

**Transcontinental Traverse:
David Harrower's *Knives in Hens* and Other Contemporary
Scottish Plays in the Hungarian Language**

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The steadily growing reputation of contemporary Scottish plays in foreign countries and their languages is well-known to Scotland's critics, theatre practitioners and audiences alike, yet there have been relatively few studies on the international reception of these works and on the impact that they have made on the theatre cultures welcoming them (for Germany, see Raab 2015). Therefore, the aim of the present article is to contribute to the understanding of this reception history by listing the Hungarian theatre productions of contemporary (understood here as post-1989) Scottish plays, many like David Harrower's *Knives in Hens* first performed at Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre, in order to analyse what cultural, linguistic and institutional factors helped the works find a resonance with Hungarian artists and audiences.

As it might not seem evident at first why Hungary could/should become the object for such a study, one has to be reminded of Hungarian literary culture's exceptionally long and eventful trajectory of interchange with Scotland despite the geographical distance and linguistic difference between the two countries. It has been widely documented how Ossianic poetry (Hartvig 2004) and Robert Burns's oeuvre (Marx 1980; Ruttkay 2014) made a decisive impact on Hungarian Romanticism and beyond, and Sir Walter Scott's contribution to the development of the Hungarian historical novel is as significant as is Hungarian critic Georg Lukács's writings for Scott's international reputation (Szamosi 2006). More recently, these literary links were further strengthened by Edwin Morgan's engagement with the Hungarian language and by his translations of Hungarian poets (Hubbard 2006), particularly of Attila József¹ (1905-1937). In the case of drama, however, it seems to be more problematic to find evidence for influential contact before the 1990s. The scarce examples include some plays by Ferenc Molnár (1878-1952), which were staged in Scotland during the playwright's lifetime,² and various adaptations of J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* (1904) since the work's debut in

Hungarian at the prestigious Csokonai National Theatre in the town of Kaposvár in 1985 (dir. Géza Pártos, transl. Pál Sipos). Even though this lack of interchange can partly be explained with Cold War-hibernation and consequent censorship policies, the contrast with fiction and poetry is still striking. It was not until the second half of the 1990s that signs began to appear that drama could be the next platform for cultural dialogue between the two nations.

Both Scotland and Hungary entered the 1990s with a certain short-lived optimism. In Scotland, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's resignation ended the UK-wide Poll Tax turmoil of the late 1980s, and Glasgow's rebranding as the European Capital of Culture in 1990 brought confidence and a vivid arts scene to the city while in Hungary the withdrawal of Soviet troops ended more than forty years of communist oppression, raising hope for better times to come. Expectations, however, were not fully met in either country as minor political and economic crises soon overshadowed these hopeful developments. Meanwhile, the decade's characteristic mode of nostalgic retrospection and pre-millennial paranoia, widespread across globalised cultures, were juxtaposed with unsettling questions of statehood and nationhood in both Scotland and Hungary. While Scotland's campaign for devolution and the resulting reinstatement of her Parliament, dissolved in 1707, re-ran centuries-long debates on the status of the country within the UK and her involvement in the British colonial enterprise, Hungary celebrated the thousandth anniversary of her statehood in 2000, a long trajectory not universally acknowledged by historians. (The source of this dispute is that between 1526 and 1918, Hungary was part of empires and had varying degrees of autonomy.) As a result, Scots and Hungarians were equally faced with postcolonial dilemmas regarding power structures that simultaneously granted them the second rank in a vast empire (e.g. in terms of cities, Edinburgh and Glasgow opposite London, and Budapest opposite Vienna or Moscow) and rendered them in some senses peripheral in the European context. This unusual in-between position regarding the centre and the peripheries, which has provided a chimerical perspective for artists, is a shared experience for the two countries. This, as this article argues, became the basis for the reception of Scottish plays by Hungarian audiences.

