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**Nóra
Borthaiser**
**"Absurd Global Fear and Alienation"
Critical review of *A Delicate Balance*
directed by Péter Galambos**

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Kényes egyensúly (A Delicate Balance)

Written by Edward Albee
Translated by Ádám Réz

Cast:

Agnes: Gizi Fekete
Tobias: József Székhelyi
Claire: Zsuzsa Csarnóy
Julia: Zsuzsanna Cseh
Edna: Mária Bajcsay
Harry: Zoltán Szerémi

Set Design: Péter Galambos
Costume Design: Enikő Kárpáti
Dramaturgy: Eszter Orbán

Prompter: Noémi Szabó
Stage Manager: Zsolt Kertész
Assistant Director: Orsolya Szabó

Directed by Péter Galambos

Premier: January 21, 2006. National Theater of Szeged, Hungary.

Missing the outset of a performance can be very ticklish. It is one of the events we cannot be blamed for. Just as our partner has been putting on her make-up for half an hour, she has had a run in her stocking, thus she has put on a new collection of clothes with the matching colors. Or, in an opposite case, he has not taken the right turn to gain some time, and has not parked the car where it would not take 15 minutes to reach the theatre from. S/he has no cash, the check girl does not have enough change. We do not care, we leave her there and gallop up the stairs. As it usually is, our seats are at the middle of the aisle, so we break our way through our neighbors while murmuring some embarrassing apologies. We are late, the actors are on stage, so we sit down, look at each other in anger and say: "You see, I told ya not to ...!" Both of us finish this sentence with our grievances. In this very moment, we draw our guns and blow out the other's brain. Or vice versa. Or we both kill the other. Or, let alone, we blow our brains out because we are fed up. The delicate balance is upset.

A Delicate Balance, directed by Péter Galambos, starts with adding fuel to the flames: Agnes (Gizi Fekete) and Tobias (József Székhelyi) are on stage 3-4 minutes before the actual beginning. It is exactly that 3-4 minutes during which the already-frustrated people fuming and forcing a smile (“snoblesse oblige”) are arriving. Seemingly, this trick is one from the directorial trades. Everyone gets cheated off: those who are late, and those who have arrived in time. The late-comers are scrambling over them, they are murmuring and fidgeting about. Finally, when the lights are out and the performance *really* starts, the whole audience is nothing but a huge room of tension.

Agnes and Tobias make up a middle-class couple sitting in their minimalist-style living room. Everything is strikingly black and white: the walls and the doors; the floor and the carpet; the pattern of the limousine-long sofa. The two poles of the color scale bring in the sense of a comfortable balance but that of the suffocating boredom as well. The dialogues between Agnes and Tobias are also meaninglessly mainstream, unlike their private remarks and shorter or longer soliloquies about their grievances articulated in the echoic voice of a microphone. These beginning remarks are the essence of the play, and –let’s face it– they are not strange to our ears. Did not we have the same silent remarks about our partner when we were on our way to the theatre? And how was that with that gun? Did we get so annoyed that we would like to blow his/her brains out? This is the case with Tobias. He is blowing out Agnes’s mind. Then again. And again. In principle, of course. This outset, extraneous to the original text, is effectively absurd and incisively real at the very same time: it is the *spectator’s* shot and the metallic voice of his/her dumb thoughts that are echoing on the stage.



[<http://www.nemzetiszinhasz.seged.hu/hun/stone/performance.php?id=224>]

Tobias is acted by József Székhelyi, director of Szegedi Nemzeti Színház (National Theatre of Szeged). He artistically plays the grey, average and indecisive man with the same precision and enthusiasm as he does the furious, blunt-in-speech, hysterical Tobias towards the end of the play. His dull outfit, the monotony of his voice, and his submissively bowed head depict an apathetic man longing for a different life. This longing is pictured by another ‘Tobias’ projected to the background of the stage. As Erzsébet Sulyok points out in her critique,

Tobias wears a typical far-eastern garland in the projected picture, which quite didactically shows that his current desire to break free is just as unimaginatively schematic as his actual weekdays.[1]



[<http://www.nemzetiszinhasz.seged.hu/hun/stone/performance.php?id=224>]

Fekete Gizi acts Agnes’ bitter role with proficiency. The actress, who hardly needs to be introduced to the audience of Szeged, lives up to the expectations, even though she makes some mistakes in her lines and noticeably corrects them. Luckily, the dynamic of the drama allows these mistakes and corrections, what’s more, they add the commonplace flavor of the play. Agnes introduces herself to the audience as a strong woman who has tight control over her husband and family alike. It soon turns out that she sees life with miserable prospects and boredom; she is tired of her own, her husband’s, her daughter’s and her sister’s lives. Gizi Fekete represses amazingly and compresses intelligently this bitterness into Agnes’s character, thus the schematic figure of the mother who wants to keep control over her family, remains on the surface.



