Reuss, Gabriella. "Sándor Hevesi's experimental staging of Shakespeare in the 1910s." *Hungarian Cultural Studies*. Journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association, Volume 18 (2025): http://ahea.pitt.edu DOI: 10.5195/ahea.2025.602

Sándor Hevesi's experimental staging of Shakespeare in the 1910s

Gabriella Reuss

Abstract: Today, with major archaeological discoveries in Southwark, Marvin Carlson's study on the semiotics of theater architecture, and insights from the reconstructed (New) Globe, it is increasingly clear that Shakespeare's "plays were written for the space in which they were to be performed: and that therefore to understand Shakespeare, one should understand his playhouses" (Stern 21). Sándor Hevesi, one of the most important yet still somewhat overlooked figures in early-twentieth-century Hungarian theater, was among the first to recognize that Shakespeare's plays did not naturally suit the proscenium stage. A critic-turned-director and dramaturg, he recognized that it was the architecture of nineteenth-century European theaters that necessitated the radical editorial and dramaturgical interventions, often infamously substantial textual cuts, characteristic of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Shakespearean productions. This recognition fueled his devoted explorations into the workings of the Shakespeare stage. In Hevesi's time, little was known about the original dimensions and staging conditions of Elizabethan playhouses. In a 2023 paper, I argued that by 1923, through his staging of *The Taming of the Shrew*, Hevesi believed he had discovered the real Shakespeare. This paper explores the starting point of that journey to assess the significance of Hevesi's anticipatory ideas.

Keywords*: Shakespeare-stage, Reinhardt Max, Hevesi Sándor, the real Shakespeare, The Tempest, Hamlet, scenography*

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> "*What shall be the relation of a modern stage*
> *to the decorations created by Shakespeare in his dramatic text?*"
> (Hevesi, "Shakespeare as Scenographer" 7)

1. Introduction: Staging Shakespeare on the proscenium stage

Sándor Hevesi (1873-1939), perhaps the most important, yet still somewhat overlooked figure in early twentieth-century Hungarian theater, was among the first to recognize that Shakespeare's plays did not naturally fit the proscenium stage. As a result, he thought that "Shakespeare was given everywhere repaired, reworked, altered, and weakened by cruel tricks and barbarous insertions" (Hevesi 1919:7). He knew that the playtexts of the famous British actor-managers such as David Garrick, John Philip Kemble, or Henry Irving, as well as his

ISSN 1936-6879 (online)

Hungarian predecessors and contemporaries, suffered substantial textual editing. A philologist-educator by nature, the massive cuts in the body of Shakespeare's text apparently both pained and provoked Hevesi. In his 1919 publication, *Az igazi Shakespeare* [The real Shakespeare], he elaborated on what he considered real and fake Shakespeares. Considering the contemporary Budapest productions of *The Merchant of Venice* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he opined that by the monstrous editorial or dramaturgical interventions "we present a fake/pseudo-Shakespeare (Hevesi 1919:21). His essay about the "real Shakespeare" has been understood as an important standpoint in the Hungarian reception of Shakespeare, one that educates his audience to respect Shakespeare's word and hence proposes the performance of the *uncut* text.

This paper intends to explore Sándor Hevesi's early, experimental stagings of Shakespeare to shed light on a particular segment of the director's extensive (life-long?) quest for what he called the "real Shakespeare." The paper will observe the way Hevesi sought practical performative possibilities of the (relatively) uncut text within reasonable performance time. Neither the slow and pathetic acting style, nor the realistic set, nor the three-walled performing space catered for the two requirements which Hevesi believed to have been the cornerstones of Shakespearean production: the original, (almost) complete text and the roughly two or two-and-a-half hours of performing time.

In the nineteenth century, Ludwig Tieck and William Poel had already shown interest in how Shakespeare's plays functioned outside the Elizabethan theater; Tieck used several planes while Poel experimented with Elizabethan costumes and an empty apron stage. Hevesi's work stands out for its sustained theoretical focus on understanding the characteristics of the Elizabethan stage which directly influence the text. Today, as Tiffany Stern claims, it is increasingly evident that Shakespeare's "plays were written for the space in which they were to be performed: and that therefore to understand Shakespeare, one should understand his playhouses" (21). In contemporary theater studies, there is growing recognition that performance spaces are never neutral but always engaged in a dynamic dialogue with the performed text; but at the time, Hevesi's realization seemed rather new.

In the 1910s, long before the archaeological finds in Southwark and Shoreditch, before Marvin Carlson's seminal study, *Places of Performance. The Semiotics of Theater Architecture* (1989), the construction of Shakespeare's Globe, and the virtual reconstruction of the Curtain (2024), theater practitioners took the proscenium theater as a given and had little reliable information about Elizabethan stages. Sam Wanamaker's seemingly impossible 1970 vision to reconstruct Shakespeare's Globe using all available historical evidence, when finally realized in 1997, has offered far greater scenographic benefits than anyone had ever anticipated. Meanwhile, in 1988 and 1989, respectively, the remains of the Rose and the Globe were found in Southwark. The size (90 ft=27,4m in diameter) and the shape (polygon) of the Rose allowed extrapolations for the Globe. The Shoreditch excavations of 2012–2016 revealed the remains of the Curtain with a sub-stage tunnel. When assessing Hevesi's practical and theoretical research we must remember that for him the only visual evidence of an Elizabethan playhouse was Arendt van Buchell's copy of Johannes De Witt's now-lost 1596 sketch of the Swan. This lone surviving drawing played a vital role in early twentieth-century interpretations. Hungarian Shakespeare scholar, Bernát Alexander, for instance, referenced it when reviewing *The Tempest,* Hevesi's first attempt to recreate the Elizabethan empty stage. Hevesi's experiment was grounded in a bold assumption: that the performance space was tightly bound to the performance's text itself.

By 1923, through his staging of *The Taming of the Shrew*, Hevesi had fully realized a perhaps ideal solution, *the multi-level spatial design* (perhaps picking up on Tieck's idea?) and

believed he had discovered the methodology of the "real Shakespeare" performance (Reuss 2023). In the present article, the still little known Hevesi will be introduced, then two stages in his journey will be closely examined, and eventually the budding Hungarian scenographic context that both inspired and accommodated Hevesi's ideas, will be tackled.