In theatre culture, the 1990s were a transitional period from the massive state-governed infrastructures of communist Hungary into a diversified field with no officially imposed ideology, while Scotland benefited from the co-existence of a new generation (e.g. Stephen Greenhorn, David Greig, Zinnie Harris, David Harrower and Nicola McCartney) and new work coming from established playwrights already active in previous decades (e.g. Peter Arnott, Ian Brown, John/Jo Clifford, Sue Glover, Chris Hannan, Liz Lochhead and Rona Munro). These artists responded to their context of a unifying Europe and accelerated globalisation by revolutionising the prevailing framework of Scottish drama, as they experimented with new approaches to space and language in their staging of post-1989 identities. David Greig and David Harrower, in their late twenties-early thirties in the decade, were exceptionally successful at pioneering a playwriting mode of non-specific settings and non-regional language use, thus unconsciously facilitating the foreign reception of their works. Indeed, their masterpieces from the 1990s, especially Greig's *Europe* (1994) and Harrower's *Knives in Hens* (1995), have become a worldwide phenomenon and have been widely translated.³ Meanwhile, other Central European nations have imported their fair share of contemporary Scottish plays with Croatia prominent among them. There, the 1999 publication of *Antologija suvremene škotske drame* [An Anthology of Contemporary Scottish Drama], a selection of five contemporary plays edited by Ian Brown and translated into Croatian by Ksenija Horvat, had a stimulating and long-lasting effect on the reception of Scottish drama in the country and its neighbours sharing the same or a closely related language. (For example, a successful Serbian production of Jo Clifford's *Ines de Castro* in 2011 also used Horvat's translation.)

The first Scottish play to be presented on a Hungarian stage after 1989 was Sue Glover's *Bondagers* (1991), another play first performed at the Traverse, the lyric story of a year in the life of six women working on a Border farm. The play, performed at the Új Theatre in English under the title *Kötélékek* [Bonds], arrived in Budapest in May 1996 for a couple of nights as the last stop of its international tour promoted by the British Council. Due to its short stay, the production could show its great potential to few theatre-goers only, although its combination of high musicality with an unexplored chapter in rural women's history might have found a more powerful echo outside the capital.

Three years later, in October 1999, David Harrower's *Knives in Hens* premièred at the Kamra, the studio stage of one of Budapest's most prestigious venues, the Katona József Theatre, with outstanding success, running in repertoire for seven years until 2006, which in total meant more than 120 performances. Beside the audience reaction, critics recognised the power of the production when in 2000, it won several awards at the yearly encounter of Hungarian theatres called POSZT in the town of Pécs: Andrea Fullajtár (Young Woman) for best actress, Gergely Kocsis (Pony William) for best newcomer, Péter Gothár for best stage design (he was also the director) and Dániel Varró for the translation. Later, the production was made into a theatre film for the public television, and it became a flagship piece of the Katona József Theatre, representing the institution at various international theatre festivals: in Pilsen, Czech Republic, in 2001;⁴ in Torun, Poland, in 2002 (where it won the Festival Grand Prize); and in Bucharest, Romania, in 2003.

Consequently, *Knives in Hens* achieved the status of a cult play, and Hungary's theatre canon, which has always, for historical reasons, been inclusive towards translated drama, adopted it as a contemporary classic. Therefore, many more productions of the play were to follow, especially in the countries bordering Hungary in the theatres of their Hungarian communities. In December 2000, the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama toured five Hungarian university towns to perform the play in the form of staged readings in English. Three years later, the director of this production, Péter Fekete, brought the work to the Szabadkai Népszínház [Popular Theatre of Subotica], a Hungarian-language theatre in the Serbian town of Subotica/Szabadka, where it premièred in May 2004, and toured Hungary the following year. In May 2006, Yorick Stúdió, an independent experimental theatre group involving Hungarian students of the theatre college in Târgu Mureş/Marosvásárhely, Romania, also staged the play (dir. Zsolt Harsányi), and in 2010, *Knives in Hens* was revived at the Új Theatre in Budapest (dir. Bálint Botos). More recently, the Figura Stúdió in Gheorgheni/Gyergyószentmiklós, Romania, chose *Knives in Hens* to celebrate its thirtieth anniversary, where it premièred in November 2014 under Árpád Barabás's direction.

