actors' Association: RAJNAI, E. *A színi kerületi rendszer kialakulása: (1879–1905)*. [Doctoral Thesis]. Budapest: Eötvös Loránd University, Faculty of Humanities, 2010. In National Széchényi Library NSZL, Budapest, Theatre History Collection, Archive/Trattár, MS 711.

4 On the social status of Hungarian actors: RAJNAI, E. Kísérletek a vidéki színészet rendezésére, 1873–1890. In GAJDÓ, T. *Magyar színháztörténet: 1873–1920*. Budapest: Magyar Könyvklub – OSZMI, 2001, pp. 220–265; PINTÉR, M. Zs. A Színészek társadalmi státusza. In GAJDÓ, T. (ed.). *Magyar színháztörténet. 1920–1949*. Budapest: Magyar Könyvklub, 2005, pp. 1065–1123.

The mapping of actors' living standards during this era is equally complex. By the century's end, theatrical publications provided insights into actors' lives, including their homes and leisure activities. Elements of celebrity culture began to emerge, with public fascination centring on successful actors. Figures like the National Theatre's leading performers under the leadership of Ede Paulay – Miklós Feleky and his actress wife Flóra Munkácsy, Kálmán Szerdahelyi with Kornélia Prielle, and Emília Márkus – enjoyed relatively stable financial circumstances and bourgeois comfort, their social and economic position and respectability incomparable to the artists of the century's early decades. However, the new form of celebrity culture in Hungarian theatre only began with the tragedienne Mari Jászai.⁵

DOMESTIC SPACE AS THE REFLECTION OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

This study explores how the internal structure of an actor/actress's home – with its defined values, microstructures of power, and reflections of lifestyle patterns as both material frameworks and spatial experiences – can be linked to the contemporary construction of actor identity. In this context, the findings contribute to understanding the embodied performative practices of the artist in question.⁶

Kornélia Prielle (1826–1906) entered the Hungarian theatre historiography as an outstanding salon actress in French and Hungarian social dramas and as the first permanent member of the National Theatre in Budapest (1881). After her early period as a prima donna in provincial theatre companies, she finally signed a contract with the National Theatre at the age of 35. Her career experienced a revitalization, driven by her creative and innovative abilities, allowing her to perform nearly 300 roles across approximately 3,000 evenings at the National Theatre, complemented by numerous provincial performances.⁷ Her final performance took place in 1902. The cult of French social dramas at the National Theatre and the popularity of salon dramas mark her most resounding triumphs. Salon roles constitute the most part of her repertoire.

The importance of establishing a permanent home for the actress becomes evident when considering her parental home, various temporary accommodations, and the numerous mansions and palaces she frequented throughout her career, all of

5 GAJDÓ, T. A baba belseje. A Jászai-kultusz történetéből. In *Dívák, primadonnák, színésznők. Jászai Mari, Fedák Sári, Karády Katalin*. Budapest: Ernst Múzeum, 2003, pp. 17–31.

6 For a more detailed analysis regarding the performative dimension see BARTHA, K. Á. *Történeti játéktípus és gyakorlat: Prielle Kornélia pályafutásának színházművészeti és társadalmi dimenziói* [Historical Acting Style and Practice: The Theatrical and Social Dimensions of Kornélia Prielle's Career]. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó – EME, 2025. DOI: 10.1556/9789636641399. The first part of the book situates the evolution of Kornélia Prielle's acting style within a biographical and socio-cultural framework, while the second part develops a methodological and conceptual reconsideration of nineteenth-century stage practice, grounded in the analysis of specific performances. The present study overlaps only in part with the chapter titled "Otthonteremtés és professzionális identitás" [Establishing a home and professional identity], *ibid.*, pp. 69–88. The original Hungarian versions of the letters cited in this study are published in that chapter.

7 For more see BARTHA, K. Á. The National Theatre of Kolozsvár (Cluj) in the Network of Hungarian Theatre Companies (Mapping Theatre towns in the Second Half of the 19th Century). In *Musicalogica Olomucensia*, 2023, Vol. 35, No. 1, p. 95. DOI: 10.5507/mo.2023.006.

which likely shaped her aesthetic sensibilities and spatial awareness. Here I briefly refer to only a few of these.

