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The Corporeal and the Intangible. Puppet Theatre in the Digital Age

Gabriella Reuss

Abstract

In recent years, theatre has increasingly integrated technology, with scholars exploring concepts like 'liveness' and 'mediatization' (AUSLANDER 1999), 'presence' (POWER 2008), and 'intermediality' (DERES 2015). However, these discourses have often overlooked puppetry as a medium. This paper argues that it is time to include puppetry in these discussions, particularly where live acting and digital tools intersect. Examining the production *Dekameron2023* (Budapest Puppet Theatre), the paper uses Bolter and Gursin's concepts of *immediacy* and *hypermediacy* and proposes to explore the interplay of the 'corporeal' (referring to the performer's body, whether puppet or flesh) and the 'intangible' (digital, virtual), celebrating the live human agency in digital-age theatre.

Key words

puppet theatre, sand animation, shadow theatre, bunraku, intermediality, post-dramatic theatre, contemporary theatre, *Dekameron2023*

A hűlt hely most bizonyíték.
 A hitelesség záloga. Mint egy Krisztus-arc
 lenyomata: ereklye.
 (Závada Péter, *A műértelmezés szőre*)

The cold trail is now evidence.
 A pledge of credibility. Like the imprint
 of Christ's face: a relic.
 (Péter Závada, *The hair of analysing a work of art*)

In the past decades, even before/without the pandemic, theatre (in parallel with our reality) has become increasingly technological and mediatized. The process has been commented upon by many scholars who problematized the concepts of 'liveness' and 'mediatization' (AUSLANDER 1999), 'presence' (POWER 2008), 'intermediality' (DERES 2015), others emphasised that the theatre was never separable from technology and tech changes (DERES et al. 2023). However, these discourses about the theatre characteristically failed to include puppetry, either as case study or as a theatre medium. Although it is possible to exclude the art of puppet theatre as a disparate medium from live theatre, we are witnessing an increasing number of influential productions that combine live acting with puppetry as well as digital tools that need to be accounted for.

Thus, this paper contends, it is high time we extended our discourse to these productions, and delved into that realm of the contemporary theatre where the live actor and the puppet meet. In doing so, the paper contributes with its observations about a Hungarian production, *Dekameron2023* (Budapest Puppet Theatre), to the description of the representational and perceptual tendencies of the theatre in the post-pandemic, digital age.

The exploration of *Dekameron2023* as the kaleidoscopic representation of our present world viewing it through tales/shards, offers a glimpse into the work of an emerging theatre (more on that 'emergence' later) that pioneers in experimenting with post-dramatic structure, the combination of live acting with puppet art, and digital tools. The production can justly be called a Gesamtkunstwerk, a comprehensive artwork whose influential position in contemporary Hungarian culture stems from its integration of several, visual, performing and literary art forms. Striving for universality in its themes and form, this production also serves as a milestone, signalling trends in the digital era.

Here I am not suggesting that through a single production Hungarian puppetry or live acting can be described and generalised, neither am I suggesting that this production represents the contemporary Central and Eastern European theatre trends in the digital age. What I do claim though is that this production which showcases the physical, intellectual, and medial-technological capabilities of an emerging puppet company, now playing for all age groups between 1-100, is part of a trend, and should be seen as an important milestone (hence, the adjective emerging) in the life of a theatre

that used to play almost exclusively for toddlers in Socialist times. The recent, unprecedented critical and popular success of the company's teenager, young adult and adult productions deserves critics' and scholars' attention, as it indicates that the Budapest Puppet Theatre has both raised and is able to hold a stable spectatorship that is curious and open-minded enough to follow their intermedial experiments, mixing the live, the digital and the puppet.