This exceptionally high number of Hungarian productions for a contemporary foreign play can be explained by the thematic, spatial and linguistic dilemmas that *Knives in Hens* offers to artists and audiences. Balázs Perényi identifies Harrower's iceberg technique in character-building as the key to the work's success in Hungary, by which the playwright converts functional archetypes into deep, mysterious characters who reveal little about their inner dynamics (2000, online). Like the characters, the plot also resembles an archetypical narrative since at first glance it is the ballad-like storyline of an adulterous wife and her lover murdering her unaffectionate husband. This chain of events is embedded into a very loose socio-historical context, described in Harrower's stage directions to *Knives in Hens* simply as 'Rural place. Cottage at the end of the village.' (p. 1) This vague and unspecific setting can easily be adapted to virtually any country's preindustrial past despite some scarce references to Scottish culture such as the 'whisky keg' (p. 30), so Harrower's setting ironically becomes the ultimate global village to which any audience can respond. Indeed, Pony William's threatening remark to his wife in an early scene: 'You know this village' (p. 5) expresses this feeling of familiarity that worldwide audiences may share at the beginning, before several, mainly linguistic, distancing strategies unsettle this identification. (The language of the play will be analysed later.)

In Hungary, naturalist narratives in the first half of the twentieth century (especially in Zsigmond Móricz's oeuvre, 1879-1942) radically transformed the image of the village from realist literary genre-paintings into a site engendered by the conflict between rational or affective human values and the dark psychological processes of the subconscious, which turn characters into instinctive, often sexually deviant beasts. As a result, Hungarian naturalism erased the cultural function of the village as the nation in its purest form (as treated, for example, in the poetry of Hungary's national poet, Sándor Petőfi, 1823-1849) in order to use it as a liminal space where the politics of power and sexuality can be contested. Even though *Knives in Hens* can obviously not be discussed within a framework of pre-Second World War naturalist narratives, I am suggesting here that their prominence in Hungary's secondary school curriculum provides a powerful subtext to the play's audiences for their interpretation of Harrower's universe.

Besides the unspecific nature of the fictional location, the stage arrangement—not described by Harrower—is another potential in *Knives in Hens* since it can be easily adapted to smaller spaces, and the quest for intimacy in the form of an intimidating kind of immersion has become essential to all Hungarian productions of the play so far. While in the 2010 production at Új Theatre, little more was made use of than straw on a Japanese-style tatami mat, in the first Hungarian production in 1999, it was director Péter Gothár who created the stage design (and also the costume design), and his cinematographic touch⁵ resulted in an acclaimed outcome. Theatre critic Tamás Koltai describes it in the following:

Two spaces at the two ends of a long narrow platform, the audience between them. Some peasants' room next to a stable at the one end, a mill at the other end. Strip floor, doors, a small cross. The walls of the depressing peasants' room seem to be of dark, muddy beaten earth. The walls of the mill are light, transparent, geometric, they breathe air. . . . When the mill runs, the walls disconnect, the floor moves and the throbbing machine is visible through the fissures. The same effect in the love scene. (1999, online)

Gothár's bipolar stage, then, juxtaposes the mill with the cottage by stimulating multiple senses through his experimentation with tones, colours, textures and masses; another theatre critic, Tamás Tarján, even identifies opposing 'smells of ink and stable' when describing the director's aesthetic vision (1999, online). Paradoxically, these sensations do not lend realism to the setting but charge it with profound symbolism, by which the mill and the cottage transcend physicality—in other words, the *anywhere* suggested by the archetypal village setting becomes *nowhere* in the 1999 production since Gothár opts for abstraction over naturalism.