Her childhood home in Máramarossziget (Sighetu Marmației), characterized by its shingled roof, is documented in a visual representation created before its demolition. Upon signing her first contract with the National Theatre in Pest in 1844, Kornélia Prielle resided in a shared house at 23 Kerepesi Road, located near the theatre. At the time, it was common for members of the older acting generation to share their apartments with young, promising performers. Within this arrangement, the 18-year-old Kornélia Prielle, affectionately called ‘Nelli,’ was allocated a room. For instance, during the autumn of 1846, while touring with the theatre company under the direction of Miklós Feleky in Debrecen, she lived in a small side room – typical of the transient accommodations that defined this early stage of her career.⁸

Later in her life, she participated in productions staged by amateur aristocrats at the Károlyi-Csekonics Palace (1869) and contributed to a theatrical performance held at the Karácsonyi Palace (1872) in Budapest, reflecting her involvement in elite cultural circles.

From 1866, Kornélia Prielle lived in a six-room rental apartment at 17 Vas Street, owned by Károly Rakovszky.⁹

The move to Vas Street marked a turning point in her career, allowing her to replace the temporary lodgings and even stagecoach accommodations she had previously used with a stable home. While she considered relocating several times, this apartment remained her anchor until her death. At the time of her move to Vas Street, she had been a member of the National Theatre in Pest for five years. The *Lexicon of Theatrical Arts* describes this period as follows: after renewing her contract in 1861, she “became a respected and celebrated member of the theatre until the end of her life.”¹⁰ (All translations from Hungarian by the author.) However, this seemingly definitive statement masks uncertainties underlying her status. Kálmán Rozsnyai (1871–1948), writer and Kornélia Prielle’s fourth husband since 1905,¹¹ recounts: “The white-haired grande dame herself told me that even during her time as a member of the National Theatre in Budapest, she would often visit Mrs Kornóli, a notorious moneylender, to exchange a pawned dress she needed for the evening for another one or to secure money for food. At one point, her

⁸ PRIELLE, K. Ismeretségem Petőfivel. In *Koszorú*, 1879, Vol. 2, pp. 386–409.

⁹ The building has since been altered; today, the Semmelweis University Faculty of Health Sciences occupies this site. The inventory of the Rakovszky apartment at 17 Vas Street is known from Gábor Gyáni’s analysis. Following the 1891 death of property owner Károly Rakovszky (b. 1814), the inventory described the second-floor apartment as consisting of five rooms, a kitchen, and a hallway. Based on this, Gyáni identified a bedroom, a salon, a dining room, a gentleman’s room, and a fifth space, the wardrobe room. The evaluation of 185 items and 30 decorative objects aligns with that of 4–6 room apartments, totalling 1,092 forints. GYÁNI, G. Polgári otthon és enteriőr Budapesten. In HANÁK, P., et al. *Polgári lakáskultúra a századfordulón*. Budapest: MTA Történettudományi Intézete, 1992, pp. 29–59.

¹⁰ SZÉKELY, Gy. (ed.). *Magyar színházművészeti lexikon*. Budapest: Akadémiai, 1994, p. 625.

¹¹ Kornélia Prielle’s first and third husband was Kálmán Szerdahelyi (since 1848 to 1849, and again from 1869 to 1872; her second husband was Elek Hidassy (1849–1854), and her fourth was Kálmán Rozsnyai (1905–1906)).

circumstances were so dire that she nearly collapsed on the street corner – from hunger.”¹²

The move and relocation may have been prompted by changes in Kornélia Prielle’s family circumstances. Until that time, she had been living with her father, József Prill, a former harness maker from Máramarossziget (Sighetu Marmăției), and her adopted daughter, Antónia, whom she had taken in as an infant. However, during this period, she began cohabiting with Kálmán Szerdahelyi, her first – and later to be third – husband. Their rekindled romance can be traced back to their correspondence starting in the summer of 1864. According to Pál Rakodczay, they formalized their marriage in 1869, and in the spring of that year, the couple undertook renovations on their home.¹³

At this time, she was performing in Kolozsvár (Cluj), giving guest performances between May 4 and 23.¹⁴ Meanwhile, her husband managed the home renovations, as well as planning her summer guest performances between Budapest and Kolozsvár (Cluj).