Before going any further let me add a few more remarks that illuminate the historical-professional background of the Budapest Puppet Theatre (BPT) as a creative community and venue behind their *Dekameron2023*, since their past is significant from the aspects of both their target audience and their theatrical aesthetics. The BPT's legal antecedent in Socialist times, the State Puppet Theatre was the only professional puppet theatre in the country which provided the majority of puppet performances in Hungary. Before 1989 it was 'a rare occasion for the State Puppet Theatre [...] to target a mature audience' (REUSS 2021: 152). The handful of shows that were geared towards an adult (mostly foreign festival) audience between 1962 and 1992, were primarily 'music-based productions that were either originally written for ballet [...] or were singspiels, musical pieces' (REUSS 2021: 152). Regarding their aesthetics it is remarkable that, thanks to the theatre's director Dezső Szilágyi's policy (1962–1992) they 'only used homogeneous tools/puppet types and the puppeteers never came out from behind the screens' (REUSS 2021: 152). Setting the homogeneity of puppet types and the obligatory invisibility of the performer as uniform requirements, Szilágyi defined a rather strict practice/theoretical framework within which the State Puppet Theatre operated. Importantly, both aspects of Szilágyi's policy were much more than mere aesthetic features: the co-presence of diverse puppet types along with the puppeteer effectively deconstructed the photo-realism of theatrical expression that was generally expected in Socialist regimes.

In fact, the hiding of the puppeteers behind the screen was a Hungarian factor, not an expectation on the part of the oppressive Soviet aesthetics: the influential Soviet puppeteer, Sergey Vladimirovich Obraztsov played with it, and his dramaturg, Leonora Spet gave a talk on the idea of puppet and puppeteer's co-presence as early as in 1962 (UNIMA conference, Warsaw (ČESAL 1983: 26)), and elsewhere in the Socialist bloc, e.g. in Czechoslovakia, 'the mixed, live actor-and-puppet production was not exceptional by 1983' (ČESAL 1983: 27). In 1967 puppet theorist Henryk Jurkowski called the co-presence of the puppet and the actor the 'third genre' (besides live theatre and puppet theatre), pointing out that as such it 'demand[ed] critical evaluation' (JURKOWSKI 2014: 33). In contrast, in Hungary the relationship between the puppet and its artist(s) lacked reflection, exploration, comment, and the limitation on puppet types within a production seriously curtailed the puppet theatre's interpretive potential (REUSS 2021: 154). The other oppressing legacy, which was the natural consequence of the officially favoured realism of Socialist times, was 'a text-based dramatic perspective', a dominantly text-centred approach to productions that not only turned puppetry into the mere illustration of the text but also 'influenced the routines of audience reception and interpretation' (DERES 2021: 107). As we will see in the

following section on *Dekameron2023*, the BPT of the 2010–20s has managed to fight off this restrictive legacy of text-centred representation.

The revision of the factors that limited the BPT's theatrical expression resulted in the theatre's emergence in the post-pandemic era amongst the other, even live acting, theatres as the flagship of progressive experiments. János Meczner, the director of the Budapest Puppet Theatre in the years of political-economic transition (1992–2020), played an instrumental role in introducing puppetry to live theatre directors such as Róbert Alföldi, László Bagossy, and Rémusz Szikszai, by inviting them to produce (and through their presence, acknowledge and canonise) the BPT's annual adult puppet show. Since 2020 under the directorship of Edina Ellinger, the BPT identifies nine age categories for spectators, and besides the youngest ones has a rich repertoire for teenager, young adult and adult age groups. The effort of raising their own future spectators with utmost care, gradually introducing them to the non-realist, metaphoric (live and mediatized) world of puppetry, especially through and after the pandemic times, should be seen as one of the greatest achievements of the BPT.

We feel it is our mission to promote our genre among adult theatre-goers because puppet theatre cannot be limited to children. We believe in our ability to create performances that can cope with the 21st century's visual stimuli, not only through technical means but also through the specificity of our abstract way of thinking. (*Budapest Bábszínház* s.a. a)

At Ellinger's BPT, they believe in abstraction as a universal language, which they describe as 'the puppeteer's way of thinking'. They 'put their live theatre tools at the service of the puppet', viewing the puppet not merely as a form but as 'a means of *expressing what realistic representation cannot*' (*Budapest Bábszínház* s.a. a). This philosophy underpins the combined aesthetics of live, puppet, and digital elements in their productions, such as *Dekameron2023*.

