



*288 metres of velvet, 16 pairs of shoes,
12 yellow top hats, 5 bathtubs ...*
– The Staging and Cultural Impact
of the 1925 Production of *Halló, Amerika!*
in the Budapest Operetta Theatre

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Halló, Amerika! was the show of the 1924/25 season in Hungary – such a big hit that even a very particularly targeted magazine, *Autó* [The Automobile] wrote about it three times. It was not only a key performance in the financial and institutional history of the theatre, but a major Hungarian cultural phenomenon, influencing language and society.

The first *Fővárosi Operett Színház* [Municipal Operetta Theatre] between 1922–1929 was researched by Gyöngyi Heltai.¹ Her analysis shows that the attempt to shift the repertoire towards revues started the decline of the theatre. While she was focusing on intercultural trends and the institutional management of the theatre, in this paper I attempt to examine one of its key shows, the debates around it, and its short and long term influences on Hungarian culture.² The show – being a hit production – has a relatively extensive range of source material: mostly press articles (with many photographs) and the management’s brief documentation kept in the National Széchényi Library. However, we have to be aware that most of our source-

- 1 Her article will be published in Hungarian: Gyöngyi Heltai, “Transznacionális hatások a Fővárosi Operettszínház korai korszakában (1922–1926)” [Transnational influences in the early period of the Budapest Operetta Theatre (1922–1926)], in *A magyar populáris zene története(i). Források, módszerek, perspektívák*, ed. Ádám Ignác (Budapest: ZTI, forthcoming); and also in English by the University of Leeds.
- 2 The show’s thematic scenographic analysis has already been published in Hungarian: Daniel Molnár, *Vörös csillagok. A Rákosi-korszak szórakoztatóipara és a szocialista revűk* [Red stars. Entertainment business in the Rákosi-era and the socialist revues] (Budapest: Ráció, 2019), 332–9.

es from the press are biased one way or another: either ideologically (as the show itself was interpreted as a political issue) or in focusing on marketing matters in relation to the venue.

A journalist wrote in 1925: “Hungary now only owns a third of its former territory, but it has only three theatres less than before.” This might have been an exaggeration, but in fact we can observe a clear tendency of turning Budapest orpheums and music halls into theatre enterprises after WWI. The *Fővárosi Orfeum* [Municipal Orpheum] was bought by an American theatre entrepreneur, Ben Blumenthal, who reopened it as *Fővárosi Operett Színház* in 1922, and changed the variety show profile to operettas.⁴ Blumenthal defined himself as a businessman *par excellence* – with theatre interests in Berlin and New York. It is unclear, however, what his role was regarding the repertoire, because the theatre was run by Hungarian theatre professionals: Imre Roboz, Dezső Tapolczai and Ernő Szabolcs. Based on the list of premieres, the primary focus of the theatre was on Austrian, French and Hungarian operettas – until the end of 1924. It is unclear who initiated the change in style and the repertoire – the press associated it personally with Blumenthal – which led to the staging of an American-style revue show. Blumenthal’s supposed goal might have been to reset the theatre’s business model: instead of creating a new production every two months, only one spectacular show would run for the whole season or even longer. This was an existing (and successful) business model on Broadway. The shows of the Ziegfeld Follies had been staged like this in the New Amsterdam Theatre since 1907; in London, the Palace Theatre staged revues which ran for 300 performances on average; in Paris, the Folies Bergère produced a single show each year from 1919 until 1944; and in Berlin the Admiralspalast hosted the yearly Haller-revues. Blumenthal invited an experienced American director to the Budapest Operetta, Jack Haskell (1886–1963), who staged and choreographed several revues both in London and New York.⁵ While it was a recurring phrase in the press that Haskell and Blumenthal “bring a complete revue” to Budapest, the show was not a

3 *Pesti Hírlap*, June 6, 1925. All translations by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

4 See the list of productions: Lajos Koch, *A Fővárosi Operettszínház műsora* [Show catalogue of the Municipal Operetta Theatre] (Budapest: MSZI, 1973).

5 Haskell enjoyed Blumenthal’s complete trust: he sent only two cables to Blumenthal during his stay in Budapest. *Mr. Haskell takes leave*. English transcript of an article in *Ma Este*, February 19, 1925. Országos Széchényi Könyvtár Színháztörténeti Tár [National Széchényi Library Department of Theatre History; OSZK SzT], Irattár 374.

replica of an existing production⁶ – it was rather an anthology of successful American revue scenes mixed with newly created Hungarian ones.⁷ As for the show's title, the management chose *Halló, Amerika!* which indicated the different quality of this new production. The sources do not suggest that the show relied on explicit visual or textual propaganda about the lifestyle or culture of the United States.⁸ Instead, "America" was represented only as an abstract, exotic setting rather than the home of the American Dream. However, between 1871 and 1913 around two million Hungarians emigrated to the US, half of them between 1900 and 1913,⁹ through which numerous members of the audience might have had already an emotional connection to the subject. Still, the main element, which made this production "American", was its style and execution. If we trust the words of writer and critic Miklós Kállay, staging such a revue might have been a continuation of an earlier trend, reacting to the changes in the taste of the audience:

Tonight Budapest will be once again closer to a global city [Weltstadt]. [...] Operettas were staged as revues lately according to the Western trends. Since A három grácia,¹⁰ each operetta had a finale or a sequence, which the director and the designer used to improvise a small revue. But the first real one [...] will be Halló, Amerika! [...] The audience is bored of middle-class lemonades and expects something extraordinary. Had enough of grey, silent idylls and anaemic sentimentalism, they want spectacular colours and loud effects. [...] The revue is the enemy of operettas, because it can provide the effects of operettas on exponential scales. Slim operetta plots, the usual banalities, fake sentimental romanticism can be easily dis-

6 A show titled *Hullo America* (with a *u*) by Herman Finck had already been staged (it ran in the Palace Theatre, London from September 15, 1918, for 358 performances); none of its music or any of the scenes were incorporated in the Budapest production.