In a letter dated May 13, 1869, written from Budapest Kálmán Szerdahelyi describes the challenges of dealing with masons and painters and goes on to discuss the furnishing of their home:

“Regarding the furniture, we are in a rather peculiar situation, by which I mean that the costs will exceed our initial calculations. However, as we are already committed, it must be completed. Do not think that I purchased any expensive fabrics; instead, the woodwork of the furniture itself had to be almost entirely redone, as everything was broken. As for the upholstery, none of it can be reused – as I observed first hand, it was entirely unusable.

Your bedroom will be furnished with chamois-coloured cretonne, featuring five-finger-wide chamois stripes alternating with four-finger-wide stripes. These latter stripes have a red center flanked by two green stripes, bordered by two purple ones, interrupted occasionally by a rose motif. I believe it will look beautiful. This same fabric will be used for the window and bed curtains. The price is 80 krajcár¹⁵ per rőf.¹⁶

The salon will be decorated with a fabric of a new style called ‘imitation de gobelin.’ Up close, it resembles coarse felt, but from a few steps away, it looks very fine. This material is particularly well-suited for curtains due to its thick and sturdy weave. Its

12 CARTON, S. [ROZSNAYI K.]. Prielle Kornélia levelesládájából. In *Vasárnapi Újság*, 1902, Vol. 49, No. 22, pp. 349–351, 1 June 1902.

13 RAKODCZAY, P. Prielle Kornéliáról. Rakodczay Pál leveles ládája. NSZL, Budapest, Manuscripts (MS), III, Fol Hung. 1484.

14 During her performances in Kolozsvár (Cluj), in addition to original Hungarian social dramas, she also appeared in the following plays: *Louise de Lignerolle* by E. Legouvé, *La Dame aux Camélias* by A. Dumas fils (as Marguerite Gauthier), *Les Femmes Terribles* by P. Dumanoir (as Madame de Ris), and *Dalila* by O. Feuillet (as Leonora, Princess Falconieri).

15 The krajcár was an old currency unit used in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. It originated from the German kreutzer coin and was in circulation in the Habsburg Empire and later in the Monarchy. It represented smaller denominations, commonly based on the system of 1 forint = 100 krajcár.

16 The rőf is an old Hungarian unit of length traditionally used for measuring fabrics. Its length varied historically, but it is generally accepted to equal approximately 0.78 meters (78 cm) or 31 inches.



Portrait of Kálmán Szerdahelyi and Kornélia Prielle. Photo by Gondy and Egey, Pest, 1860s. National Széchényi Library, Budapest, Theatre History and Music Collection, SZT KA 4814/16.

base color is dark Havana, interwoven with colourful stripes, and it costs 1 forint 60 krajcár per rőf. Mr. Vajdinger also suggested a kind of reps fabric, which was admittedly beautiful, but its price was 2 forint 60 krajcár per rőf, and even higher in other stores. While I liked it, I hesitated due to concerns about moth damage.

For my room, I have chosen a coarse fabric as well, also striped, costing 1 forint per rőf.

I made arrangements for the fabrics with Fischer on Vienna Street, as their prices were the most reasonable. In total, we estimate that just the fabrics will cost around 200 forints. This does not yet include the costs for the carpentry and upholstery work, as well as the considerable amount of padding material required. I believe I am not mistaken in estimating that the furniture will cost at least 450 forints.

Additionally, the painting and polishing – or rather, lacquering – will also incur significant expenses. In summary, we should be prepared for total costs to reach as much as 1,000 forints.”¹⁷

¹⁷ SZERDAHELYI, K.'s letter to K. Prielle, Budapest, 13 May 1869. In NSZL, Manuscripts, Letter Collection.

The reply arrives promptly. Three days later, on May 16, Kornélia Prielle dates her letter from the Ürmössy estate, the family home of lawyer Samu Ürmössy and Borbála Ajtai where she stayed during her guest performances:

“My dear Kálmán, yesterday was the big day, the so-called benefit performance – and as you know, this is always a lively occasion in Kolozsvár (Cluj). Of course, I would like to find everything ready at home; that would bring me great peace and, above all, a sweet surprise. You certainly startled me with the expenses amounting to 1,000 forints – but I agree with you that once begun, it cannot simply be done half-heartedly. On the contrary, let me draw your attention to a few additional expenses that, although I leave entirely to your discretion, I would very much wish to see realized if possible. For example: Would you consider adding curtains to the connecting doors? I would very much like to have them, both in the bedroom and on the doors on either side of the salon. In the salon, a charming little chandelier in the center would be lovely, especially since there will be no paintings there, only the two gilded mirrors on either side, (do not laugh at me), I think a couple of white lacquered statues on white pedestals would look beautiful. It is an inexpensive decoration yet very elegant; I have seen this in a few places. In the bedroom, a hanging night lamp would be lovely. As for Ristori and Rachel, please have their frames replaced, as they are quite worn. Please ensure that my wardrobe cabinets are lacquered without fail.