The philosophy underlying 'the puppeteer's way of thinking' is clearly manifested in *Dekameron2023*, and this is precisely what has made both the production and the company so significant. The paper will scrutinise *Dekameron2023* to understand BPT's abstract thinking, with special attention to the integration of live acting, puppetry, and digital tools. The next section introduces the creators' cultural context and artistic characteristics of storytelling, then the third section analyses the interplay of puppetry and digital media, emphasising their co-presence within the visual frame. Section four provides short, detailed case studies of two tales, considering the 'puppeteer's way of thinking'. To round up, the paper concludes by quoting Péter Závada's tale, *Letter to Mantua from the Verona quarantine* (ZÁVADA 2020b) as a metaphor for the possibilities theatres and practitioners have in the digital age.

Storytelling with puppets in the digital age: post-dramatic, mediatized, visual, digital

The idea of this new *Decameron* was conceived in actor-director Rémusz Szikszai's mind during the pandemic: he asked a number of contemporary Hungarian authors to voice the problems and their perceptions of the recent years and write short tales for him to create a diverse collection more or less akin to the one Boccaccio penned in the 1340–50s. Boccaccio featured ten contemporary narrators whose tales provided an intriguing glimpse into European society, weaving together a variety of genres and tones within a unifying plot frame. Similarly, though on a much smaller scale, Szikszai's 'quilt' is equally colourful but notably darker. He set neither the topic, nor the number of characters, neither the genre, nor the tone in his commission. All he asked for was brevity, but with the production's co-dramaturg, Dóra Gimesi, they often compressed the stories even further.

The inherent danger in wanting to stage ten texts by living authors is that such an effort would naturally lead to a highly text-(and author)-centred production, but *Dekameron2023* fortunately avoided that trap. The reason that it is not fully text-driven is, I believe, due to the fact that the tenth tale (by Szikszai himself) is a visual one, not a text, and of course, due to his 'puppeteer's way of thinking'. The production's dramaturg, Dóra Gimesi and director Szikszai knew well that in post-pandemic times attention spans are rather short and that puppet scripts demand action. The playtexts that work well have either an adventure-packed plot or are relatively dense in stage action, or both. It was these characteristics that the dramaturg of *Dekameron2023*, Dóra Gimesi, a multiple HUBBY Award winner Young Adult author herself, treated in her DLA dissertation (GIMESI 2016; BOTH 2021); whereas actor-director-dramaturg Szikszai is well-versed in a number of necessary fields, e.g. close reading and editing Shakespeare, Rumanian stylized acting, or Far Eastern wayang, to name but a few (REUSS 2022). Moreover, he already tested a variety of puppet traditions for character construction on stage in his duly celebrated puppet-and-live-actor *Tempest* (REUSS 2020: 105–127).

For Szikszai and Gimesi it was clear that neither the nature of puppet theatre, nor the (post-pandemic, young adult, adult) audience will tolerate too much text. Wisely, though the production premiered some newly commissioned pieces of literature, their stage representations were not, or not exclusively, defined by their text. Instead, each tale was visually different: performed with a different technique, either digital, live, puppet, or all these combined. In this post-dramatic, combined, puppet-and-live-cum-digital approach I see the 'puppeteer's way of thinking' manifested. The inclusion of any technique (e.g. digital) or medium (e.g. puppetry) in live theatre (or the other way round, the inclusion of live acting in the puppet theatre) is of value only if and when its role exceeds that of a simple decorative visual element, if and when its use is perfectly justified.

Szikszai's other works in the theatre prove that his intention was in line with this principle of the BPT and that he assigned a particular function to each puppet type

he used. For instance, in his first work at the BPT, *The Tempest* ((*Budapest Bábszínház* s.a. c), puppet designer and creator: Károly Hoffer), he chose a different puppet technique for each character, and thus achieved that the puppets' type, material, physical potential and performance history appropriately informed and impressively characterised the personalities they represented. Undoubtedly, the both functional and metaphorical play with and between the characters' live and puppet selves, and the reliance on the puppets' past traditions for theatrical effect made Szikszai the innovative director who fit extremely well into the artistic credo of the Ellinger-led BPT in the 2020s.