This abstraction is also empowered by Harrower's text, written in a unique idiolect which is problematic to define historically or geographically. Rather than a means of communication, this stylised language becomes the thematic core of *Knives in Hens* by adapting a highly agentive role in the dramatic conflict since much of the play's dynamics rely on the Young Woman's gradual discovery of the power residing

in language. The work's Hungarian translator, Dániel Varró, then a student of English Studies in his early twenties with a poetry collection (now one of Hungary's leading contemporary poets and translators), had to reconstruct Harrower's logocentric universe in one of the few European languages completely unrelated to English or Scots. Tarján records that when submitting the script of *Knives in Hens*, Varró called his version 'a faithful rewriting' rather than a translation (1999, online) since he had to develop and employ his own strategies to achieve a similar distancing effect to the original text. Moreover, as Hungarian theatre is not tolerant towards non-standard language varieties for the non-comic stage (regional dialects and sociolects are exclusively used in comedies as a source of laughter), Varró had to recur to a wide range of linguistic input that could be merged into a fragmented whole without turning the work into its own parody. Besides his experiments with the flexibility of syntax to lend an unsettling rhythm to the utterances (e.g. by omitting definite articles or shuffling word order), Varró incorporated elements from varied sources, which Tarján lists as 'folk poetry fragments, school slang, suburban and rural sociolects, the polysemy and wit spontaneously generated by language, and vulgarities'. (1999, online) Koltai, who compares the outcome to François Rabelais's writings, praises the translation when saying that 'Harrower speaks Hungarian' in it (1999, online). For the Hungarian communities living in the countries around Hungary, the question of language is a more complex issue since they are regarded as a language minority even in the regions where they outnumber other language groups, hence their uneasy relationship to linguistic power structures. The Young Woman's emancipation through using her own language, then, finds a special resonance with the Hungarian minorities, which explains the play's solid success in these communities. Natália Vicei, the actress playing the Young Woman in the 2004 production in Subotica/Szabadka, Serbia, for example, has confirmed in an interview that the play's language was the major concern in the rehearsal room: 'We were talking about the meaning of this fragmented, ballad-like mode of expression, if the woman is strange or disabled.' (Papp 2005, online)

Knives in Hens, then, has been instrumental in expanding Hungary's theatre vocabulary. It swiftly entered the national drama canon as a highly regarded piece of contemporary theatre, as explained thus far, due to the outstanding success of the

play's first production in the country in 1999, Varró's powerful translation-rewriting and the artistic challenges encoded in the original text. As a consequence, it could be expected that after so many successful productions, *Knives in Hens* would be followed by further Harrower-plays. The international success of *Blackbird* (2005), which stages the re-encounter of Ray and Una who were lovers when he was in his forties and she was a twelve-year-old girl, was a natural candidate to become the next Harrower-debut in Hungary, but the deep political and financial crisis in the late 2000s aborted a planned 2008-production at the Komédiium Theatre in Budapest before it could materialise. Although the play did debut in December 2008 as a staged reading in English at the Merlin Theatre (dir. László Magács), audiences had to wait until October 2012 to see the play in Hungarian, when it opened at the Szkéné Theatre, which is a studio in the building of the Budapest University of Technology and Economics. *Blackbird* was the first direction of Adél Kováts, one of Hungary's leading stage and film actresses, and the text was translated by Miklós Vajda, an exceptionally experienced drama translator and the long-term editor of *The New Hungarian Quarterly*. (Vajda is a major figure in the Scottish-Hungarian literary exchange for providing rough translations of Hungarian poetry for Edwin Morgan.) In an interview, Kováts explains that she decided that *Blackbird* could be her first experience as a director when Vajda shared his translation with her and she found 'the play very touching but Una wasn't a possible role due to [her] age so [she] thought of directing it'. (Rick 2012, online) The production, however, failed to make a comparable impact to that of *Knives in Hens* despite the fact that critics welcomed Harrower's fresh approach to the taboo topic of paedophilia. Tamás Jászay identifies Kováts's lack of directorial intervention as the cause for certain melodramatic elements, and he also criticises the play's unoriginal conclusions, 'one, that paedophiles (might) have real feelings, the other, that the girl (might have) participated in everything willingly'. (2012, online) The staging, Zsolt Khell's sterile, bright white office interior design, was another weak point to which Jászay and others objected since it failed to direct more attention on the characters. It is debatable whether Hungarian audiences' understanding of the play's dynamics is conditioned by the fact that the country, as opposed to the UK or Ireland, has had virtually no highly publicised paedophilia case, In any case, the play, as of December 2014, has not been revived.