7 "Haskell, the director of the revue compiled the show from the most effective scenes of five American revues." *Magyarország*, December 18, 1924.

8 The only exception might have been the sketch pair entitled *Mönök a zamerikába – Nem mönök a zamerikába* [I'm goin' to Theamerica – I'm not goin' to Theamerica] placed in the beginning and at the end of the show.

9 See Attila Z. Papp, "A nyugati magyar diaszpóra és szervezeti élete néhány demográfiai, társadalmi jellemzője" [Organisation and social characteristics of the Hungarian Western diaspora], in *Kisebbségkutatás*, no. 4 (2010) based on the data of Julianna Puskás, *Kivándorló magyarok az Egyesült Államokban 1880–1940* [Hungarian emigrants in the US 1880–1940] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1982).

10 Operetta by Ferenc Lehár. Adaptation of his 1916 work, *Der Sterngucker. Municipal Operetta Theatre*, Budapest, June 6, 1923. Koch, *A Fővárosi Operettszínház műsora*, 13.

*carded, giving more space to the beauty of music, dance and design. If we cannot revive the old traditional operetta, let us make the new operetta, the revue without hypocrisy. However, the revue has a big flaw. It holds the sprouts of deterioration in itself as its possibilities are limited and despite the detailed variations, it will fall into the anaemic trap of constant repetition.*¹¹

Although we cannot agree with the statement that revue and operetta are opposed to each other, Kállay understood the main difference between them: a shift towards having mostly spectacular effects and their possible danger. But his wish to introduce the genre without hypocrisy if based on changes in the preferences of audience was not to be granted.

The production in the trap of political narratives

Already the decision to stage the show generated a resistance in the conservative Hungarian press, as they claimed that Blumenthal was attempting to Americanise Hungarian culture, with the extreme right-wing press seeing it as “spreading Jewish culture”, which had to be stopped. Previously a Hungarian-themed show ran in the Operetta Theatre that was written by Imre Farkas, *A nótás kapitány* [The singing captain], which finished its run after 116 performances in order to stage the revue. This was already very easy to interpret as discarding “national” values and favouring “foreign” ones. The conservative narrative argued that the show could have ran longer and was terminated too early.¹² For those making this political argument it did not seem to matter that one week before *Halló Amerika!* premiered, *A nótás kapitány* was being performed again on Sunday afternoons so the cast of the former could rest. Conservative press also questioned the presence of Jack Haskell, claiming there were plenty of Hungarian directors who could stage such a revue. On the other side, theatre-sponsored articles and liberal journalists argued that while the modern genre of the revue was indeed not Hungarian, it could be,¹³ and the show raised Budapest to the level of other European metropolises. In this regard, the show was in the front line of a Hungarian political and cultural debate, which set in op-

11 Miklós Kállay, “Revü,” *Nemzeti Ujság*, January 30, 1925.

12 *Pesti Hírlap*, February 16, 1926. The press also claimed that the theatre did not organise a jubilee banquet after the 100th performance of *A nótás kapitány*, so that actors properly could rehearse the American revue (as it was called) next day, although the actors organised one anyway. 8 *Órai Ujság* [8 o’ clock News], January 18, 1925.

13 *Magyarország*, April 8, 1925.

position the styles attributed to local and cosmopolitan cultures.¹⁴ In fact, this debate inspired Imre Kálmán's 1928 operetta, *Die Herzogin von Chicago*, and Béla Zerkovitz's *Miss Amerika* in 1929.

Director Jack Haskell's methods also did little to help the theatre's image in the press. "*His way of theatre making*," as the press put it, ended up in scandals. He gave instructions using a whistle, and soon had a quarrel with the stage crew who were unable to fit the set of a mountain on stage.¹⁵ A week later he had another quarrel with a stage manager; after that with a chorus girl, who he even kicked – and this is just what was printed in the papers.

*Haskell insulted an actress – even more, he had a difference with manager Tapolczai. The quarrel spread like the Spanish flu to other members of the crew, so at 1 PM everybody was upset with everybody. The majority though was on Tapolczai's side.*¹⁶

Not much later the performers stopped the rehearsal to talk to the manager about how Haskell addressed them. On January 27, Haskell fainted from exhaustion, but two days later he again physically insulted an English girl.¹⁷ The two sides of the press interpreted it differently: conservatives that by insulting a girl the arrogant Englishman had hurt Hungary's national pride, and the liberal side defended him by saying that he was simply prioritising the show.¹⁸ Defending his brutality became much easier after the premiere, when the show opened to rave reviews:

Whatever measures had to be taken, it is now clear that such discipline, precision, synchronisation, such amount of stage tricks, such dazzling acting was never seen on Hungarian stage before – and

14 See Kornél Zipernovszky, "'Who will win – the jazz or Gypsy, it is hard to tell:' Gypsy musicians defend Hungarian national culture against American jazz," in *AMERICANA - E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary*, vol. X, Special issue on jazz, <http://americanajournal.hu/vol10jazz/zipernovszky>.