While back in 2018 Szikszai already assigned an important role to the digital, it was not yet central or structural. In *The Tempest*, DJ Bálint Bolcsó performed live, utilising a grandMA2 Light console to pre-program and/or create in real-time the island's ambient noises, the lighting and lightning effects of the storm, and the magical atmosphere of the Harpy's spell. For the ethereal singing of the two Ariel characters, Bolcsó employed live loop sequencing. The grandMA2's lighting effects were synchronised with the performers' movements, powerfully evoking the sense of a real storm, the illusion of the enchanted island, and the hellish aura of the Harpy. The audience had no idea how these effects were created, they seemed to be unmediated. Despite the inherent metatheatricity of the puppetry, the audience was immersed in the magical world of Prospero's island – in short, the production's *immediacy* (BOLTER and GURSIN 2000), when the spectator forgets about the medium and focuses only on the content, was conspicuously dominant.

In contrast, in the emphatically post-pandemic *Dekameron2023* produced with the same company, puppet designer (Károly Hoffer) and video designer (Vince Varga), and the same digital grandMA2 Light technology, the role of the digital and the visual manifests as slightly different. Szikszai again insisted on the principle of the strictly meaningful, non-illustrative, and justified application of puppetry and digital medium in the live theatre, but he did not aim to immerse the spectator and did not mean to hide the medium. Spectators were reminded of the way the performance of a tale was constructed. Several scenes/tales employed multiple forms of media simultaneously, so the spectator could not but become aware of the tales being mediated. In this sense *Dekameron2023* seems a textbook case of what Bolter and Gursin described in their *Remediation as hypermediacy* (BOLTER and GURSIN 2000: 33–34), when the representation emphasised the process of mediation itself.

The representation of the ten tales displays a remarkable balance: five of them (plus the frame tale) heavily rely on the digital medium, each in a rather different manner and to a rather different extent. The five examples below will demonstrate how essential and how intertwined the digital, the puppet and the live elements are in the production.

The concluding story (*Lehet, hogy ez az utolsó* [Perhaps this is the last one] by Sári O. Horváth), which is set in a post-human time and stages a battle between penguins and polar bears is performed with body masks, and displays a flashback video recording on the belligerents' childhood fights where the characters' tender age appears through the puppet medium, as small, soft, likeable glove puppets.

In another tale, the enigmatically titled *O. hazatér továbbáll* [U. returns moves on] (by Dóra Gimesi) the digital medium takes the form of a giant billboard/screen as the backdrop. This screen, referencing the story's setting – the Asklepios Medical Center – serves as a key visual element. It gradually guides the spectator to recognize the ancient story, allowing them to (literally) piece together the title character Ulysses' name, body, and memory.

In István Tasnádi's story, *Numidák* [The Numidians], the war between the ancient Roman and Numidian empires is shown with a unique combination of rod puppets, shadow theatre, and the live projection of sand animation. The latter means live sand painting on a light table which is simultaneously projected onto a screen (CONNOLLY 2022). Even though the sand animation was visibly created in real time, with the two rulers altering the landscape for the 2D rod puppet warriors while engaged in verbal disputes, some of my students still questioned the scene's liveness. While the tale's multi-layered mediatization was evident to many, including myself, the students' responses – being novices to shadow theatre and sand animation – highlight the cultural aspect of hypermediacy: the visibility of a medium seems closely tied to the spectator's familiarity with it.

In János Háty's Skandinavian noir crime series (*Istenháta* [God's back]) the digital medium appears in an entirely different yet equally creative way: two detectives investigate a series of suspicious suicides and question the locals: with a rolling camera-cum-torch in their hand the pair livestream the dialogues. Here the spectator may choose which form of media to engage with, or may even attempt to simultaneously engage with both. One option is to watch the bunraku characters along with the black hooded animators who are still visible despite the darkness. The other option is to opt for immersion and immediacy, by watching only the live stream above, without seeing the animators on the large screen, which uncannily enlarges the bunraku suspects' enigmatic features. On yet another level of hypermediacy, one has the option to frequently swap between these two.

Lastly, in Závada's story, *Letter to Mantua from the Verona quarantine*, the digital medium manifests itself in the sophisticated lighting technology, the key to the performance: the Letter to Mantua is impersonated by a fragile actress wearing handwriting on paper as a body mask. As the Verona gate guard ignites the plague-contaminated letter, the digital flames spectacularly consume the letter, her physical body.