2. Scholar, director, scenographer: Sándor Hevesi

Sándor Hevesi (1873–1939) is one of those figures in Hungarian culture who are widely recognized and highly regarded yet seldom discussed. He represents the paradox of influential trendsetters whose names grace public spaces, while the concrete details of their achievements remain largely unknown in public discourse. As an effort to repair the situation, the University of Theater and Film Arts (SzFE), Budapest, organized a conference in 2014 in honor of the seventy-fifth anniversary of Hevesi's death. The event featured five talks: on Hevesi's forgotten dramas by Zsolt Győrei, on Hevesi's stagings at the Budapest Opera by Mária Harangi, a comparison between Hevesi and his Soviet colleague, Stanislavsky (by Sebastian Cortes), on Hevesi's experiments with Thália Society by Zoltán Imre, and finally, his work at the National with the talented actress Gizi Bajor by Tamás Gajdó.[1] The National Theater Institute and Museum also marked the 2014 anniversary with the publication of an anthology of theoretical texts by Hevesi and his director-dramaturg contemporaries. The volume, entitled *A modern színpad* [The modern stage], has received much less public attention than it deserved.

What all existing accounts remark is that Hevesi was the first Hungarian Shakespeare scholar and director who achieved international renown. Péter Szaffkó, the scholar who studied Hevesi's presence in the English-speaking press, appreciated him in a European perspective, stating that Hevesi "proved to have played the same part in the development of the Budapest theater as Antoine did earlier in Paris, Brahm in Berlin, Grein in London and Stanislavski in Moscow" (Szaffkó 1985:101). Hevesi gained renown through his wide-ranging international activities, including his correspondence with Edward Gordon Craig—who published several of Hevesi's papers in *The Mask*—, his translations of Shakespeare and Shaw,[2] and his 1929 lecture series at London's King's College and the PEN Club on the influence of Shakespeare and the reception of modern dramatists in both England and Hungary. The short-term impact of these lecture series culminated in a dinner that John Galsworthy, then Chair at the PEN Club, gave to celebrate Hevesi, which undoubtedly contributed to furthering his fame outside Hungary. So much so that this prompted the Department of Eastern Europe, University of London, to begin engaging with Hungary in 1930, and under Hevesi's influence it decided to publish Hungarian works in excellent English translation.[3]

Despite his international fame, Hevesi's more than eight-decade-long Hungarian afterlife consists of only a handful of works that are devoted exclusively to him, while many others only mention him. The first group is made up of a detailed biography by Anna László from 1960 that contains Géza Staud's meticulous bibliography of Hevesi's works, several posthumous collections of his essays on Shakespeare edited by Shakespeare scholars in the Socialist decades, two English scholarly papers by Péter Szaffkó about Hevesi's activity in Thália Society and

[1] https://szfe.hu/hirek/hevesi-75-konferencia/
[2] Hevesi translated all of Shaw's dramas
[3] e.g. *The Tragedy of Man* by Madách for the first time, see further details in Szaffkó "Hevesi".

Hevesi in the English Press (1982, 1985), then György Székely's erudite bilingual edition of the letters Craig and Hevesi exchanged (*Edward Gordon Craig*) and a recent biographical entry in the *Palgrave Encyclopaedia of Global Shakespeare* (Reuss 2022). In the second group, short mentions and equally short laudatory summaries belong, such as the few lines at the beginning of Pálffy's article on "Shakespeare in Hungary"). Nonetheless, Pálffy's paper appeared in the theater review section of *Shakespeare Quarterly*, which was both a rare achievement for a scholar from the Socialist bloc at that time, and a perfect illustration of the somewhat distant kind of appreciation: "during the first decade of the twentieth century and the inter-war years, great efforts were made by Sándor Hevesi, an outstanding Hungarian stage director and Shakespeare scholar, to liberate the Hungarian cult of Shakespeare from its Romantic conventions and to introduce a more up-to-date style of acting Shakespeare. Hevesi's style, combined with a historico-realistic approach to the plays, became in the post-war years the standard for Shakespearean stage interpretations" (292).

While most of Pálffy's claims can be verified, two of his points, the "historico-realistic" approach and the "Hevesi's style" demand clarification. Having looked at Hevesi's writings, the stage designs he asked for and the written testimonies of the designer artists who worked with him, I strongly believe that there was no such a thing as "Hevesi's style", at least not something in the same sense as "Reinhardt's style". Born in the same year as Max Reinhardt[4] and being an equally influential theater reformer in the field of actor training, opera and theater direction as well as theater management in his own country, Hevesi could have been called the Hungarian Reinhardt, and was indeed compared by contemporaries to Reinhardt on several points and occasions. The opportunity for comparison was a given as Reinhardt's Berlin company regularly performed in Budapest. Hevesi followed Reinhardt's work closely and with a critical eye from the beginnings.

Those familiar with the works and inventions of the two believe that, while Reinhardt developed his own iconic manège-like approach, Hevesi never had, and never even attempted to develop, such a visual signature. In a 1930 essay Hevesi opined that "Reinhardt was at his greatest when he felt this [Shakespeare's] lack of style to be a vital gift and richness", and praised those directorial performances by Reinhardt, such as stagings of *The Winter's Tale* and *The Merchant of Venice*, in which Reinhardt "did not try to repair and modernize Shakespeare, but was content to represent both poetically and humanly, the poetry, the drama, the tragedy, the farce, the pastoral, the fable – in short, everything that Shakespeare, the greatest denier of uniform style and the greatest master of style-less-ness, brought to the stage to create the highest rank illusion of life with the lavishness that only he, of all the dramatists in the world, could achieve"[5] (Hevesi 1930).

[4] Austrian-born theatre director (1873-1943), whose work established the profession of the director as a creative artist.

[5] "Reinhardt akkor volt a legnagyobb, mikor ezt a stílustalanságot eleven adottságnak és bőségnek érezte, s megcsinálta a *Téli regé*-t és *A velencei kalmár*-t, ahol nem akarta Shakespeare-t megjavítani és modernizálni, hanem beérte azzal, hogy emberileg és költőileg visszaadja a lírát, a drámát, a tragédiát, a bohózatot, a pastoralét, a mesét - szóval mindazt, amit Shakespeare, az egységes stílus legnagyobb tagadója s a stílustalanság legnagyobb mestere színpadra vitt, hogy az élet legmagasabb rendű illúzióját azzal a pazarsággal teremtse meg, amely csakis neki adatott meg a világ összes drámaírói közül." - All translations from Hungarian are mine unless otherwise indicated.

Indeed, Hevesi believed that works—especially Shakespeare's—rather than directors, should determine their own artistic expression. Accordingly, he argued that sets should be informed by both the text and the historical research into the play's authentic theater space, rather than remain merely decorative or serve as reflections of a theater director's fleeting ideas or actual budget. While this view may seem evident in the 21st century, it was groundbreaking in Hungary at the time: nineteenth-century Hungarian scenography typically consisted of painted canvas backdrops *without any dramaturgical function* (Berczeliné 169) and were therefore re-usable. As a common practice, the Budapest National Theater frequently re-used its sets for several other productions, due to economic reasons. By the millennium, however, some of the sets had become too shabby to be used any more (Pukánszkyné 391).