Besides Harrower, the only other contemporary Scottish playwright who has been translated into Hungarian is David Greig. His *The Cosmonaut's Last Message to the Woman he once loved in the former Soviet Union* (1999), translated by István Nagy and commissioned by László Upor, was staged as a rehearsed reading at the Millenáris Park, a multifunctional art venue in Budapest, in December 2004. Upor, another experienced drama translator, explains that he chose *Cosmonaut* because he found it 'an exciting, irregular play, exceptionally relevant to Hungary's contemporary situation and with each playwright, [he] tried to stage the latest play because it can point back at earlier significant plays'. (2014, online) Greig's postmodern drama of interconnectedness and globalisation develops an unlikely network of seemingly unrelated characters from different parts of the world by random encounters, so Upor's choice was also justified by the political subtext of Hungary's accession to the European Union earlier that year, redefining the country's psychological connection to the rest of the continent. While *Cosmonaut* became a successful theatre production in the Czech Republic (2003, dir. Juraj Nvota) and Romania (2010, dir. Radu Afrim), countries sharing the context of EU accession, the rehearsed reading at the Millenáris Park has not resulted in any further productions in Hungary.

Five years later, in November 2009, the Merlin Theatre in Budapest organised staged readings of contemporary plays, where together with German dramatist Dea Loher's *Das letzte Feuer* [The Last Fire] (2008), Greig's *Europe* (1994), yet another play originally produced at the Traverse, was read by young actors in the translation of Róbert Markó. Markó's text successfully adapts Greig's distancing strategies such as the exclusion of culture-specific idioms, confirming Greig's description of his idiolect as 'a language imagined to be in translation. Spoken in English but translated from the original Greig.' (2013, p. 13) Markó's translation was used in a site-specific production of *Europe* in September 2011 by the Hungarian-language Szigligeti Theatre in Oradea/Nagyvárad, Romania (dir. István Szabó K.). There, the performances took place at the railway station where the cast and the audiences made use of the platforms, the tracks, the benches and the lamp posts in the quickly alternating film-like scenes of the first act, and in the second, they

all got on a real train in motion for a round trip to Băile Felix/Félicsfürdő, very close to the Hungarian-Romanian border. As a result, the site performed a twofold function. On the one hand, it contributed to the domestication of the work by taking it to an actual train station on the border in times of deep economic recession, exemplifying what Greig describes as a hybrid of ‘Hapsburg, Nazi and Stalinist forms’, ‘which has neither the romantic dusting of history, nor the gloss of modernity’. (2002, p. 7) Consequently, the local station as a symbol of the region’s long history of violent oppression and failed ideological experiments becomes a powerful form of engagement for the audiences, who can re-evaluate their own past and present from Greig’s point of view as an outsider (also emphasised by the abovementioned idiolect). On the other hand, the site’s geographical closeness to Hungary highlights the play’s emphasis on the changing concept of borders, as the Hungarian communities were especially vulnerable to the massive border changes in the period of the two World Wars. As a result of European integration, however, radically new forms of cross-border communication have emerged with double-faced effects on the community such as migrations, another key issue *Europe* dramatises. The production, then, responded to a range of problems that the Hungarian community in Oradea/Nagyvárad was facing in 2011, and delivered its version of Greig’s seventeen-year-old but highly relevant text in a very local yet experimental form, widely publicised in even the mainstream media of Hungary of the time.