The descriptions of the productions by the same puppet company and director indicate a notable shift in the director's approach to immediacy and hypermediacy between the pre-pandemic *Tempest* and the post-pandemic *Dekameron2023* (Budapest Bábszínház s.a. c; s.a. b). In the latter, hypermediacy – the visibility of the media used – has become more pronounced and dominant, and puppetry was often combined with technology (e.g. sand animation, shadow theatre and rod puppetry). Also, it is essential to note the director's evident effort to emphasise the human agency beside/behind the technomedia.

Combining media and legacies in the digital age

Szikszai chose to create a separate microcosm for each tale, associating them with a particular performing style and/or a puppet type. Instead of ending up in a hopeless chaos, this form effectively conveyed the message that the ten tales, just as Boccaccio's *Decameron* did in its own time, characterise our eclectic, post-pandemic universe, on local/Hungarian, European and global levels.

Anthology series, which are collections of pieces in different genres as seen in *Dekameron2023*, typically strive for a certain universality and are quite common in film and television (for example, *The Animated Tales of Shakespeare* or *The Canterbury Tales*) or even in music (Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*). However, they are somewhat rare in the theatre. Szikszai's idea of giving each tale its distinctive style may have been inspired by Marcell Jankovics' powerful method in his graphic masterpiece, *The Tragedy of Man* (JANKOVICS 2011). *The Tragedy of Man* is Imre Madách's 1861 philosophical drama (MADÁCH 1861), a time travel of Adam and Eve through fifteen eras of history, from ancient times to the future, framed by the story of the biblical Creation. Jankovics adapted the otherwise intellectually difficult read/play into a spectacular adult animated movie in which each historical period was animated with the period's own distinctive and recognizable drawing style. In both cases the kaleidoscopic visuals emphasise the diversity of representation and thus convey a sense of universality.

The frame story in *Dekameron2023* serves as a special cohesive device between the tales/scenes, and it is one of the six stories that employs a digital tool. The frame story's function here is to provide something spectacular, catchy, like Mussorgsky's famous Promenade tune in his *Pictures at an Exhibition* (MUSSORGSKY 1874), a theme that recurs several times with a recognizable variation. The opening and closing venue of *Dekameron2023* is an airport, represented by shiny white walls, sliding doors, a conveyor belt and a vending machine, an old cleaner and a weather-beaten policeman, and a huge, frequently updating Departures/Arrivals screen that dominates the space. Szikszai's frame story has little in the way of plot, works without a text and a narrator, and consists of a single venue: the space itself is liminal and as such, the representative – and ultimately the ruin – of our busy, diverse, rushing, mobile, only seemingly stable civilization. It is the digital screen, a giant impersonal compass that makes this airport so real (set designer Gergely Zöldy Z). The regularly updating grid of times, flight numbers and destinations on the huge display implies that time is properly passing inside and outside, people leave, arrive and return, and that there is some sort of a calculable and universally operating order in the world. This sometimes empty, often busy, digitally equipped space does not belong to any particular geographical location, or perhaps belongs to several at once. This starting point is familiar to travelers who depart and arrive, meet and part. It is a metaphor for life, which by its sheer repetition dramatises the trope, the journey of life. It is the digital screen, the precisely functioning impersonal electronic device that turns the rather empty stage into an airport lounge, often seen as a symbol of globalisation. Furthermore, this airport

lounge is the place where stories and memories surface so that we can see them on the stage, and ultimately it is this environment whose collapse marks the end of our (pre-pandemic) world of *Dekameron2023*.

In Szikszai's (almost) text-less, plot-less, visual storytelling, the stage airport becomes a heterotopia, a modern crossroads, a space of both continuity and change, which stands for the digital world, too. Here the characters from iconic European artworks across the centuries appear side by side, suggesting that they appear in a digital screen format, in the timeless realm of the virtual world, or, eventually, in the human mind. Here we can spot the Minotaur on Marilyn Monroe's side, Mona Lisa featuring in a surgical mask commercial, and next to Botticelli's *Venus* we spot Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. Such unlikely co-presences powerfully convey the idea that cultures and histories, works of art and their adaptations, all exist in a non-hierarchical, culturally interconnected network of nodes, simultaneously, which recalls the way Douglas Lanier applied the concept of the 'rhizome' to Shakespeare adaptations (LANIER 2014). Through the recurring airport scenes we recognize how many different, oral, written, drawn, painted, puppeted and projected works we know and carry, consciously or inadvertently, with us. Wedged in between the tales and varying each time, the airport scenes whet the appetite for the next tale, thus separating and loosely stitching them together.