Although Hevesi was a director, in the special issue of *Magyar Iparművészet* [Hungarian Applied Arts] (1914) which was devoted to stage art, he was listed among the three defining figures of Hungarian scenography. Discussing foreign scenic reforms and influential scenographers in his paper, art critic and editor Károly Sztrakoniczky remarked that "Sándor Hevesi must be mentioned first, who is not a design artist, but as the artistic director of the National Theater and later the Opera, he has contributed so much precision and so many interesting and artistic ideas to Hungarian theater that he has had perhaps the most profound impact to date on the modern development of the Hungarian stage."[6] (Sztrakoniczky 34-35)

Hevesi's quest for "the real Shakespeare" is often seen as an investigation by the Shakespeare scholar and philologist. In my view, however, his reading of Shakespeare's text was just as much the quest of the theater professional, that is, of the dramaturg and the director. Ostensibly, he sought a suitable method, rather than an artistic style, of representing "the real Shakespeare" on the stage. The process, as I see it, began around 1909–10 with *The Tempest* (1910) and *Hamlet* (1911).

3. Scenography: suiting the space to the word

"What shall be the relation of a modern stage to the decorations created by Shakespeare in his dramatic text?" Hevesi asked in 1909 (Hevesi 1909b: 7). His answer was firm, if somewhat vague: the right approach was "what Shakespeare suggested him-self" (8). Clearly, Hevesi sought an authentic way to connect the text with the performance space.

The 1914 special issue of *Magyar Iparművészet* [Hungarian Applied Arts] offers an abundance of articles that explore the spatial possibilities of the modern stage. I have grown to be persuaded that this inspiring intellectual turbulence was related, or perhaps, to some extent, catalyzed by Hevesi's views and earlier practice. It is conspicuous how deeply the scenic artists and critics who penned these articles engaged with the relation between the scenery and the plot. They treated stage decoration strictly in terms of function, as if they responded to the views

[6] "Hevesi Sándort kell hogy elsőnek említsük közöttük, aki ugyan nem tervező művész, de mint a Nemzeti Színház, majd az Operaház főrendezője, annyi alapossággal, annyi érdekes és művészi ötlettel szolgált a magyar színjátszásnak, hogy mindeddig talán a legmélyebb nyomokat hagyta a magyar színpad újkori fejlődésében." (Sztrakoniczky 34-35) – Károly Sztrakoniczky (1889-1915) was a talented lawyer, editor, critic, and art historian, "the Benjamin of Hungarian criticism" (D. I. 270) who died prematurely on the Russian front in WWI.

Hevesi had earlier articulated either on paper or on stage, in his "Shakespeare as Scenographer" in Craig's *Mask* or in the experimental productions of *The Tempest* (1910) and *Hamlet* (1911).[7]

To illustrate both the interconnectedness of the authors of the 1914 special issue and the depth of their engagement with the topic of scenography, let me quote the paper that was written by the talented dramaturg and director Lajos Bálint[8], a member of Hevesi's intellectual circle. He criticized Reinhardt (perhaps his *Othello*) from an exceptionally mature and experienced artistic perspective: he claimed that the set should not speak *instead of the text* but *should unfold* along with the drama. "A truly good stage décor […] should not impress with a readymade atmosphere; much rather, it should be a picture that is able to change and develop at any moment"[9] (Bálint 1914: 22).

3.1 *The Tempest*, 1910

The starting point of "Shakespeare the Scenographer" was the idea that "the mediaeval stage which had gradually developed to the time of the English Renaissance and become part of it, became by virtue of its lack of magnificence and its primitiveness the stage of unlimited possibilities" (7). Such a mise-en-scène capitalized on the medieval heritage of symbolic thinking, he explains, thus it was the spectator's "task to arrive at illusions through purely poetic mediums" (7). With this claim Hevesi reinforces the traditional (Hungarian) idea of Shakespeare being a poet or poet-dramatist ("drámaköltő"). The first page of the article lauds the playwright's poetic power: "The word is supreme, and Shakespeare alone creates the decorations and illuminates the play every night with magic quickness." (6), and the last page concludes with a reinforcement of the same idea: "Shakespeare's dramas are poetic creations, and they must be presented and treated as such." (7).

The article appears to be entirely theoretical; it does not explicitly ask whether Shakespeare's plays should be performed exclusively in spaces resembling those for which they were originally written. Nor does it yet inquire why or how it might be beneficial for each dramatic text to generate its own unique performance space. Nonetheless, these questions probably loom in the air for Hevesi, as in mid-April the following year, 1910, he puts this long-nursed theory into practice with a group of volunteering actor trainees and stages *The Tempest* on a bare stage, in one piece without a break, completely unabridged.

Because the performers were unpaid students, when the production is remembered at all, it is mostly dismissed as an amateur one. However, the students were educated by Hevesi, and the occasion was an official matinée (turned soirée) of the Hungarian Shakespeare Committee,

[7] In my view, Hevesi's 1909 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also belong to the important early experiments, however, as it did not directly seek to reconstruct the Shakespeare-stage, it is outside the focus of this paper. It was Hevesi's response to, and in part, his first (semi)rebuttal of Reinhardt's *Dream*, representing an interesting starting point of another intellectual-scenographic journey leading to the Hungarian director's mature 1928 *Dream.* Given its significance and the fact that the drawings of the set design by Gusztáv Oláh, are available at the Theatre Archive of the National Széchenyi Library, it will be the subject of my next study.

[8] Lajos Bálint (1886–1974) was a dramaturg, translator, literary editor, theatre artistic secretary, dramatist, and the co-founder with Hevesi of the experimental, Freie Bühne/Théâtre Libre-type Thália Society (1904-1908).

[9] "Az igazi jó dekorációnak, minden festői szépségétől eltekintve, első kelléke éppen az, hogy ne egy kész hangulatot adjon, hanem olyan festői kép legyen, mely minden pillanatban változóképes, aszerint, hogy benne és körülötte mi történik, természetesen világítással és a színpad egyéb eszközeivel segítve." (Bálint 1914: 22)

reviewed in the press. The occasion, the performers, and the venue in particular, Uránia Academic Theater, were all indicative of the performance's uniqueness (not amateurishness!), its artistic, scholarly and literary value, and experimental nature. The venue was located near the boulevard in a relatively new four-story palace, one of the rare Venetian Gothic / Moorish Revival style buildings designed by the Hamburg architect Henrik Schmahl. Over the ball and concert halls on the ground floor, the building housed the offices and classrooms of the academy of performing arts. At the time, the Art Nouveau ground-floor cabaret gave way to Urania Academic Theater, whose mission contributes to the significance of Hevesi's experiment.