My dear Kálmán, let us not begrudge ourselves these external embellishments, as we, first of all, deserve them, and secondly, they are indeed necessary in today’s world.

And now let me return briefly to yesterday’s events. There were countless flowers, a rain of poems, boundless enthusiasm, and so many camellias that they would have been enough for ten *Dames aux Camélias*.¹⁸

On 17 May, Kornélia Prielle encloses her Saturday earnings, 200 forints received after her benefit performance of *Marguerite Gauthier*. By return post, on 19 May 1869, Kálmán Szerdahelyi responds with the following update:

“My dear Kornélia, I am still writing from the theatre because the state of disarray at home is worse than ever. Today, they are painting my room; yours, the children’s, and the new hallway are already finished. Perhaps my room and the old kitchen will also be completed today. That leaves the salon, the old dining room, Mama’s room, and the new kitchen to be done by the end of the week. Everything must be finished by Saturday, as Kovács will leave for the countryside on Monday. (...)”

Returning to household matters: I may not be able to make door curtains for the salon because only 50 rőf of fabric was available, and this was needed for the furniture and windows. However, I will look into it this afternoon, and if more can be sourced, I will place an order. As for the bedroom, I will ensure there are as many curtains as the space allows.

Regarding the canopy bed, I thought of having mine refurbished for you, as I could not find one of similar width at the merchants. I did see another bed, but it is so large

18 PRIELLE’s letter to Szerdahelyi, Kolozsvár, 16 May 1869. In *ibid.*

that it would take up two-thirds of your room, and the wood alone costs 85 forints. If we were to equip it with a matching mattress, bedding, and curtains, it would amount to 4–500 forints. I, on the other hand, can sleep on a divan or purchase a cane bed like our chairs. (...) As for a chandelier, the salon is too small, but I am in favour of the statues.”¹⁹

Kornélia Prielle begins drafting her reply on 21 May 1869, but severe headaches force her to continue the next day. She writes:

“Believe me, my dear Kálmán, I am deeply grateful and indebted to you for the extraordinary effort and care you are dedicating to directing the arrangements of the house – for me, the greatest joy will undoubtedly be that it was you who orchestrated it. God forbid we invest in such a 400-forint bed! If you do not purchase a new one, or if you find it more practical to have a smaller and lighter bed for yourself, then I am perfectly agreeable to using yours. However, we must by no means block off the wallpapered door. Believe me, in this refined separation of quarters, I am only seeking the reassurance of ensuring, as far as I am able, constant vigilance and care over the two children, both day and night. (...) Will the large antique mirror fit on the wall between the two windows in the bedroom? Regardless, trust me when I say that I will be satisfied with everything, as you see fit.”²⁰

In the letter, she also sends 200 forints to cover the purchase of various necessary spring items.

What observations can we make, and what conclusions can we draw from the correspondence and other sources regarding the apartment’s structure and furnishings, as well as the family’s actual living and financial circumstances?

The apartment at 17 Vas Street was located in a prestigious district of Pest’s broader inner city, in a rental palace situated very close to the National Theatre. The six-room apartment represents the lower boundary of haut-bourgeois standards but undoubtedly reflects a solid middle-class lifestyle.²¹ The value of the furniture mentioned in the correspondence can be estimated at no less than 1,000 forints, as the refurbishment work for just three of rooms costs 450 forints.

Additionally, they possessed valuable dining room furniture, furnishings for the children’s room, the mother’s room, and the kitchens, as well as the mirrors mentioned in the letters, likely accompanied by the period’s most common suspended gas chandeliers. While these items cannot be accounted for in detail, their estimated value is comparable to those listed household inventories of four- to six-room apartments from the era, pointing to a restrained yet respectable bourgeois milieu.²²

¹⁹ SZERDAHELYI, K.’s letter to K. Prielle, Budapest, 19 May 1869. In *ibid.*

²⁰ PRIELLE’ s letter to K. Szerdahelyi, Kolozsvár (Cluj), 21–22 May 1869. In *ibid.*

²¹ According to the social historian G. Gyáni, apartments with six to ten rooms were considered representative of the haut bourgeois standard. GYÁNI, G. *Parlor and Kitchen: Housing and Domestic Culture in Budapest, 1870–1940*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2002, p. 82.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 50–82.