[<http://www.nemzetiszinhasz.szeged.hu/hun/stone/performance.php?id=224>]

The formality and coldness of the opening scene is broken by Agnes's alcoholic sister, Claire. Her clothing, style and behavior are the mere opposite of the black and white composition: Claire's colorful dress, red hair and her vibrating personality – brilliantly acted out by Zsuzsa Csarnóy – bring in the missing elements to the stage. "She plays the role of Agnes's alcoholic sister with such life-like naturalness that entrances the audience," [2] says Sulyok in her critique. Claire's alcohol-smelling, loose-tongued and free-of-inhibitions figure seems to be the only straightforward character in the play – Claire has no microphone-voiced remarks since she is the only one who dares to utter everything she thinks or feels. Her name is a conscious construct on the word "clear", and a pragmatic example to *nomen est omen*. Claire's character is, thus the clearest one, a figure without lies and evasions. Moreover, she is completely clear in her mind about others' problems and hidden feelings and thoughts. Her funny remarks and entertaining style make her the favorite of the audience.



[<http://www.nemzetiszinhasz.szeged.hu/hun/stone/performance.php?id=224>]

Julia is Tobias and Agnes's daughter. She is 36, has left four marriages behind her – the last one has ended just now. Her character is acted out by Zsuzsanna Cseh –who although a promising starlet of the National Theatre of Szeged in the past years, cannot really meet these expectations in this performance- plays Julia as if she were a teenager. Her hysterical coming-outs are rather frivolous and artificial. At other times during the play she is self-conscious, stiff and self-confident, which are hardly the features of a woman having recently had four divorces. Zsuzsanna Cseh's slipped and hyperbolic play is – unluckily – emphasized by the other actors and actresses' high quality and well-constructed acting.



[<http://www.nemzetiszinhasz.szeged.hu/hun/stone/performance.php?id=224>]

The last two characters in the play are Harry and Edna, who are Tobias and Agnes's (too) good friends. They are afraid, leave their house and end up at Tobias and Agnes's place, in Julia's room. Harry and Edna are extremely schematically acted, they cannot really be scoped out one by one, if they can be at all. Their costumes are always in sync: due to their overwhelming fear, they change from similar mackintoshes to the toxic lab assistants' protective wear. Harry and Edna are annoying, vexing characters, who bring and leave tension; their exit is more than desired by the audience. They are not welcome in the house of Tobias and Agnes however hard they try to show its opposite. Edna and Harry remind us of those acquaintances whom we love but their full presence 24/7 is more than maddening. Harrys and Ednas represent our friends, colleagues but most probably – our family members. We cannot get rid of them, unlike our friends. Tobias cannot set himself free of Agnes, but he can send Harry and Edna away, which he indirectly does so in a hysterical monologue towards the end of the play.



[<http://www.nemzetiszinhasz.szeged.hu/hun/stone/performance.php?id=224>]

It is not specified in the course of the play what Edna and Harry are frightened of. Galambos claims that we, as they, all of us on the stage and outside it are facing an “absurd global fear:”

The media - manipulated by business interests - spread a dumping of information that fills us all with an unbelievable anxiety and with an absurd global fear. Many people are even afraid of existence. We [Hungarians] have already caught up with the Americans in this respect as well. The world is so close to us. The war in Iraq, hurricanes, the bird flu, etc. have all become part of our everyday life.[3]

It is worth bringing together Galambos’s message with Harry and Edna’s virologist garment: the similar clothing of the people killing poultry on suspicion of bird flu in recent media coverage. The theatrical staff must have seen a symbolic value in this outfit since the brochure advertising the performance has the same motif on it: a couple try to kiss each other but fail to do so because they are wearing gas masks.



[[id=224](http://www.nemzetiszinhasz.szeged.hu/hun/stone/performance.php?id=224)]

[<http://www.nemzetiszinhasz.szeged.hu/hun/stone/performance.php?id=224>]

My observation at this point is that there has been too much emphasis on the issue of fear whereas in the dramaturgy of the performance this issue is not so much highlighted. The performance is rather saturated with the alienated nature of human relationships. This is not a new topic, it can be found in most of Albee’s plays (for example, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *The American Dream*, *The Goat or Who is Sylvia?*, etc.) The scenery, also designed by Péter Galambos, is in parallel with the issue of alienation. The background is covered by a huge “poster” showing a night panorama of an American metropolis suggesting the feeling of alienation. The interior design of the living room refers to cold, superficial relationships: there are no photos, not a single souvenir, nothing at all that would bring some heartiness or intimacy into the room. The only exception is the giant fridge and the infinite amount of alcohol in it, which binds all the characters together.