15 *Esti Kurír*, January 4, 1925.

16 *Pesti Napló*, January 9, 1925.

17 Several physical insults and fights happened even after Haskell left. In March Lala Collins had a quarrel with the leading man, Tibor Halmay. Collins hit Halmay, who punched back so hard that Collins fainted and had to skip a performance. *Új Nemzedék*, March 25, 1925.

18 "[...] it was about time to bring a director to Budapest who teaches discipline to the actors." *Pesti Hírlap*, January 8, 1925.

*now that we saw it, we can forgive Mr. Haskell's nervousness [Emphasis by the author].*¹⁹

From Haskell's perspective, this Budapest production must have been undertaken for the money and experience, as it did not mean much in career terms compared to his US and London works.²⁰ He claimed the root of every problem was that his English was not understood. So despite the success and the rumours in *Variety* that he was planning to secure two new pieces for Budapest,²¹ when he was asked by a journalist "*When do you come to Budapest again?*" he answered "*Never. Never more. Never.*"²² He continued working using his usual strict methods in the USA, and at the 1936 Oscars was nominated for the best dance direction.

Haskell also answered very diplomatically when he was asked about Erzsí Péchy, a star of the show.²³ She publicly expressed her disapproval to the show and the whole genre:

*What shall I say? If I said I like it that wouldn't be true. I was meant to be an operetta actress and I would like to remain one; this new genre which is very popular all over the world is not for me. But for this one time I do that because the management asked me.*²⁴

Her contract for 200 performances in the theatre was soon to expire and she already wanted to leave the production by the end of February.²⁵ She was asked to star in the next revue, but she went abroad instead. László

19 *Budapesti Hírlap* [Budapest News], January 31, 1925. The antisemitic conservative paper, *A nép* [The People] reviewed the show as "*staged insanity*"; but on the same page it published a paid advertisement for the theatre which called the show "*sensational*". Also, according to the list of those who attended the premiere, a certain Mrs. Albert Frühwirth was present, whose identity is unknown, although there is a chance she was related to Mátyás Frühwirth, the editor-in-chief of this paper. *A Nép*, February 1, 1925.

20 "*Mr. Haskell – let us hear with what impressions do you leave Budapest? A strange smile lights up on his face, he shakes his head. This shake expresses very much. I must not speak – he answers – I can't speak. Then he lights a cigarette and looks for a telegraph in his writing desk.*" *Mr. Haskell takes leave*. English transcript of an article in *Ma Este*, February 19, 1925. OSZK SzT Irattár 374.

21 *Variety*, March 11, 1925.

22 *Mr. Haskell takes leave*.

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Esti Kurír*, January 30, 1925.

25 *Az Est*, February 26, 1925. Her cover, Eta Hajdú took over her role from April 15, 1925.

Békeffy quit the show after the 50th performance²⁶ and Irén Biller, the leading lady, also left the show before the end of its run.²⁷ There may have been various reasons behind these decisions, but based upon Erzsébet Péchy's statement we can suspect that, personal conflicts aside, the core of the problem was the revue genre itself.

The show's real protagonists were not the operetta stars, but the girls – particularly the 16 English girls. Operetta stars, who traditionally created roles, were now “merely” to sing songs (sometimes without any context) and to lead the girls in fancy dresses. Roles or characters in the traditional sense only appeared in comic sketches. From their perspective, this revue took only a small part of operetta productions (dancing with the ensemble, frequently in the *Abgang*) and made it dominant – while discarded everything else which might have been more important and fulfilling to the performers. In addition to this, the foreign troupe was new and exotic compared to the established Hungarian stars, whose mannerisms were already well-known by the audience. Erzsébet Péchy might thus have realised that her position in the show was only a supporting role compared to the girls – the press campaign of the productions shows the same. *Halló, Amerika!* was advertised with the showgirls and visual effects rather than operetta stars. In the following section, I put these into the focus of the analysis.

The spectacular

The fact that *Halló, Amerika!* did not have a plot was a new experience for Budapest audiences. Thus, several articles were sponsored by the theatre to introduce the genre and manage expectations.²⁸ However, not having a plot does not mean the show does not have a structure to analyse. We have a detailed description of the production because a reporter for *Színházi Élet* attempted to describe what happens in the show:

26 *A Nép*, September 3, 1925. Beside his stage work, he was also a manager of Vidám Színpad [Merry Theatre].

27 *Nemzeti Ujság*, May 9, 1925.

28 For example: “*It would be difficult to talk about the plot because it doesn't have one. It's a three hours long continuous chain of stage tricks with small rests, solos and duos, sensational American singing and dancing acts, artistic light and colour effects, the sparkling beauties of the female body and dresses with kaleidoscope-like processions and stylised folk dress [...].*” Jenő Kálmán, “Érdekes és mulatságos kis revü a nagy revüről” [Interesting and fun review of the big revue], *Színházi Élet* XV, no. 7 (15–21 February 1925): 8–13, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00549/pdf/>.