Szikszai's recurring airport scene, just as Mussorgsky's *Promenade* music, is much more than a simple connecting/dividing device. The *Promenade* first starts as a separate movement, then recurs with a variation (though not after every picture) and in the tenth, last movement, it integrates into the last picture: as the church bells toll in the 'Great/Bogatyr Gates of Kiev' the theme ends up staging an apotheosis. In *Dekameron2023* the frame, which embraces the tales, ultimately becomes the main theme itself. The frame story's single plot turn takes place towards the end. The recurring airport scene darkens and integrates into the last tale to stage an apocalypse, the tale about the end of mankind. The airport's digital display begins malfunctioning, eventually going black, the conveyor belt is incessantly fetching more and more luggage, people keep disappearing from the scene, and the once bright, clean, shimmering, digitally equipped space degenerates into a dark and primitive battlefield, where power-hungry polar bears fight against unfairly cheating penguins. The foil-wrapped suitcases heaped up by the malfunctioning conveyor belt look like piled-up Arctic ice sheets; then, just as Madách's *Tragedy of Man* envisioned, comes the darkest vision of the lifeless cold. The airport's photocell sliding door breaks down, its gate leads nowhere – there are no more pictures at this exhibition, on this stage, there are no more tales to tell.

The frame thus represents Szikszai's vision on the connection between contemporary society and the digital: it structures people's (and puppets', and artworks') lives, offers unlikely meetings, and creates parallel existences across the ages. Tellingly, in the theatre of the digital age, though the framework inspires non-digital cultural parallels like Mussorgsky's or Madách's iconic works, the breakdown of the digital indicates the end of the known world.

What we should note here from the above examples of both the frame and the five tales is that ultimately it does not matter how many types of digital technology *Dekameron2023* deploys in the fields of stage lighting and design; with their diversity the production emphasises rather than suppresses the fragile and ephemeral nature of our civilization and ultimately, humankind. These examples spectacularly validate Worthen's remark, that the 'theatre not only assimilates technologies; it represents their changing interface with theatre, and so with the technologized human' (WORTHEN 2020: 28). These examples equally spectacularly demonstrate that the technologized human can and even should opt for playing with live digital solutions in live theatre. By selecting live streaming and live sand painting for the production the inherent characteristics of liveness, such as unrepeatability, and ephemerality, are perfectly maintained.

Liveness and intermediality: puppet theatre in the digital age

What unfolds on the stage of *Dekameron2023* supports Deres's assertion that contemporary theatre's integration of audiovisual technical media creates an interface for spectators, performers, and media, thereby representing intermedial theatrical interaction on stage (DERES 2015). Deres argues that Auslander's 1999 concept of liveness is validated by the theatre's ability to combine and integrate multiple media forms simultaneously, as in the theatre live events blend seamlessly into mediatized contemporary reality. Following this line of thought, Szikszai's *Dekameron2023* can be described as a production that effectively stages intermedial theatrical interaction.

Deres, in her discussion of contemporary theatre in the digital age, highlights the futility of contrasting the 'live' (not recorded, mediatized) with the 'mediatized' (without live presence). Her perspective is particularly useful here, as the position of puppet theatre within this dichotomy is challenging to determine. Extending the concept of liveness to include the mediatized liveness of the puppet medium might be necessary. However, as this paper suggests, it may be more productive to think in terms of the material/corporeal/live (encompassing both puppet and live bodies) versus the intangible/virtual. This approach better explains the dynamics of these medial exchanges – immedial and hypermedial.

In the following let us take a closer look at two instances from *Dekameron2023* – the questioning of the female villagers in *God's Back* and the champion warfare of *The Numidians* – to see how these medial exchanges manifest in a puppet-and-live-actor production, to elucidate the specific contributions of puppetry. Such a closer look will also highlight the focal role Szikszai assigned to the human agency.