Kornélia Prielle's salon in Vas Street, Budapest, on the occasion of her seventieth birthday. Photo by an unknown photographer, Budapest, 1896. National Széchényi Library, Budapest, Theatre History and Music Collection, SZT NSZK KC IV.130.

A detailed inventory of furnishings for each room is not feasible due to insufficient sources. However, Kornélia Prielle's correspondence, supplemented by other sources, allows for a partial reconstruction of the furnishings and the family's material environment.

Kálmán Szerdahelyi's room, referred to by him as 'my room,' embodies the characteristics of a 19th-century gentleman's room or male study, an essential part of middle-class homes at the time. Among intellectuals, such a room often functioned as a study. Its essential furnishings typically included a desk, chairs, an armchair, and often a divan or couch, which could also serve as a bed. The latter is mentioned by Mrs Mályusz, who noted, "Szerdahelyi would stretch out on the low couch in his room, where he loved to smoke cigars and read French authors."²³

The room also contained a wardrobe, a bookshelf, and a personal library. Items acquired during his 1862 trip to Paris and later travels with Kornélia Prielle in 1871 were likely housed here. These included numerous volumes bound in dark green

23 MÁLYUSZ-CSÁSZÁR, E. *Egy színészházaspár élete: Szerdahelyi Kálmán és Prielle Kornélia*. Budapest : Művelt Nép Tudományos és Ismeretterjesztő Kiadó, 1956, p. 219.

half-cloth with gilt lettering on the spines, comprising plays and encyclopaedias, as well as Gustave Doré engravings that adorned the walls.²⁴

A prized item, likely placed on the desk, was a leather-bound album from the 1860s, decorated with floral motifs and featuring engraved brass corner protectors and a clasp. The album contained carte-de-visite-sized portraits of contemporary actors from Hungary, Germany, and France, individuals with whom Kálmán Szerdahelyi maintained connections. The room also featured textile decorations, such as wall tapestries, rugs, and the window and door curtains mentioned in correspondence.²⁵

Kálmán Szerdahelyi's profession is reflected in the many drama volumes, artworks, and memorabilia he received during his career. He likely spent much of his time here when at home, working at his desk, writing, translating or memorizing texts and reading on the divan. During visits, this space served as a retreat for male company to converse, smoke pipes, and enjoy each other's company.

Kornélia Prielle's room, referred to by Kálmán Szerdahelyi as 'your bedroom' or 'your room,' likely also functioned as a female boudoir. This room contained the actress's canopy bed, a standing night lamp, religious images, albums, her large antique mirror, and portraits of actresses Rachel Félix and Adelaide Ristori, who had performed on the stage of the National Theatre in Budapest in the 1850s (in 1851 and 1856, respectively). Rachel Félix and Adelaide Ristori's acting skills and careers may have served as professional role models for her. Given her profession, her clothing, accessories, stage makeup, and powders likely required significant storage space.²⁶ Part of her wardrobe was kept in the hall.²⁷

Following her husband's death, she offered this room in 1874 to her actress sister Lilla, who had also been recently widowed. In February 1877, she wrote: "a whole room, the one above the gate, which used to be my bedroom when Kálmán was alive, is at your disposal. It already contains a bed, a chiffonier, and a washstand."²⁸

The family correspondence reveals that a bathroom was also furnished, equipped with a bathtub and a 'douche apparatus.'²⁹ This bathroom reflects the remarkably modern expectations of the household's woman, as the installation of bathrooms in Budapest's more refined apartment buildings only became common practice in the 1880s.³⁰

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 99–100.

²⁵ Szerdahelyi Kálmán fényképalbuma. [online]. [cit. 28 January 2025]. Available at: http://kozvilagitas.blogspot.ro/2016_06_01_archive.html.