The show starts with two pageboys in red and white opening the curtain and Guszti Pártos, the master of ceremonies announce the performers. [...] After the introduction [...] the company left the stage to make space for the English girls, wearing white capes and white caps perform a nice English song. Suddenly the cape is gone and the English girls are [...] standing there in a fantastic Hungarian dress. [...] Here, after a short intermezzo, a revue drill starts moving (just like the Moulin Rouge) and the audience applauds for the double act of Teri Fejes and Tibor Halmai. [...] The stage becomes dark and 60 heads appear above each other in four rows, illuminated with mystical lights. Rows appear and disappear according to the rhythm. [...] Irén Biller appears in a red wig on the side of Haskell's wicked English dancer, Albert Wyne and 12 girls. [...] A short sketch follows with Gergő Mály and Aladár Sarkadi. In the meantime they build the haystack, while the bon vivant of the theatre Tolnai performs a song and the haystack is filled with black haired girls in red skirts. [...] A short sketch in front of the curtain. [...] Erzsébet Péchy's beautiful song with the rococo lamp, Tibor Halmai and the Indian [oriental] scene [...] the Niagara Falls, which bursts down the huge rocks of the stage [...]. [after the break] Next is the artistic Indian [native American] scene [...]. Two charming English girls with a banjo, then a hit song: Rózsabokorban terem a nő ... the prehistoric fun, the wonderful Hawaii-scene with Biller ... Mály, Sarkadi and the Hungarian speaking English girl ... followed by Biller and Halmai with the hit Katóka, légy a babám [...] a great Békeffi monologue then the Chinese scene with living vases and Erzsébet Péchy, and finally the top of Mr. Haskell's training science, the ladder scene with its flowing enchanting beauty.²⁹

Three types of scenes followed each other in a particular order. Major chorus scenes (*lebenden Bilder; tableaux vivants*) with the complete ensemble appeared in key positions, at the opening and end of acts; smaller dance scenes and comic sketches on the forestage were placed carefully to provide time for the 20 quick changes in the show and maintain a flowing experience for the audience. Overall, it was a strategic mix of both cosmopolitan and Hungarian themes. The opening resembled a classic circus

29 Anon., "Mi történik a Halló, Amerikában?" [What is in Halló, Amerika?], *Színházi Élet* XV, no. 7 (15–21 February 1925): 16–21, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00549/pdf/>

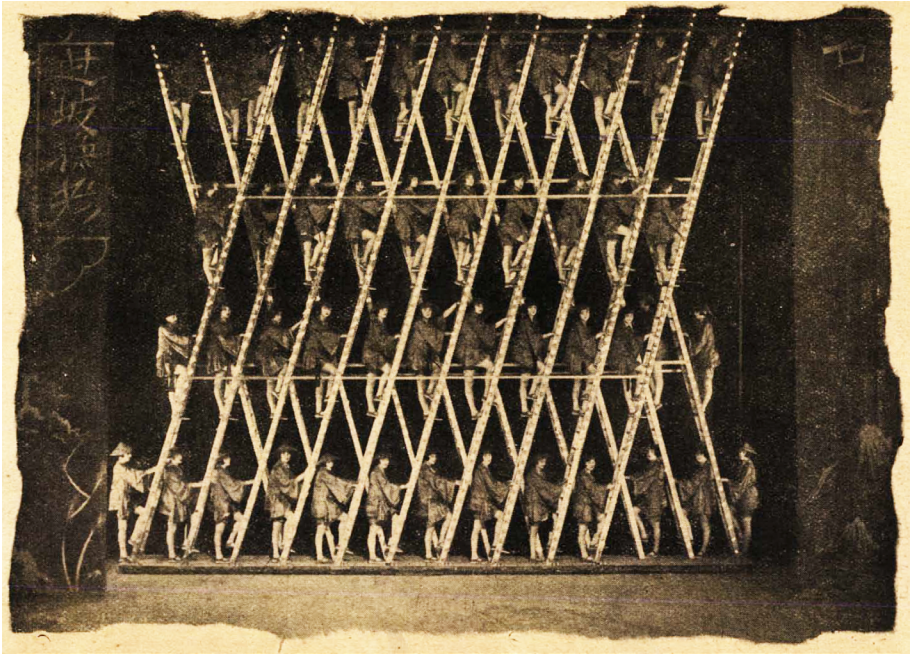


Figure 1: The ladder-scene of *Halló, Amerika!*
Színházi Élet XV, no. 7 (15–21 February 1925): 13.

technique: to open with a so-called *charivari* act, which introduces the artists and gives taste of everything (and everyone) the audience will see that evening. It also serves as a warm-up and gets the first applause. The indirect message of transforming the English girls into Hungarian maidens was this “foreign” production now turns into a “national” one by singing and dancing a traditional Hungarian *csárdás* (*Ritka búza, ritka árpa*). Mixing Hungarian themes in the show also suggested to the audience that, despite the lost war and the unfair peace treaty, Hungarian culture is equivalent to the others represented with grandeur in the revue.³⁰

However, significant structural features, such as the positioning of a hit song, followed the Broadway practice: the hit song, *Katóka, légy a babám*³¹ appears as an 11 o’clock number or the last showstopper before the second

30 What made Hungarian themes eligible and frequently present in international show business is detailed in Daniel Molnár, “‘A Whirlwind from the Puszta’. Hungarian and Hungarian style variety acts in Berlin 1920–1961,” in *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 64, no. 1 (2019): 211–26, <https://doi.org/10.1556/022.2019.64.1.12>.