Urania Society and its Academic Theater was a "special undertaking" launched in Budapest in 1899, with a mission to provide "non-school-based public education". It followed the "foreign models that were opened under the same name [Urania] in Berlin and Vienna [1890 and 1899 respectively]" (Kis). Before it began showing films exclusively in 1917, Uránia offered presentations enhanced by still and later moving images, using dioramas, 8.5x8.5 slides, and even live music. Topics ranged from travelogues—such as Jenő Cholnoky's exploration of the North Pole—through natural sciences and physics to literature. Urania Academic Theater was in fact one of the latest and most progressive forms of public education,[10] which "were created as Hungarian versions of the English free universities, folk houses, American lyceums and German educational societies" (Bogdán and Munkácsy). As the editorial in Uránia's eponymous journal declared in 1900, the 576-seat theater aimed to be "a place where the scientist educates, the artist delights and the writer ennobles his fellow human beings, and where all three cultivate a sense of belonging" (Molnár 2). Enviably, this idea of free, holistic education, the dissemination of knowledge with visuals, proved immensely popular. While image-producing companies quickly understood the demands of visual education, audiences of all ages, about fifty thousand every year, flocked to the lectures, both individually and in school groups. Urania even toured its productions in the countryside. Clearly, Urania Academic Theater was anything but a minor or peripheral place to stage an experiment; its program in itself effectively directed public attention onto Hevesi's new theory.

Even if we know little of Hevesi's production of *The Tempest* (22 April 1910) in Urania, this knowledge originates from authentic contemporary sources. Understanding the venue also helps us speculate. One reliable source is Lajos Bálint, Hevesi's dramaturg for thirty-five years, who reveals in his reminiscences the intrigues that were used to prevent the production from coming to life (*Művészbejáró* 53). The other source is the Shakespeare scholar Bernát Alexander, whose review appeared immediately after the performance. We know it from both Bálint and Alexander that the experiment was met with such enthusiastic reception that the performance at the academic theater was not only fully booked, but repeated the next day, April 23. Furthermore, Alexander, who was invited to deliver a twenty-minute pre-performance talk, managed to explain the unconventional literary-theatrical-historical concept of the empty stage to Urania's diverse audience.

Alexander's edifying lecture and his review in *Vasárnapi Újság* [Sunday News] the following day referred to three historical drawings that were believed at the time to represent the Shakespearean stage. One of the pictures featured the etching of the Swan's roofed stage with

[10] See also Palló and Perényi.

two columns from 1596, the other featured an apron stage surrounded with groundlings from 1632, and a third displayed a drawing of dancing characters on the stage of the Red Bull from 1662.[11] In view of Urania’s mission “to establish a cultural institution that will present the history, development and present of all scientific and social knowledge *in projected, decorative and cinematographic images, interesting plays and music,* in such a perfectly attractive and entertaining form that it will be a popular entertainment for all levels of our audience, improving their curiosity and knowledge” (founding document of 1899, qtd by Bogdán and Munkácsy), we may speculate that the images Alexander talked and wrote about (Figures 1–3) were most probably shown during his talk as projected slides on Urania’s screen.

Figure 1. "The Swan Theater in London (after a drawing from 1596)”—this is the copy of Johannes de Witt's 1596 drawing of the Swan made by Arendt van Buchell—as it appeared in Vasárnapi Újság *[Sunday News] with Bernát Alexander’s review, 23 April, 1910. p.360.*

Figure 2. “An English stage (1632)”—as it appeared in Vasárnapi Újság *[Sunday News] with Bernát Alexander’s review, 23 April 1910. p.360.*

[11] The original of Johannes De Witt’s drawing of the Swan, 1596 is long lost, but a copy by Arendt van Buchell survived as the only sketch of an Elizabethan playhouse known to exist, and as the sketch of a playhouse that was similar to the Globe – this was known to Bernát Alexander.

Figure 3. “The stage of the Red Bull Theater (after a drawing from 1662) Images of stages from Shakespeare's age"—as it appeared in Vasárnapi Újság *[Sunday News] with Bernát Alexander’s review, 23 April 1910. p.360.*

We cannot decipher how Prospero’s magic was staged from either Bálint’s or Alexander’s account. Nonetheless, it is certain that the text was running without scenery, without intervals, in one act, and in one and a half hours, “with a Shakespearean stage arrangement [Shakespeare-korabeli színpadi berendezéssel]” (Bálint 1914: 22). As Alexander, whose plural reference to “us” obviously implies Hevesi, persuasively described the motive behind the venture:

> Some of us opined, it was clear that some of Shakespeare's plays could *only be played in this way*. The uninterrupted succession of scenes reveals the secrets of Shakespeare's composition that we have scarcely thought of, and which have had effects hitherto unknown. For example: the first scene of *The Tempest* is indeed a great storm. Today’s stage can do a storm brilliantly, everything is fine. The storm is over. The curtain drops. The stage hands are working feverishly to create a new scenery. Long pause. At last, the curtains open, Miranda and Prospero stand before us and Miranda, filled with grief, sighs over the wrecked ship, and the destroyed people. But no effect! That storm has long gone! However, on the Shakespearean stage: the storm is still raging when we have Prospero and Miranda appear to us. *The two scenes are interconnected without the slightest pause, just as they should*. (Alexander 1910: 360–61, emphasis is mine)

Alexander’s explanation continues with a structural interpretation of the text, ostensibly with an edifying goal:

> The whole play is interwoven from three threads. The fate of Prospero is one; it includes Miranda and Ferdinand’s love. This is the emotional, sublime, poetic thread. Then there is the comic intermezzo: the role of the clowns, to which Caliban belongs in a way just as Ariel does to the first thread. Eventually comes the thread of the Neapolitan and Milanese lords (Alexander 1910: 361).

Here Alexander concludes that braiding the three threads together, especially with young actors-to-be would have been impossible on a realistic stage:

> the primitive stage is more sophisticated in this regard. This is how it happened that the students (some of whom are very talented) performed this play with an effect that even great theaters can envy. Perhaps they will follow suit. I believe they are already inspired. (Alexander 1910: 361)

In sum, the experiment ended with success: it spectacularly proved that the experimental characteristics, i.e., producing Shakespeare "without scenery, without intervals, in one act, and in one and a half hours," were no mere scholarly extravaganza. Moreover, the venue, Urania Academic Theater, guaranteed that the motive behind the experimental staging reached and stirred popular interest, too. As the second night of *The Tempest* was also fully booked, the idea of the empty stage reached ca. 1200 spectators (ca. 600 spectators, twice). Even if theater histories are nearly silent about the experiment, I firmly believe that Hevesi—and Alexander's lecture with the projected visuals—were able to convert the empty stage from mere technical detail into the production's essence, and that Urania's venue contributed to popularizing their new ideas.