²⁶ PRIELLE's Letter to K. Szerdahelyi, Debrecen, 3 August 1865. In *ibid.* PRIELLE's Letter to K. Szerdahelyi, Miskolc, 10 April 1867. In *ibid.*

²⁷ PRIELLE's Letter to K. Szerdahelyi, Balatonfüred, 19 August 1871. In *ibid.*

²⁸ PRIELLE's Letter to Lilla Prielle. Budapest, 20 February 1877. In *ibid.*

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ BUZINKAY G., A középosztály lakásideálja. In HANÁK, P., et al. *Polgári lakáskultúra a századfordulón*. Budapest: MTA Történettudományi Intézete, 1992, pp. 19, 20.

If we attempt to establish the hierarchy of the mentioned spaces, the drawing room or salon stands out based on the cost of its textiles and fabrics. This aligns with the organizational principles of middle-class housing and domestic culture in the period. Evidently, the most significant investments were made in the representational space, although economical décor items were not avoided either. The salon as a reception room was intended to have a stately appearance and served social functions: a chandelier was planned, and two gilded mirrors adorned the room. Initially, no paintings were to be hung here, only statues. The salon furniture, upholstered in ‘imitation de gobelin,’ is known to have been so elegant that it was even borrowed by the National Theatre to enhance the atmosphere of the staged French social dramas, lending a curious sense of domesticity to the performances of the actor couple.

The impression Kornélia Prielle’s salon left on visitors is exemplified by the account of 21-year-old actress and singer Lujza Blaha, native of Rimavská Sobota (Rimaszombat), later known as the ‘nation’s nightingale,’ who, upon visiting the actress’s home in 1871, found it aesthetically refined and carefully curated, inspiring her to emulate its arrangement in her own residence.³¹ This suggests that her home not only reflected middle-class taste but also functioned as a model of artistic and domestic sensibility within theatrical circles.

Despite following the conventions of middle-class salons, Kornélia Prielle’s drawing room was distinct in incorporating a growing collection of theatrical trophies and numerous artworks accumulated over the years. A photograph from the early 20th century reveals that the salon had significantly changed and expanded since 1869, becoming museum-like in appearance. Many of its furnishings were gifts received during her provincial performances.³² By the turn of the century, the couple’s rich collection of memorabilia had garnered considerable interest, with parts of it exhibited to the public at the National Theatre Exhibition in 1890.

In contrast to the common domestic practice of the era, which primarily ensured the male head of the household a separate space, this family’s approach warrants attention. It reflects a microstructure of power within the household that emphasized individualization, as seen in the naming of private rooms: Szerdahelyi’s room, Prielle’s room, the children’s room (where Tónika/Antónia, their adopted daughter, and Irén Láng, her niece, resided), and Mama’s room, which belonged to Szerdahelyi’s mother.

ECONOMICS OF ACTING: SALARIES, CONTRACTS, AND LIVELIHOODS

Based on comparisons of the incomes of professionals, civil servants, and state officials with those of private sector employees, as well as estimates of household expenses from the period, Erika Szívós concludes that by the late 1880s, an annual income of approximately 1,000 forints, equivalent to the average salary of

31 CSILLAG, I. (ed.). *Blaha Lujza Naplója*. Budapest : Gondolat, 1987, pp.105, 109–110.

32 N. Prielle Kornélia emléktárgyai. In *Vasárnapi Újság*, 1901. Vol. 48. No. 26. p. 415, 30 June 1901.

a secondary school teacher (1,000–1,100 forints), was the minimum required to sustain a middle-class lifestyle for a family.³³

By contrast, Kornélia Prielle's salary during the 1859–1860 season when she was contracted by the National Theatre was 1,900 forints, exceeding those of many of her peers, though still below the 2,200 forints earned by Róza Laborfalvi Jókainé, the highest-paid tragedienne.³⁴

Over time, her income increased significantly, reflecting her rising prominence. In the 1868–1869 season, Kornélia Prielle and her husband, Kálmán Szerdahelyi, received together a salary of 3,703 forints and 34 krajcár from the National Theatre. Her portion was larger, at 2,026 forints and 67 krajcár annually, though her position incurred higher personal expenses, as she had to cover the costs of her own stage costumes. Kálmán Szerdahelyi's annual salary as an actor was 1,676 forints and 67 krajcár.³⁵ However, their income was not limited to these salaries. It was supplemented by revenue from their benefit performances, fees from his translations and directing,³⁶ and additional income from guest performances.