31 It was the hit of *No No Nanette* (1925) as *I want to be happy*. Lyrics by Irving Caesar and Otto Harbach, music by Vincent Youmans.

finale. Béla Zerkovitz, who was commissioned to compose music for the next revue following *Halló, Amerika!* complained:

*My job is difficult enough, because here are Irén Biller [the leading lady] and Tibor Halmay [the leading man] who hardly meet on stage, but according to local taste, their duets shall dominate the show.*³²

The show was split into two acts while Central European operettas traditionally had three.³³ Not delivering greeting cables during a performance³⁴ was a relatively harmless difference between the two theatre cultures, but led to a confrontation behind the scenes on opening night. It wasn't the only one. The Hungarian actors protested against not repeating successful scenes and songs, which used to be a common practice. According to the American approach, repetition interferes with the tempo of the spectacular; and if anyone wanted to see a particular scene again then he should simply buy another ticket. The leading man, Tibor Halmay confronted the management on opening night, because he was not allowed to take extra bows, and, according to the reports, due to the intense debate that ensued both Erzsé Péchy and Ernő Szabolcs both fainted.³⁵

Regarding scenography, the staging had a major novelty for the Hungarian audience. Several scenes were organised using a vertical approach (unlike traditional horizon-dominated sets), such as the Night Sky-scene³⁶ or Giant Lady-scene:

The crinoline-scene starts with the little Polette Mészáros who enters, stands in the middle of the stage and – as Mr. Haskell instructs

32 *Magyarország*, April 8, 1925.

33 It was a transitional period: the 1928 Király Színház production of *J'aime* by Henri Christine was restructured from three into two acts during its run. *Magyarország*, June 5, 1928.

34 “The English custom is that relatives, friends and fans of the performers and even performers among themselves send their best wishes on opening night by cable. Imagine the horror of the porter, who according to the old Hungarian custom, is not allowed to deliver cables during the show, only if they're done on stage. Here people send only cables when something terrible happened and this custom is supposed to defend the recipient, at least for the time while he's on stage.” Anon., “Maga csak tudja” [You just know], *Színházi Élet* XV, no. 6 (8–14 February 1925): 28–30, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00548/pdf/>.

35 *Magyarország*, February 1, 1925.

36 “A black velvet curtain falls, and according to the beat, all of the Hungarian and American girl heads appear [on the same vertical line].” *Az Ujság*, January 28, 1925.



Figure 2: The stage crew of *Halló, Amerika!*
Színházi Élet XV, no. 7 (15–21 February 1925): 41.

– she looks insecurely at the audience. Suddenly 50 girls run in and grab the ribbons on her biedermeier dress. The crinoline gives in for the insult and starts growing. Grows and grows with the little Poullette, two metres, now even taller than Lajos Újváry, three, four, five, she almost outgrows the theatre while the jazz band plays; and curtain.³⁷

The scenes in the show changed rapidly,³⁸ the prompt book was 44 pages long while Viennese operettas were usually 20–25 pages.³⁹ To execute such changes, twice the amount of stage technicians were necessary, with 82 stage hands, eight dressers, four stage managers worked on the show each night.⁴⁰ Moreover, to ensure a flawless run, six replacement girls were changing parallel to the ones performing each night.⁴¹ The production budget (and the show's electric bills)⁴² thus exceeded any of the theatre's previous productions.⁴³

37 *Esti Kurír*, January 6, 1925.

38 "It requires three and a half minutes to move the used sets and set up the new one." Iván Sipos, "A nagy rövü – a színpadról nézve" [The big revue – watching from the stage], *Színházi Élet* XV, no. 8 (22–28 February 1925): 34–5, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00550/pdf/>.

39 *Esti Kurír*, November 5, 1927.

40 *Esti Kurír*, January 6, 1925.

41 Sipos, *A nagy rövü – a színpadról nézve*, 34–5.

42 *Esti Kurír*, April 12, 1925.

43 See Gyöngyi Heltai's cited works or Books of Fővárosi Operett Színház – Vígszínház, OSZK SzT Irattár 374 122/1.

Table 1: Excerpt from the books of *Halló, Amerika!*⁴⁴

Subject	Date	Cost (Hungarian korona)
Costume contribution for Tibor Halmay ⁴⁵	10 Feb 1925	7,313,000
Costume contribution for Erzsí Péchy	10 Feb 1925	7,725,000
16 pairs of shoes	16 Feb 1925	7,446,000
Body paint and gold paint	16 Feb 1925	11,233,180
Clothes repair, gold lamé fabric	16 Feb 1925	2,240,000
Set painting	16 Feb 1925	90,814,000
Shoes for Erzsí Péchy ⁴⁶ and Irén Biller	16 Feb 1925	6,660,000
Women's hats	22 Feb 1925	71,000,000
Headpieces	22 Feb 1925	12,000,000
5 bathtubs ⁴⁷	25 Feb 1925	5,026,400
Tailcoat contribution for Kálmán Latabár	26 Feb 1925	5,781,000
Transporting costumes from Vienna	13 Mar 1925	15,000,000
288 ²⁹ m of velvet	17 Mar 1925	68,400,000
Lamp paint	8 Mar 1925	720,000
12 yellow top hats	14 Mar 1925	4,944,000
Costumes	30 Apr 1925	342,879,100
Costumes	30 Apr 1925	524,084,310
Gold paint	26 May 1925	3,399,000
Wig material	17 Dec 1924	8,700,000
Géza Faragó 24 costume drawings	23 Dec 1924	16,800,000
20 ladders	29 Dec 1924	19,057,000

According to the bills, the majority of the budget was spent on sets, costumes and lights. Most of the textiles were so-called noble fabrics (fur, silk and velvet). The price of the shoes for the two leads was almost as much as sixteen other pairs (presumably for the English girls). Most of the costumes and props were made by prominent Budapest manufacturers,⁴⁸ and some of them by the *Werkstätte für dekorative Kunst* in Vienna. The cred-

44 Books of Fővárosi Operett Színház – Vígszínház, OSZK SzT Irattár 374 122/1.

45 According to the practice, certain pieces of the costume wardrobe – which counted as civilian clothing – were to be provided by the actors themselves (tailcoats, tuxedos etc.).