In April 2013, the Katona József Theatre staged David Greig’s *Midsummer* (2009), the most recent contemporary Scottish play to première in Hungarian (just like *Europe*, in Markó’s translation). Soon it was moved to the Thália Theatre, Budapest, and as of the end of 2014, it was still being performed, making it the second most successful production discussed here after *Knives in Hens* from 1999. Director Anna Erdeős, who chose *Midsummer* as her final project at the University of Drama and Film in Budapest, praises the play’s ‘absurdity and shameless nonchalance’ (2013, interview), the major sources of humour in the Budapest production. Erdeős’s minimalism is complemented by her inclusion of puppets, highlighting the playfulness of this Edinburgh-set rom-com with music. The overall result, however, is not too different from other popular contemporary comedies being staged in Budapest, which might account for its commercial success.

The first conclusion to be drawn from this article is that in terms of quantity and frequency, Hungary seems to underperform some Central European nations in staging contemporary Scottish plays, and even more in translating them. (For example, Croatia and the Czech Republic compare favourably to the Hungarian developments in this field partly because of their vivid contribution to the study of Scottish drama and theatre, too.) In spite of this, the impact of the works that did arrive in Hungary cannot be overstated: Varró's translation of *Knives in Hens*, especially, opened a space to the country's theatre practitioners and audiences to redefine prevailing concepts of stage language. In other words, the play's miller's question: 'What power've you over others' tongues?' (p. 14), has a surprisingly reinforcing answer in the Hungarian context, where Harrower is regarded as an influential playwright who has been naturalised in the country's canon for pioneering a new approach to space and language varieties in theatre. Scotland's and Hungary's historically problematic position between the centre and the margins of power, which I have identified earlier as a link between the two cultures, manifests itself in the list of the Scottish plays to which Hungarian audiences most positively responded since they all dramatised liminal spaces to experiment with identities under construction. While *Knives in Hens* represents marginality in terms of language and gender, *Europe* highlights geography, class and race in its exploration of the centre-periphery relationship. The Scottish dramatists' perspective on these issues, which also affect Hungarian audiences, has resulted in a new chapter in the history of literary dialogue between Scotland and Hungary.

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Notes.

¹ Throughout the article, the Western name order (first name + surname) rather than the native Hungarian name order (surname + first name) is used when mentioning Hungarian artists. Central European towns are referred to by their names in their country's main language and in Hungarian (when available), separated by a slash.

² According to the Scottish Theatre Archive (2015), these were *The Devil* at Edinburgh's Royal Lyceum Theatre in 1909; *The Swan* by St Martin's Players at the Theatre Royal, Glasgow, in 1932 and *Liliom* in James Bridie's version by Citizens' Theatre Company in 1944.

³ Ian Brown suggests that Greig has been translated into approximately thirty languages. (Brown 2012, online)

⁴ The Divadlo na Zábřadí [Balustrade Theatre] in Prague, linked to alternative performances and to the name of playwright-politician Václav Hável, staged *Knives in Hens* after this tour, making it the first contemporary Scottish play to be performed in the Czech Republic, and the play has had several other Czech premières since that debut, too. Meanwhile, Czech theatre audiences have already discovered a wide range of Scottish plays mainly thanks to a drama translation grant of the British Council in 2003. Plays include David Greig's *The Cosmonaut's Last Message to the Woman he once loved in the former Soviet Union*, *Outlying Islands* and *Pyrenees*, Gregory Burke's *Gagarin Way*, Liz Lochhead's *Perfect Days* and Sue Glover's *The Seal Wife* and *The Straw Chair*.

⁵ In 1999, Gothár was less widely known as a theatre director than as a film director with awards from international film festivals in Cannes and Venice, although he had already directed a few classics such as Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. Since *Knives in Hens*, he has directed more than fifty more theatre productions.