Combined with supplementary earnings their annual income reached at least 6,100 forints in 1870.³⁷ This placed their earnings on par with high-ranking civil servants or university professors.³⁸

Despite this substantial income, the financial demands of their profession (costumes, travel expenses for tours) and the need to support 6–8 dependents, including family members occasionally residing in their apartment, strained their finances.³⁹

After Kálmán Szerdahelyi's death, the functions of the rooms in the apartment underwent some modifications. During this period, Kornélia Prielle's daughter, Antónia, reached adulthood, and her education became a central priority for her mother. Antónia attended the Pest Reformed Girls' Secondary School, received piano lessons (a piano was present in the apartment), studied French, and eventually

33 This figure likely applies to the preceding one or two decades, with a slight downward adjustment, as salaries increased modestly in the 1870s and 1880s. SZÍVÓS, E. *Social History of Fine Arts in Hungary, 1867–1918*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, pp. 77–83.

34 MÁLYUSZ- CSÁSZÁR, E. A rendi Nemzeti Színháztól a polgári nemzet színháza felé (1849–1873). In KERÉNYI, F. (ed.). *A Nemzeti Színház 150 éve*. Budapest: Gondolat, 1987, pp. 37–56.

35 See Kötetes iratok. 646. NSZL, Theatre History Coll.

36 From the 1867/68 theatre season onward, his director's fee was 300 forints per year. PUKÁNSZKYNÉ KÁDÁR J. (ed.). *Nemzeti Színház százéves története*. II. Budapest: Magyar Történelmi Társulat, 1938, p. 393.

37 Their earnings from the guest performances in July amounted to 2,133 forints and 83 krajcárs. See *Szerdahelyi és neje vendégszerepléseinek jövedelmei* [The Earnings from Szerdahelyi and His Wife's Guest Performances.] NSZL, Budapest, MS, An. Lit. 5732.

38 SZÍVÓS, E. *Social History of Fine Arts in Hungary, 1867–1918*. In *ibid.*, p. 83.

39 Additionally, K. Prielle supported the children of all three of her actor siblings. She actively nurtured her niece Ilona Láng's acting career, the daughter of her sister Emília Prielle (1828–1902), who was married to actor and theatre company director Boldizsár Láng. Apart from the Láng daughters, 4–5 Láng boys were also periodically present, receiving food and lodging. She also assisted Sándor Rónai, the son of her sister Lilla Prielle (1832–1877) and her actor husband, Gyula Rónai, as well as her brother, Péter Prielle (1838–1915), whose multiple marriages and children's welfare were a continual concern for her. See her family correspondence in NSZL, Budapest, MS, Letter Collection.

married Zoltán Kovách de Visonta, a landowner, thereby entering the ranks of Budapest's elite social circles.

At times, one of the apartment's rooms was rented to Miklós Ürmösy, son of Kornélia Prielle's close friend Borbála Ajtay, or temporarily used by her sisters, Lilla or Irén, who occasionally helped with household duties. The household also took in paying boarders to supplement income.

Kornélia Prielle employed two maids: her long-serving housekeeper, Alajosné (retained out of loyalty since 1859 despite her age) and a second maid who was periodically replaced. Each was paid 6 forints monthly, with daily food costs around 50 krajcárs. They occupied the apartment's kitchen spaces.

CONCLUSION: DOMESTICITY, CAREER, AND THE SALON ACTRESS ROLE

When Kornélia Prielle articulated her views on bourgeois domesticity at the request of the journal *Háztartás* at the end of the century, she offered a creed that acknowledged the declining universality of the domestic ideal:

"I had begun to doubt that anyone in today's world would reflect on 'domesticity.' Without condemning the opposing trend, I believe that I am grateful to the Creator for allowing me to consistently possess, feel, and enjoy the complete peace that domesticity brings. (...) For an anxious and unsettled state would have ruined my nerves, perhaps even my life.

I can therefore say that my fondness for my modest home, my constant attention to my household order, and the loving care of my family left me only as much time for the pleasures of society as was truly desirable and, to some extent, necessary for me. I neither aspired to nor longed for more. This is my faith in domesticity."⁴⁰

Her reflections reveal that domestic order served not only as personal fulfilment but also as a source of strength in her artistic career.⁴¹ While she affirmed the traditional 'angel of the house' ideal, she also acknowledged its decline and the tension modernity introduced. Her career and homemaking roles were mutually sustaining, and public life did not diminish her domestic commitments.