46 Drawings of Péchy's shoes were published in *Színházi Élet* XV, no. 5 (1–7 February 1925): 101, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00547/pdf/>.

47 Almost a complete bathroom was necessary to build in order to wash off the bronze paint which the performers were wearing in the oriental scene. After the production the bathtubs were kept in the theatre, Ernő Szabolcs used one of them during the staging of *Páros csillag* [Stars by the pair] because he did not have time to go home. 8 *Órai Ujság*, November 29, 1927.

48 Shoes from the Simon Holzer Emporium; headpieces by the Kálazdy silk flower manufacturers, gowns and dresses from the salon of Andor Berkovits.

it for set design was split between Herbert Ward and the Hungarian architect Béla Málnai. The costume designer was Charles LeMaire (the designer of the Ziegfeld Follies) and Géza Faragó, whose costume sketches became part of the promotional campaign of the show.⁴⁹ After the show's run some of his designs were exhibited by the *Iparművészeti Társulat* [Society of Applied Arts] as the example of modernism.⁵⁰ However, before Haskell left Budapest he made a statement that the show's Hungarian costumer and set designers did not deserve their credit for working on the show.⁵¹ The manager of the Operetta Theatre almost immediately demanded a retraction. Perhaps it was not a coincidence, but the management's international lobbying efforts meant that a couple of weeks later Faragó was again in the news: the Piccadilly Association in London ordered sets for a Hungarian marriage scene from him for a new production.⁵²

The showgirls

Thanks to *Halló, Amerika!* the English word "girl" written as *görl* became a Hungarian *terminus technicus*.⁵³ The Hungarian use of this word, however, goes back beyond *Halló, Amerika!*, but this production popularised it in Hungary.

49 See *Ma Este*, December 24, 1924; *Magyarország*, January 30, 1925; *Színházi Élet* XV, no. 5 (1–7 February 1925): 26–7, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00547/pdf/> etc.

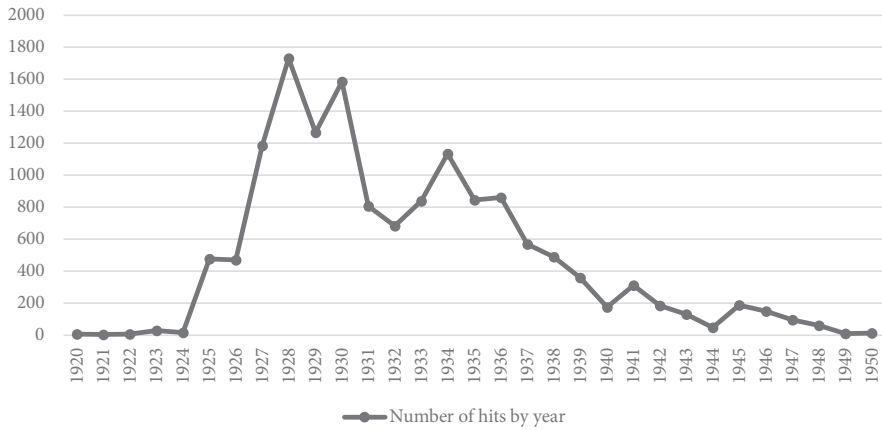
50 *Az Est*, May 31, 1925.

51 "Please write that the newspapers were mistaken in their praises of Mr. Málnai and Mr. Faragó. From the figurines Mr. Faragó has not made more than ten as the most, while hundred and twenty have been made after American models. I must tell the same of Mr. Málnai who has not a single original scenery in the review. All that there is, is American. He executed the design technically only." Mr. Haskell takes leave.

52 Lestyán Sándor, "Faragó Géza magyar menyecskéket exportált Londonba" [Géza Faragó exported Hungarian maidens to London], *Színházi Élet* XV, no. 8 (22–28 February 1925): 2–3, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00550/pdf/>.

53 Parallel to this, a diminutive form of the word, *görlce* (playing with the word *gerlice*, meaning "little dove") appeared in theatre circles and even in the official brochure of the show.

The distribution of the 14,738 hits for the word "görl"
in digitized Hungarian press between 1920 and 1950



Graph 1: The appearance of the word "görl" in digitised Hungarian press⁵⁴

As the Graph 1 shows, the term was widely used in 1925, with *Halló, Amerika!*, reached its peak in 1928, then it was mentioned less and less until it practically disappeared in 1950.⁵⁵ The word not only referred to the performers (considered to be the lowest in theatre hierarchy), but was also identified with a certain lifestyle. It was a socio-cultural phenomenon which already existed in American and European metropolises, and by the time the show opened in Hungary, the first studies were also being published about its aesthetics.⁵⁶ *Halló, Amerika!* was not the first Budapest show dominated by a large number of girls;⁵⁷ but definitely the first modern one whose

54 Source: Arcanum Digital Database. The collection does not host the complete Hungarian press, although it now has almost 30 million pages including major daily newspapers. Nevertheless, we have to be aware of the limits of OCR and diacritic signs and words, as for *Görlitz*, *Gorlice* might be also included among the results. Among the 256 hits between 1900–1919 for *görl* only two was referring to showgirls.