3.2 *Hamlet*, 1911

Hevesi's experimental *Hamlet*, performed May 5, 1911, is a little more known in theater history than *The Tempest*. Pukánszkyné alludes to it, stating that in the 1911 Shakespeare series, Hevesi "is already beginning to find his way to a suitable Shakespeare staging, although the process of reconstructing the Shakespearean stage, which he is now experimenting with for the first time, is still a mere groping in the dark and does not win the unanimous approval of the audience and critics. For the time being, however, it is a great achievement that an initiative is being taken at the National Theater."[12] (392). In the influential journal *Nyugat*, Zoltán Ambrus criticized the series/cycle format, arguing that in this manner, individual plays received only a fraction of the necessary time and attention, which lowered the overall performance quality. Nevertheless, Ambrus acknowledged the public's heightened interest as the merit of the cycles.

Interestingly, the production of *Hamlet* on a Shakespearean stage was also covered in the press and accompanied by Alexander's enthusiastic pre-show lecture—just as it happened in the case of *The Tempest* in Urania. As the host of the show, he effectively initiated the public into Shakespeare's theater, this time not the six hundred people at Urania but the much larger crowds at the National. Alexander took pains to explain the goal and the details of the venture in hoping to reach out to an even larger audience. To establish the position of the current experiment, he made sure that its predecessor was mentioned in his *Vasárnapi Újság* [Sunday News] review.

[12] "Az 1911 -i Shakespeare-ciklusban már kezdi keresni a megfelelő Shakespeare-rendezés útját, bár a Shakespeare-színpadnak ez a rekonstrukciója, mellyel most elsőízben kísérletezik, még merő tapogatódzás és nem nyeri meg egyöntetűen a közönség és kritika tetszését. Egyelőre azonban az is nagy dolog, hogy a Nemzeti Színháznál történik valami kezdeményezés." (Pukánszkyné 392)

> The performance of *Hamlet* was particularly interesting. The stage was old-fashioned, schematic: it only suggested the levels; and symbolic: it artificially indicated them. It was roughly like last year's production of *The Tempest* at the Uránia, when we discussed it here and published a drawing of an old Shakespearean stage. But at the National Theater, this was a different and a very risky experiment. It was met with great suspicion and reservation, especially by the critics. But almost all of them became persuaded. They saw that the audience, the ultimate judge of us all, accepted the approach without any hesitation. (Alexander 1911:418)

It is clear from Alexander's rhetoric that he intended to focus attention on and explain the point of the experiment while (establishing and) reporting the experiment's success:

> What is the point of it all? Shakespeare wrote his plays with this perspective in mind; so he adapted his plays. Let's see, then, how *Hamlet* appears and what effect it has on such a stage. Indeed, this is the only way to present Shakespeare without omissions, without artificial and arbitrary rearrangements, and without time-wasting pauses, practically in one continuous sequence. True, the performance of *Hamlet* lasted nearly four hours. But we saw the whole thing and were deeply impressed. At the same time, it became clear that one does not need to believe excessively in the fetish of decoration. Look: *Hamlet* was performed without any lighting or decoration, and it had a greater impact than ever before. (Alexander 1911:418)

Interestingly, Alexander not only voiced his doubts about the future of Shakespeare production and reception—echoing the potential concerns of the weekly's diverse readership—but also managed to educate and attract readers to become future spectators through familiar examples:

> After all, we are already in the same situation with decorations as we are with women's hats. Right now, big hats are in fashion. Eventually, it will become apparent that women's heads can look perfectly beautiful with small hats, as long as the small hat is fashionable. In Munich, they already tested this *poor* stage setup, and no one mourned the absence of the padded scenery. The only problem was—and still is—that the audience, due to the unfamiliarity of it all, *still notices the poverty and schematic nature* of the stage, and this awareness inevitably distracts their attention. If only they would get used to it! Will they get used to it? This is something that requires further discussion. (Alexander 1911:418, Alexander's emphases)

26. szám — SZÍNHÁZI HÉT — 23. oldal

STOCKBAUER GUSZTÁV
Budapesten
Üzlet: Párisi (Zsibárus)-utca 3. szám.
Készít: ágyneműeket, paplanokat és matrácokat a legfinomabb kiállításban
Különlegesség: Pehely-paplanok.
Gyár: VIII., Kisfaludy-utca 14. sz.

NEMZETI SZÍNHÁZ

Hétfő este

Hamlet.

Tragédia 5 felv. Irta: Shakespeare. Forditotta: Arany János. — *Személyek:*

Claudius	Szacsvay
Hamlet	Beregi
Horatio	Mihályfi
Polonius	Gál
Laërtes	Garamszeghy
Pap	Hajdu
Marcellus	Rajnai
Bernardo	Abonyi
Szellem	Bartos
Első sirásó	Gabányi Á.
Második sirásó	Rózsahegyi
Első szinész	Gyenes
Gertrud	S. Fáy Sz.
Fortinbrass	Kürthy.

Az eredeti angol VERY-puder felismerhetetlen.

I. felvonás. Hamlet dán királyfit felszólítja atyja szelleme, hogy álljon bosszút, mert őt, az atyját, a Hamlet anyja és ennek kedvese, a mostani király ölték meg.
II. felvonás. A királyfi gyilkosságot ábrázoló szindarabot rendeztet. Claudius király elárulja magát.
III. felvonás. Hamlet végzetes tévedés folytán megöli szerelmesének, Ofíliának atyját. Claudius el akarja pusztitani Hamletet.
IV. felvonás. A terv nem sikerül, Ofélia pedig bánatában meghal.
V. felvonás. A leány bátyja, Laërtes, párbajt viv Hamlettel. Miután a királyné megmérgezte magát, Hamlet pedig megölte Claudiust, a viaskodók leszúrják egymást.

NEMZETI SZÍNHÁZ

Csütörtök este

A balga szűz.

Szinmű 4 felv. Irta Bataille Henry. Forditotta Ábrányi Emil. — *Személyek:*

De Charance Amadé herceg	Gál Gyula
Gabrielle, a felesége	K. Hegyesi M.
Gaston } gyermekeik	Dezső József
Diane } gyermekeik	Paulay Erzsi
Armaury Marcel, ügyvéd	Odry Árpád
Fanny, a felesége	P. Márkus E.
Roux abbé	Pethes Imre
A herceg titkára	Szőke Lajos
Armaury titkára	Bónis Lajos
Ketty, Diane komornája	Kelemen M.
Komornyik De Charance-nál	Petri J. a. n.