The Prielle–Szerdahelyi household diverged from conventional 19th-century patriarchal models in both spatial and financial dimensions. The division of rooms reflects an emphasis on individual roles and identities, while Kornélia Prielle's economic prominence underscores a redefinition of gendered authority. These factors suggest a household dynamic marked by negotiation, shared cultural labour, a more egalitarian distribution of authority, and a nuanced distribution of power, rather than simple male dominance.

The death of Kálmán Szerdahelyi in 1872 and her permanent contract with the National Theatre in 1881 further strengthened her dedication to the stage. Unlike

⁴⁰ PRIELLE's letter to Gizella Szemere, Mrs Kürthy Budapest, 8 December 1899. In *ibid.*

⁴¹ On domestic ideology see HALL, C. *The Early Formation of Victorian Domestic Ideology*. In BURMAN, S. (ed.). *Fit Work for Women*, London: Routledge, 1979, pp. 15–32.; LANGLAND, E. *Nobodys Angels: Domestic Ideology and Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Culture*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995, pp. 290–304. On Hungarian context: TÖRÖK, Zs. *A Wohl-nővérek emancipációja*. In *Aetas*, 2015, Vol. 30, No. 1, p. 104.

many contemporaries who retired, Kornélia Prielle embraced her profession with missionary zeal, as reflected in her extensive provincial performances. These tours not only affirmed her commitment to her craft but also served practical purposes, enabling her to support her extended family and sustain her lifestyle.

Despite her distinguished career, the newspaper *Vasárnapi Újság* noted Kornélia Prielle's lack of wealth, as she continued to rent rather than own property. In contrast, her contemporary Lilla Bulyovszky, who expanded her career in prominent German theatres across Europe during the 1850s, secured considerable financial success. This disparity highlights the limited financial recognition afforded to Hungarian national actresses. Unlike Lilla Bulyovszky, whose wealth and connections enabled her to acquire multiple properties, Kornélia Prielle and Kálmán Szerdahelyi, performing exclusively in Hungarian-language theatre, were unable to achieve similar financial security or homeownership.⁴²

The salon actress role type emerges as a pivotal aspect of Kornélia Prielle's career, as most of her performances at the National Theatre aligned with this type (eg., Madame Fourchambault, Marguerite Gauthier, marquise de Menneville etc.).⁴³ According to the lexicon edited by Aladár Schöpflin, the term 'salon actor/actress' denoted a specific role or character type, particularly popular in the late 19th century. It referred to an actor "who, through their mere presence, brought an air of genuine aristocracy to the stage."⁴⁴ This line of business was also prevalent in other European theatrical traditions, described as the 'salon actor' or 'drawing-room actor,' excelling in plays set within the refined milieu of high society.

A defining feature of this role type is its intrinsic connection to spatial experience. Within the theatrical institution, the role of the salon actress carried legal and economic dimensions (reflected in laws, contracts, and salary classifications) alongside its performative aspects, which were deeply influenced by the actress's spatial experiences beyond the stage. Understanding the home as a cultural code integral to the identity of an actress is essential not only from socio-historical and art-historical perspectives but also within the framework of performance studies.

The home, as the material and spatial framework for and shaping of lifestyle patterns, plays a fundamental role in influencing acting styles, stage practices, and embodied theatrical culture. The interplay between domestic and performative spaces reveals an indispensable dimension of Kornélia Prielle's artistic identity and offers valuable insights into the broader cultural and institutional dynamics of 19th-century European theatre.

⁴² On the career of L. Bulyovszky see BARTHA, K. Á. Lilla von Bulyovsky und der ungarische Theaterdiskurs. In NEUHUBER, C. – TAR, G. N. – ULRICH, P. S. (eds). *Das deutschsprachige Theater im Kontext europäischer Kulturgeschichte. Traditionen – Wechselbeziehungen – Perspektiven*. Berlin : LIT Verlag, 2022, pp. 141–157.

⁴³ See the list of her roles: CZENNER, M. *Prielle Kornélia: Emlékbeszéd és adattár*. Budapest : Színháztudományi és Filmtudományi Intézet, OSZM, 1967, pp. 15–26.

⁴⁴ SCHÖPFLIN, A. *Magyar Színművészeti Lexikon*. Budapest : Országos Színészegyesület és Nyugdíjintézete, IV. 1931, p. 168.

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