55 See Molnár, *Vörös csillagok*, 212–20.

56 Fritz Giese, *Girlkultur* (München: Delphin, 1925); Siegfried Kracauer, *Ornament der Masse* (Berlin: Surhkamp, 2009 [1927]). So far, only an exhibition, *Az ismeretlen görl* [The unknown girl] in the Hungarian Museum of Trade and Commerce (2016) put them into their focus – curated by the author.

57 In 1906, Király Színház produced a show titled *Madár Matyi* written by Jenő Heltai and Ferenc Molnár; featuring 24 dancers and 84 (!) female performers in total. One of its main themes was the Vürstli, the Budapest fairgrounds, upon which Molnár wrote his world famous play, *Liliom*, three years later. *Budapesti Hírlap*, May 10, 1906.



Figure 3: Jack Haskell, the English girls and Ernő Szabolcs
Színházi Élet XV, no. 4 (25–31 January 1925): 10, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00546/pdf/>.

quality and execution could be compared to the same kind of productions in American and European metropolises.

The 16 English girls arrived in Budapest with Jack Haskell, at the end of November 1924. An intensive rehearsal period started almost immediately⁵⁸ along with the promotional campaign for the show. Despite the fact that they were unknown in England, the Hungarian press treated the girls as stars. They had a photoshoot with the famous photographer Angelo, who also wrote an article introducing them in *Színházi Élet*.⁵⁹ Each of the girls was presented as a distinctive stereotype or characteristic (the sporty, the fragile, the phlegmatic, the aggressive, the one who plays the ukulele, etc.).⁶⁰ This was a key feature of their promotional campaign, and when some of them were replaced during the run, the new girls arrived with their already

58 “[...] the girls dance before noon, afternoon and during the night.” They rehearsed three times per day already, a month and a half before opening night. *Magyarság*, December 14, 1924.

59 “Mit szólnak a Haskell-görlök Budapesthez?” [What do the Haskell-girls say about Budapest?], *Színházi Élet* XV, no. 1 (4–10 January 1925): 12–4, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00543/pdf/>.

60 The same marketing technique was used widely regarding girl and boy bands in the 1990s. For instance, each of the Spice Girls (1996) had an official nickname referring to her designated type e. g. Sporty, Scary, Baby etc.

designated image.⁶¹ This technique (beside being an analogy for cosmopolitan diversity) helped to attract the interest of a wider audience, although these individual attributes dissolved completely in the show through the identical costumes and choreography.

Their role in the show was to set an example of professionalism from a real metropolis, which the management hoped would inspire future Budapest productions. Apart from Lala Collins and Edna May (the soloists), the girls accompanied the major Hungarian stars of the show (Billar and Hal-may), and certainly appeared in the opening and finale. They were referred to as Haskell-girls by the Hungarian press, but their position and role was not self-explanatory at the time for the Hungarian public.

*We ask what is a bit blurry for the Budapest audience: why do they call the English dancers of Halló, Amerika! Haskell-girls? What is their relationship with Haskell? They laugh. They have never heard before that are called Haskell-girls. Haskell chooses the talent from the applicants. Only forty-fifty from the hundreds. Haskell-girl, Haskell-girl – repeats the charming boyish Dorotty Liver-Sidge. She hardly can stop laughing.*⁶²

They were not an act by themselves (like the earlier Tiller-girls or the Ziegfeld-girls), at least they did not think of their work in *Halló, Amerika!* as such. They were cast as ensemble members for a single foreign job, not for a permanent house ensemble. They were replaceable anytime, and some of them in fact were replaced during the run. Nevertheless, they soon became a sensation for Hungarian high society.

*In the last couple of months girls were in fashion: hardly anything could happen without them. There was not a company's car ride to Svábhegy [Buda mountains], was not a soirée in the [Hotel] Ritz, nor a football match or party in Lipótváros without them. At noon, you could have spotted them by groups in different company and not just looking at the glamorous shop-windows of Váci utca, but also buying classy goods from there.*⁶³

61 "The young Swedish girl is only sixteen, but as strong as Hercules." *Esti Kurír*, March 10, 1925.

62 *Az Ujság*, March 8, 1925.

63 "Good by [sic] Budapest...!" *Esti Kurír*, May 15, 1925.

Because of their intense socialising,⁶⁴ some of the girls moved from the Hotel Royal to the Hotel Bristol, with a view of the Danube. The press romanticised this by claiming “*In the Bristol lived the rich and aristocratic [girls], in the Royal the poor and the ones in love.*”⁶⁵ We don’t know much for sure about their actual financial status. The reports are contradictory, but apparently some of the girls had some money to spare, others did not. When the Orient Express left Budapest after the production finished its run, six of the girls decided not to go back to England but rather stay, particularly those who established good connections with members of the aristocrat club, *Nemzeti Casino* [National Casino].⁶⁶ Indeed, two of them were already engaged or married to Hungarian counts. Those who were not, were aware of the fact that if they left Hungary they would lose their celebrity status. Lala Collins and Edna May started working in a Budapest nightclub (the *Pele Mele*), then in the same year they appeared on the stage of *Magyar Színház* [Magyar Theatre] and *Kis Komédia* [Small Comedy Theatre], advertised as “*world famous English dancing girls.*”⁶⁷ This news appeared in provincial Hungarian papers too,⁶⁸ showing the continuous interest in them even in the countryside. Hungarian press referred to them even ten years later.⁶⁹ From intercultural point of view, this Hungarian job provided the English girls a chance to step up from their ensemble position and become established performers or marry into high society, which would have been more difficult to achieve in their homeland.