In performing István Tasnádi's *The Numidians*, a story of rivalry, dominance, and senseless warfare, Szikszai and the creative team used live actors to portray the rulers' insatiable power hunger and employed simple/simplified cut-out figures manipulated by rods to represent the common soldiers' simplicity and subordination. Sand animation depicted journeys and battles, with the rulers manipulating the environment and

battlefield by drawing in the sand, projecting their creations onto the backdrop. Inspired by Pliny the Elder's account of the Punic wars (FEHÉRVÁRY-MÉNES 2023), the story of the arbitrarily changing sand-drawn landscape powerfully conveyed the soldiers' helplessness and expendability. This was further emphasised when the puppet medium was contrasted with live acting. Following the rod puppets' tragicomic stumbling, the moment the rulers demanded their soldiers' self-sacrifice, the rod puppet soldiers seamlessly transformed into their animators' human forms behind the large screen. The shadow theatre technique underscored their unchanging subordination by making the live actor soldiers appear smaller than the monarchs. The medial shift from puppetry to live acting, along with the change in scale, further focused attention on the soldiers' altruistic gestures, making them more relatable and emotionally impactful, while also highlighting the futility of their sacrifice.

The other tale, *God's Back* by János Háý, has previously been analysed as an example of *hypermediacy* due to its integration of live actors streaming the puppets' performance. Here the tale is cited because it spectacularly exhibits the exchange between diverse media and the 'liveness' of the puppet medium attains particular significance. *God's Back* addresses the alleged suicides of war veterans who hang themselves shortly after returning home. The darkness of the stage evokes the medium of photography, or perhaps film noir, where tonal contrast and low-key black-and-white simplicity convey more than just the absence of saturation (GRUJIN 2018; PETROVSKI 2015): it adds tragic depth to the drama of the villagers, whose turmoil simmers beneath their laconic phrases. The bunraku villagers gather after sunset around two tables: one for the men to pass time in the pub and complain about their inability to connect to their wives, and another for the women to express their experiences of rape, abuse and desecration. The puppet animators, dressed in uniform black hoodies, are barely visible, blending into the background.

The choice of puppet type, the bunraku is instrumental here: the bunrakus' wooden, emotionless faces represent the frozen expressions of the victims of abuse who are unable to articulate their stories and emotions. As the puppets' faces are rather small, the two detectives who arrive to investigate the enigmatic suicides, live stream, project and thus enlarge them onto the large screen. As a result, a philosophically and theoretically twisted intermedial situation emerges: in episode two the last murder takes place onstage, 'live', the wooden bunraku man 'dies' before our eyes (problematizing the fundamental question about the death of the puppet, see (WILLIAMS 2014; GENTY 1973)), all in parallel with the ongoing investigation. Thus, the puppet performance coexists and collaborates with its own projection. The two aged detectives, the airport's security guard and cleaner, (Gyöngyi Blasek and Tamás Fodor), as some elderly Vergil and Beatrice inspired by Dante's *Divine Comedy*, guide the spectators to immerse into the hell behind God's back, doubly mediating the puppet show with their close-ups and comments.

The multi-layered mediation (puppetry, streaming, commentary) combined with its presentation in yet another medium – a two-episode television series where the first one ends with a cliffhanger, a 'to be continued' announcement on the screen –

imparts a sense of universal validity (and even irony) to Háy's Hungarian story. The idea for *God's Back* originates from a well-known series of husband killings¹ committed by Hungarian village wives following World War I (BODÓ 2002: 185–187): the women secretly disposed of their husbands for reasons like infidelity, domestic abuse, rape, impotence, and excessive drinking. A memorable Hungarian indie film, *Hukkle* (2002), tells a similar story, and also aspires for universality by resorting to folksongs and visual allusions, without a Hungarian dialogue. The film's numerous awards indicate the story's resonance in societies where war veterans struggle to reintegrate, or in general, where women are rendered secondary and sexual abuse is latent but abundant. In Hungary, one woman dies every week due to domestic abuse, reflecting a historical norm where men considered it their right to exert physical and emotional control over their families (BODÓ 2002: xv). Háy's title metaphorically places the archetypal plot behind God's back, stripping the story of its Hungarian roots, while the physical characteristics of the puppet performers further universalise the problem of domestic abuse. The puppet medium's corporeality and materiality can both intensify and alleviate the discomfort of confronting the painful theme: the victims' carved, expressionless faces evoke a sense of deep disquiet, yet their playful resemblance to contemporary actors from Scandinavian/Nordic crime thrillers offers a sense of familiarity and underscores their connection to other media.