Szinház után a NEW-YORK kávéházba megyünk.

I. felvonás. De Charance Diane hercegnő bevallja szüleinek, hogy viszonya van Amaury ügyvéddel. A kétségbeesett főúri család elhatározza, hogy zárdába küldi a leányt.
II. felvonás. Diane azonban szökni készül Amauryval. Éppen indulni akarnak, mikor Gaston, Diane bátyja, megzavarja őket. Amauryné elrejti a szerelmeseket, de ezek rejtekhelyükről is megszöknek. Amauryné erre mindent elmond Gastonnak.
III. felvonás. Amauryné felkeresi Greenwichben a szökevényeket, de itt látja, hogy ura nem tér többé vissza hozzá. Belenyugszik a fájdalmas valóságba.
IV. felvonás. Gaston belopódzik a szerelmesek lakására, hogy párbajra hivja Amauryt. De Amauryné is odajő és feltartóztatja. Diane pedig elveszi Gastontól a fegyvert és agyonlövi magát.

FOGTECHNIKAI ÉS FOGORVOSI MŰTEREM
Budapest, IV., Károly-körút 26. I. em.
Rendelés 9–6-ig ■ ■ Ünnepnap 9–1-ig
Edelmann József dr. és Márfai Arthur

Figure 4. Playbill of Hevesi's Hamlet September 9, 1911, without the director's name—as it appeared in Színházi Hét (26) 1911. p.23.

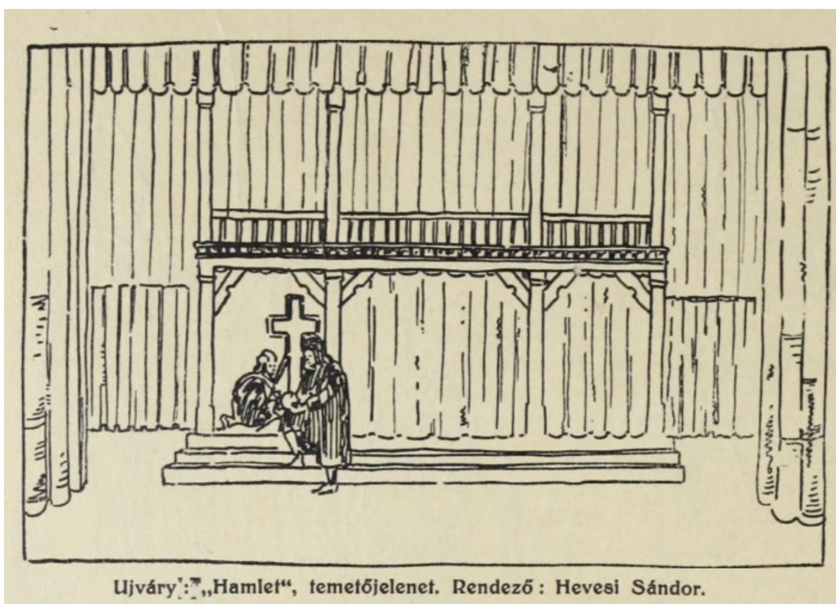

Figure 5. "Újváry: Hamlet, gravedigger scene. Directed by Sándor Hevesi"—as it appeared in Újváry, Ignác. 1914. "Shakespeare Hamletének díszleteiről" [About the Sets of Shakespeare's Hamlet*]*. Magyar Iparművészet. *[Hungarian Applied Arts] XVII (1914): 38.*

While all critics agree that the audience is soon under the production's sway and does not miss the elaborate realistic décor anymore, it is only Hevesi's own description that illuminates an extra feature, the tripartite nature of the stage (Figure 5 shows three planes: ground level, a level three steps higher and a balcony). Hevesi's paper expresses the director's care to establish the

position of his work outside Budapest and Hungary, too, within the international discourse of Shakespeare and scenography research.

> In tonight's performance at the National Theater, we recreated the stage of Shakespeare's winter theater,[13] the Globe Theater, with its large timber-framed structure and dark drapes. All that was changed was to adapt to the dimensions of our auditorium and stage. The stage consists of three parts: a *foreground*, which uses the whole proscenium (where we don't normally play) and sets the actor in the audience, so to speak, *a backstage* (which we always cover while the play is in front of it), which can be closed off with curtains, and *an upper stage (*which represents the castle's headquarters, and where the actors sit during the scene of the play), *so that the stage is a faithful copy of the Elizabethan stages*, and in this respect is not to be confused with the German Shakespearean stages, which, from Tieck to Perfall, while aligning to the same principle, performed Shakespeare with (perhaps even too) much freedom and arbitrariness.
>
> The logical interplay of the three, even four fields of the Shakespearean stage (which I have restored using the latest findings of Brandl, Brodmeier, Wegener and the American Albright), and the discreet but effective use of lighting (on this point, of course, we cannot be as simple as Shakespeare was on his stage) makes the entire decoration superfluous, because it gives each color its own specific character, so to speak, and there is no need for what is still taught in secondary schools today, namely to make up for missing scenery with index cards and inscriptions. (Hevesi 1911)

We rarely have any detailed reviews of the production, so the one credible contemporary spectator, the poet Dezső Kosztolányi's wrote is a rare gem and must be quoted word for word. His description reinforces that the theoretical foundation Hevesi had meant to establish, worked spectacularly (Fig. 5).

> The set is a wooden stage divided into two floors, so that the drama is played out on three levels, three floors, including the proscenium, which is very well used. What richness there is in this primitiveness. …] It is as if we were looking at a small t theater—another theater on the stage—and at every moment we feel that they are acting, but the illusion is not diminished. (Kosztolányi 346)

Clearly, it is the *multi-level set* that enabled the scene changes to take place fast, almost simultaneously on multiple levels, and it is the vertical, three-dimensional structuring that is missing from other contemporary Shakespeare-on-bare-stage experimental sets in Europe (see Duval and Schumacher's sets of the same, the gravedigger scene, Figures 6-7). The production proved that the symbolism of the Medieval tripartite stage was indeed comprehensible for the diverse, early-twentieth-century audience of the Budapest National. In fact, neither the effect of stylization nor the meta-theatrical feature was lost on the Hungarians. Fortunately, Kosztolányi's

[13] By now we know that performances during the winter were moved indoors, e.g. to the halls of the aristocracy or the Court, or "using rooms at inns in winter" (Gurr 146), even building a "hall playhouse in the Blackfriars" (Gurr 146).

words vividly record the way the performance advances. When he writes that "Hamlet has never been closer to the audience than now," this should be seen as a particularly positive feature of the production, since the old National (former Népszínház) in Blaha Lujza Square was a particularly inhospitable building not only for modern, non-declamatory theater but for prose performances in general.