Further criticism should also be made on the brochure. A precise, neat summary is given about Edward Albee’s life and works. However, the quality of these serious, informative and almost academic lines is in contrast with the style and quality of the last page, which presents a “informal invitation” to Tobias and Agnes’s house. Its simplicity, clichés and dry humor are almost upsetting: “Come then, you all welcome. Have a nice weekend at Tobias and Agnes’s home. There’s gonna be fun, laugh, horror and fear. Sister-in-law, daughter, friends. And you can always mix a cocktail for yourselves whenever you want. If you can get at the fridge.”[4] The pictures attached to the brochure –except for the one of Edward Albee– are semiotically irrelevant to the play and to the performance.

Although the performance has very few musical elements, two aspects are worth mentioning. First, Claire’s short singing is an intertextual reference. In Act 2/Scene 2, Claire appears on stage wearing her colorful dress, with an accordion in her hands. She is drunken enough to sing without anyone surprised at it. But the melody and lyrics she is singing are more surprising and humorous: “I don’t want my freedom, there’s no reason for living...”[5] Claire starts singing with

a voice much similar to Freddie Mercury, but she is soon booed at by the other characters. It is easy to recognize the song, “It’s a hard life.” Supposedly, this song ironically (or very schematically) refers to the characters’ miserably tense life. It is problematic because the song is about a deserted lover’s feeling and as such has no relevance to the performance except for its title.



<http://www.nemzetiszinhasz.szeged.hu/hun/stone/performance.php?id=224>

Second, the “signature tune” during the shifts between the scenes is unusually familiar to Hungarian ears. These notes are the same as that of the opening chords of a well-known Hungarian series of cartoons, *The Mézgas* (*A Mézga család*, 1968). These stories are about the life and funny problems of an average Hungarian family whose members are humorously flawed in one way or another. The title song starts with the following line: “Sometimes you should be a bit crazy,” (“Néha légy bolond egy kicsikét...”^[6]) which obviously refers to the Mézgas’ loveably silly lifestyle. It is exactly the line that comes to the spectator’s mind when these notes are heard between the scenes. “Crazy” interprets as “unusual” and the song addresses the characters to have an intimate coming-out when they say out loud everything that has been hidden before. Actually Tobias does become much of a “crazy” man especially during his hysterical monologue. Inserting this Hungarian intertextual reference has also problematic sides. There are no other issues on the basis which the Mézgas could be drawn in parallel with Tobias and Agnes’s family and life. This insertion might have the uncomfortable illusion that the characters in *A Delicate Balance* are degraded to the level of the Mézgas’. It might also be a message that all the characters are crazy and their problems and actions are mere foolishness, but most probably spectators sensitive to deeper readings of dramas would not agree with this point.



www.mediaguide.hu/pannoniafilm/story.html

Péter Galambos managed to stage a “perfect, correct and sometimes quite effective”^[7] performance of Edward Albee’s *A Delicate Balance*. He worked with an exceptional cast whose experienced acting provided quality entertainment for the audience in Szeged. I found the use of audiovisual elements creative and effective because, as such, they have a double role: they have become indispensable devices of our everyday life, which fact brings the spectator closer to the performance; at the same time – as Mr. Galambos has articulated it – it is the media that conveys the “absurd global fear” to people. The design of the scenery is praiseworthy since the whole stage is filled with repulsive alienation. Problematic details can be found only in less significant issues such as the design and content of the brochure and some musical elements which seem to ridicule and degrade the characters and their problems. I am convinced, however, that Péter Galambos and his staff have surprised the audience of Szeged with an enjoyable and well-composed production.

Notes

^[1] Erzsébet Sulyok, “Színpadi kényes egyensúly,” *Délmagyarország Online*, available: <http://www.delmagyar.hu/cikk.php?id=76&cid=116092>, access: 26 February 2006

[2] *ibid.*

[3] Zsolt Hollósi, “Abszurd globális rettegés,” *Délmagyarország Online*, available: <http://www.delmagyar.hu/cikk.php?id=76&cid=115926>, access: 26 February 2006.

[4] Pamphlet of *A Delicate Balance* directed by Péter Galambos in the season of 2005/2006 of the National Theatre of Szeged, Hungary. (*Translation mine.*)

[5] “Queen – It’s a Hard Life Lyrics,” available: <http://www.sing365.com/music/Lyric.nsf/It's-A-Hard-Life-lyrics-Queen/C6EF923652C95FB24825689400057288>, access: 26 February 2006

[6] “Mesedalok – Mézga Géza Főcímdal,” available: <http://www.zeneszoveg.hu/dalszoveg.phtml?szk=12853&>, access: 26 February 2006. (*Translation mine.*)

[7] Sulyok, op. cit.



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