Conclusion

The ultimate goal of this paper was neither to enumerate the diverse appearances of digital or other technomedial tools nor to justify their uses. Instead, its aim was to highlight that it was high time the discourses about the theatre and technomedia included puppetry either as case study or as a rather special theatre medium that needed theoretical treatment or both. Also, the paper's aim was to explore if and how the digital or technomedial tools described within the framework of theatre studies with concepts such as liveness, immediacy, hypermediacy, and intermediality can operate in the puppet theatre in the digital age.

The paper selected the Budapest Puppet Theatre's recent production, *Dekameron2023*, as a case study, emphasising meticulous details with a particular focus on hypermedial and intermedial elements. It demonstrated that extending the concept of liveness to puppet theatre is essential. Furthermore, it argued that the traditional paradigm of mediatized versus live appears irrelevant or futile, suggesting instead that a more useful framework might be tangible/material/corporeal versus intangible/virtual.

1 According to rumours, around 300 murders took place. Bodó's research has evidence for an estimated 45–50, which took place in three villages, mainly in Nagyrév, between 1911–1929. As historian Bodó admits in 2002, men of his grandfather's generation 'still considered their God given right to manhandle anybody in the family' (BODÓ 2002: xv) and women were expected to serve the men and were not or rarely 'allowed to sit at the table with the rest of the family' (BODÓ 2002: xv).

The beginning of this paper situated the Budapest Puppet Theatre within the broader context of Hungarian and Central European theatre to illustrate how a former children's puppet theatre evolved in the 2000s and, by the 2020s, became the flagship of exciting, progressive, and experimental theatre trends. The brief overview of Szikszai's earlier work at the BPT, *Dekameron2023* in the BPT's repertoire, and the production's visual, post-dramatic storytelling demonstrates that *Dekameron2023* encapsulates the theatre's mission. It represents the culmination of both the director's and the theatre's professional achievements, spanning physical, digital, material, intermedial, and puppet mediums.

BPT's artistic credo (*Budapest Bábszínház* s.a. a) focalizes the puppet medium and 'the puppeteer's [abstract, metaphoric] way of thinking', inviting all other mediums to engage in a smart dialogue and interplay on stage and to present what realistic expression cannot. This includes a grotesque sense of intermedial humour (playful or ironic referencing to the advantages or limitations of the puppet medium) that 'suits puppetry very well', as dramaturg Dóra Gimesi remarked in an interview (BOTH 2021). She added, 'the constant changeability, the creation and constant reinterpretation, the reversal and the ridicule of stage signs and symbols is also a very 'puppetry' thing' (BOTH 2021). Consequently, the examination of *Dekameron2023* demonstrated that its density of both corporeal and virtual elements ultimately emphasises – and perhaps celebrates – the ephemeral, fragile human agency within puppet theatre in the digital age.

Závada's anthropomorphic protagonist, the Letter to Mantua wears a costume made from the text of *Romeo and Juliet*. Sent by Friar Lawrence to the exiled Romeo with the vital information about Juliet's pretended death, the Letter never reaches its/her addressee because it/she is halted and raped by a power hungry city guard of Verona. In her fight to survive, the handwriting on her body becomes blurred and her ink contaminates the unwelcome reader with the plague. As a response, the guard ignites the letter and the digitally projected flames spectacularly consume the Letter's fragile body, leaving the spectator with the cold trail of the message, the memories of the blurred work of art, and the many questions about the corporeal/tangible and the digital/virtual. In the BPT and Szikszai's representation of Závada's text the virtual element is used to layer and memorialise the artistic message, leaving an urge to seek and remember the traces of the ephemeral performance. 'The cold trail is now evidence. A pledge of credibility' (ZÁVADA 2020a).

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