> In fact, Hamlet has never been closer to the audience than now. During the monologues, he stands in front of the inner stage and speaks from there. His words compensate for the lack of scenery. And when the curtains of the inner stage part, a warm and intimate interior is revealed. This stage has all the effects, the atmosphere, and the possibilities, the mystery, the peace, the excitement, and the rush, because it is a stage that is constantly changing the drama, without a barrier or a break. (Kosztolányi 346)

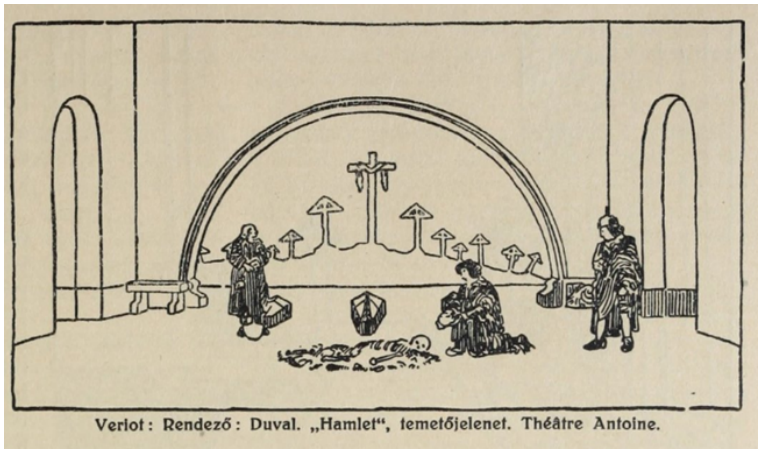

Figure 6. "Veriot: Hamlet, gravedigger scene. Directed by Duval. Théatre Antoine."—as it appeared in Újváry, Ignác. 1914. "Shakespeare Hamletének díszleteiről" [About the Sets of Shakespeare's Hamlet*].* Magyar Iparművészet. *[Hungarian Applied Arts] XVII (1914): 38.*

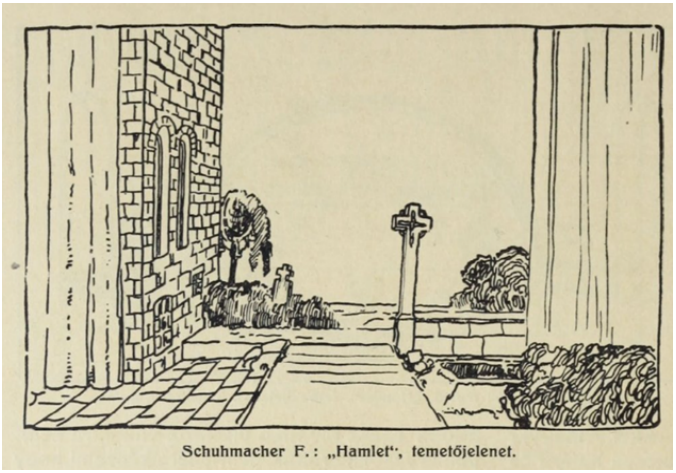

Figure 7. "Schuhmacher: Hamlet, gravedigger scene."—as it appeared in Újváry, Ignác. 1914. "Shakespeare Hamletének díszleteiről" [About the Sets of Shakespeare's Hamlet*].* Magyar Iparművészet. *[Hungarian Applied Arts] XVII (1914): 38.*

4. Marketing the Stylized Shakespeare Stage, 1914

What appears to be an equally vital feature in both experiments, the empty stage of *The Tempest* and the miniature Shakespeare-theater within the proscenium theater in *Hamlet*, is in fact the selling of novel ideas to the public in several media. The marketing included the introductory talk before the live performance for the spectators and the explanatory articles in the press for the readers. Although I have not found evidence of a premeditated and planned campaign, the topic gradually became known, perhaps even fashionable and popular. Whether intentionally or not, Hevesi managed to thematize public discussions and energize like-minded artistic discourse. It is not impossible that the intellectual input of the 1914 special issue of *Magyar Iparművészet* [Hungarian Applied Arts] devoted to the art of the stage was heavily reliant on Hevesi’s first experiments. The editorial invited the contribution of the decorative arts to serve the modern theater. (Györgyi 1)

In itself, the search for a suitable manner to play Shakespeare perhaps would not have induced such an electrifying discussion that the 1914 special issue displays, but Hevesi’s paper, which followed the editorial in the volume immediately, raised the stakes and broadened the horizons by stating right away that “the stage compressed time as much as space in order to express the world [a színpad az időt éppen úgy sűrítette, mint a teret, éppen azért, hogy a világot kifejezhesse]” (Hevesi 1914:2). Both surprising and thought-provoking, the article first dealt with the Medieval and the Shakespearean performing spaces, then looked into “the principle of tripartition, in other words the triple stage [a hármas tagolás elve, szóval a hármas színpad],” which “gave the poet a great deal of freedom and unlimited possibilities [roppant nagy szabadságot és korlátlan lehetőségeket biztosított a költőnek]” (Hevesi 1914: 4). To restate my view: by tripartition or triple stage, he means three physically different levels or planes in the theater which may convey the sense of three different locations and times/chronologies. When he concludes that “the Shakespearean stage is in essence symbolic and architectonic [a shakespearei színpad lényegében szimbolikus és architektonikus]” (4), by architectonic he apparently means that its vertical architectural construct is a symbolic and physical signifier of time, space, even heterotopia.

Several other artists agreed with stylization, renounced both pointless and artless decoration and fake naturalism or canvas realism. Instead, they insisted on the precise functionality and the metaphoric/stylized nature of scenography. To illustrate the understanding and progressive milieu whirling around Hevesi and the question of representing our distance from reality, let me cite a few. The young and enthusiastic Artur Bárdos[14] who worked in 1909 as an assistant to Reinhardt pointed out that “stage décor is first and foremost a problem of space”, and conclusively refuted the customary and widespread theatrical practice, calling it “absurd to re-use the set of another play in another play from another era” (18). Essentially, he announced a paradigm change: “we have to become accustomed to deal with the stage from the point of view of the essence of the stage rather than that of literature” (ibid.). The famous painter

[14] Artur Bárdos (1892-1974) dramaturg, screen writer, theatre and film director, manager of Belvárosi Színház [Downtown Theatre], whose funny anecdote opens Dennis Kennedy’s witty Introduction in his *Foreign Shakespeare* (1).

and scenographer of the Opera, Ignác Újváry[15] contributed a fascinating paper in which he compared the sets of the gravediggers' scene of Hevesi's *Hamlet* (design by Újváry himself) to those of Duval's *Hamlet* (Paris, design by Veriot) and Schumacher's *Hamlet* (inspired by Appia, 1909, Dresden Royal Court Theater[16]) to offer a wide international horizon. He concluded that

> In all three solutions, the frame of the stage image remains the same throughout the play; the image it contains changes according to the scenes. The French and German conceptions are in principle quite similar. The Hungarian conception, however, shows a significant difference in that the scenes are nowhere accompanied by a scenic image; the stage image is provided only by the figures on the stage. To better illustrate the three concepts, let us take the cemetery scene as an example. In the Hungarian staging, the cemetery is marked by a primitive cross, simply placed in front of the curtain of the left-hand, separate part of the scene, the cross is not complemented by any landscape motif; the scene is presented to the viewer in a completely simplified form, to give less than that would be to say "nothing". (Újváry 38)

Besides Kosztolányi's report, it is Újváry's paper that reveals minutely, scene by scene, how the scaffold-set was used, for instance, with the top level representing the castle walls of Elsinore, etc. As the creator of the mise-en-scène, Újváry concludes by explaining the most important practical advantage of his design:

> the innovative staging [took place] to frame the scenes in such a way that only a small part of the set changes, which happens when a curtain is lowered or raised, so that the whole change takes a few seconds. In this way, it achieved a uniform effect, prevented the spectator from becoming tired, and shortened the performance of a Shakespearean tragedy by an hour and a half, or even two hours. (Újváry 39)

The lighting technique Újváry also describes was quite elaborate and surprisingly similar to that of a much later (say, László Bagossy's famous 2014) *Hamlet*: "only the part in which something is actually taking place is lit" (38). Despite the fact that lighting technologies developed rapidly in theaters, at the turn of the century, the National could afford to pay neither for more sophisticated lights nor for more skilled lighting technicians (Pukánszkyné 391). However, from both Kosztolányi's and Újváry's reports, it seems that Hevesi and Újváry's team did manage to use a relatively simple lighting design and thus, with this innovation, saved Shakespeare and the audience from extremely lengthy and unbearable performances.

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[15] Ignác Újváry (1860-1927), painter, professor at the Academy of Decorative Arts, head of the Opera and National's common scene-painting workshop. His works include contributions to the painting of the Feszty panorama, murals for the Catholic church in Zebegény, and four panneaux for the Café at the Budapest Opera.

[16] Schumacher's 1910 set is described (Catalogue No. 081 in the Fritz Schumacher Society's page) as "A system of permanently installed basic architectural elements, in conjunction with variable set pieces and curtains, allows the rapid transformation for 18 different scenes on a stage without any special technical equipment." http://fritzschumacher.de/gesellschaft/werkkatalog/081-buehnenbild-hamlet/. Last accessed: …April 6, 2025.

5. Conclusion

This paper investigated the scenography in the performances of two Shakespeare plays, *The Tempest* and *Hamlet*, directed by Sándor Hevesi. The paper’s objective was to highlight Hevesi’s otherwise lesser-known efforts to reconstruct and understand the workings of the Elizabethan stage and text. Although the availability of contemporary newspaper articles, theater reviews, and art criticism is limited, a handful of first-hand reports were found that describe the innovations of a contemporary pen. While we only have slightly partial reports on the success of these imperfect experiments, they both seem to have been illuminating and immensely useful, indeed.

As a means of reconstruction, Hevesi first employed a *barren, empty stage* in 1910, and next a tiered, *theater-within-theater-like scaffold* in 1911, designed to offer a stylized, non-specific performance space in “compressed time”. The latter, benefiting from a three-dimensional, *multilevel* stage, eliminated the need for elaborate scene changes, allowing the performance to flow seamlessly. The innovations removed the necessity for substantial cuts to the text: scene localization was achieved through Shakespeare’s own language, enabling Hevesi’s actors to perform the plays unabridged.

The paper renders the 1910 and 1911 productions important as it views them as the first steps along the same journey that led to a new approach to performing Shakespeare, and a functional yet non-realistic scenography. It would, of course, be a gross overgeneralization to attribute the significant shift in Hungarian scenography during the 1910s to Hevesi alone; rather, as the paper suggests, Hevesi catalyzed the anti-naturalist turn away from the lifelike, illusionistic stage settings toward the more abstract, stylized, and symbolic approaches to theatrical space. This change helped shape contemporary thinking about theatrical space and stylization in scenography.

Reading contemporary publications clarified that public and artistic discourses were equally engaged in estimating the potential of abstract scenographic solutions. These discussions in the written press or in the form of public lectures, often with projected images – new forms of progressive education – helped advocate new Hungarian scenography and at once frame Hevesi’s search for “the real Shakespeare”.

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List of Illustrations:

1. “A londoni Swan Színház (1596-ból való rajz után)” [The Swan Theatre of London (after a 1596 drawing)] – this is the copy of Johannes de Witt's 1596 drawing of the Swan made by Arendt van Buchell - as it appeared in *Vasárnapi Újság* [Sunday News] with Bernát Alexander’s review, 23 April, 1910. p.360.
2. Egy angol színpad, 1662 [An English stage, 1662] - as it appeared in *Vasárnapi Újság* [Sunday News] with Bernát Alexander’s review, 23 April, 1910. p.360.
3. "The stage of the Red Bull Theatre (after a drawing from 1662) Images of stages from Shakespeare's age" - - as it appeared in *Vasárnapi Újság* [Sunday News] with Bernát Alexander’s review, 23 April, 1910. p.360
4. Playbill of *Hamlet,* September 9, 1911, without the director’s name – as it appeared in *Színházi Hét* (26) 1911. p.23
5. Újváry, „Hamlet” – temetőjelenet. Rendező: Hevesi Sándor [Újváry: *Hamlet* – gravedigger scene. Director: Sándor Hevesi] as it appeared in Újváry, Ignác. 1914. “Shakespeare Hamletének díszleteiről” [About the Sets of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*]. *Magyar Iparművészet.* XVII (1914): 36.
6. Veriot: Rendező: Duval. Hamlet – temetőjelenet. Theatre Antoine [Veriot: Director: Duval – Hamlet – gravedigger scene. Theatre Antoine] as it appeared in Újváry, Ignác. 1914. “Shakespeare Hamletének díszleteiről” [About the Sets of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*]. *Magyar Iparművészet.* [Hungarian Applied Arts] XVII (1914): 37.
7. Schuhmacher F. Hamlet – temetőjelenet [Schuhmacher F. Hamlet - gravedigger scene] as it appeared in Újváry, Ignác. 1914. “Shakespeare Hamletének díszleteiről” [About the Sets of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*]. *Magyar Iparművészet.* [Hungarian Applied Arts] XVII (1914): 38.