The 60 Hungarian girls selected for this production, however, did not enjoy such a status. They were “regular” girls at the bottom of theatre hi-

64 Flirting with the audience was part of the show: “*Then suddenly as if they were growing from the ground, enormous ladders are built towards the proscenium boxes and the girls start climbing. From the top they bend to the box and start flirting in English. But Biller does not allow them to act naughty. She follows them quickly, grabs them by their hair, and pulls them down. The girls jump metres to the bridge which replaced the first two rows of the orchestra and as they breathe, they start dancing again [...]*” *Világ*, January 25, 1925.

65 *Színházi Élet* XV, no. 22 (31 May–6 June 1925): 43, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00564/pdf/>.

66 *Színházi Élet* XV, no. 21 (24–30 May 1925): 19, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00563/pdf/>.

67 *Pesti Hírlap*, November 3, 1925.

68 *Miskolci Napló*, May 1, 1926.

69 “A Halló, Amerika! görlszárja öt évig várt hűségesen férje kiszabadulására” [Girl star of Halló, Amerika! waited patiently five years for the release of her husband], *Pesti Napló*, July 19, 1936.

erarchy, nameless and replaceable extras.⁷⁰ They did not appear in the papers and they could have only dreamed of a stay in the Hotel Royal. Their salaries, however, appear to have been equal to those of the English girls: around 32,000 Hungarian korona daily, while more prestigious artists earned 17 million per night.⁷¹ Gyöngyi Heltai cites another article in this regard, which claims that the English girls received a salary of 12–15 million a month, while the Hungarians only 800,000–1 million.⁷² She argues that this was due to the centre-periphery situation and the inequality of cultural power. Nevertheless, her cited article criticises Blumenthal explicitly, and demonises him.⁷³ Even if this article is true (about which I have my doubts) and the English girls had a significantly higher salary, it could have been because they were a different class of girls (more professional, experienced etc.) and were unlikely to be engaged for a foreign job for less than their English salaries. While we do not know much about the relationship between Hungarian and English girls, at the penultimate performance

*A conflict was generated on the stage where Sári C. Hungarian girl pushed C. Pollin English girl by chance. After the scene, the English miss hit the Hungarian in the wings. This was followed by terrible a shouting up to the dressing rooms in which both groups participated. A serious clash was in the air, when the director with his good diplomatic skills ended the quarrel.*⁷⁴

It is likely, one assumes, that the different social status of the English girls might have been behind this outburst.

Dissemination in Hungarian theatre

After postponing opening night several times, *Halló, Amerika!* opened on 30 January 1925. *Színházi Élet* listed 89 (!) female members of the audi-

70 “The stage manager reports to director Szabolcs that one of the girls fell sick. – Call her replacement immediately from the standby!” Sipos, *A nagy rövü – a színpadról nézve*, 34–5.

71 *Esti Kurír*, April 12, 1925.

72 *8 Órai Ujság*, June 27, 1925.

73 “There are excellent Hungarian directors who could have directed better the show than Haskell.” etc. *Ibid.*

74 *Pesti Napló*, May 14, 1925.

ence attending opening night sorted by the colour of their gowns.⁷⁵ Among them and their company we find aristocrats (from the Sacelláry, Bornemissza, Kohner families), members of the Budapest art scene (Béla Zerkovitz, the operetta composer; an unidentified relative of the late Viktor Jacobi; the poet Simon Kemény; Nagy Bella, the second wife of the late writer Mór Jókai; the actress Lili Darvas, who a year later married the famous playwright, Ferenc Molnár; the Gombaszögi sisters, Frida and Irén; Rózsi Ilosvay, both actresses) and several members of the economic elite. Count Gyula Csekonics supposedly saw the show 65 times,⁷⁶ and certain aristocrat clubs also bought tickets for multiple evenings.⁷⁷ Since the show did not depend primarily on language, it was suitable for foreigners too: during their stay in Budapest, the Czech football team⁷⁸ and the foreign and provincial visitors of the Budapest International Fair also saw the show.⁷⁹ Many visitors came from the Hungarian provinces, who if they spent a night in town attempted to get a ticket for the spectacle.⁸⁰ The management calculated that 150 full houses would be necessary just to recoup their investment, but only the first 30 performances were full.⁸¹ On 3 March, new rehearsals were launched to insert 10 new scenes⁸² to refresh the show (as was originally planned after the 50th performance). Plans were made to stage a new show, *Halló, Budapest!* a “completely Budapest revue” consisting of the newly rehearsed scenes (directed by Ernő Szabolcs with songs by Béla Zerkovitz),⁸³ but Ben Blumenthal stopped the production. After the 75th performance (16 April) the show ran only with 60–70 % houses⁸⁴ and reached its 100th performance.⁸⁵ Ticket sales went down, so much so that for the last four performances prices were reduced and even a fashion show was incorporated to

75 Madelaine, “Kik voltak ott a *Halló, Amerika!* premierjén?” [Who attended the opening night of *Halló, Amerika!*?], *Színházi Élet* XV, no. 6 (8–14 February 1925): 18–9, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00548/pdf/>.

76 *Színházi Élet* XV, no. 21 (24–30 May 1925): 32, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00563/pdf/>.

77 *A Nép*, February 15, 1925.

78 *Nemzeti Sport*, April 11, 1925.

79 *Budapesti Hírlap*, April 21, 1925.

80 “The auditorium of *Halló, Amerika!* looks these days as if there was a smallholder gathering in the world of velvet seats. Every smallholder who came to the city for the livestock-market watches the show [...]” *Esti Kurír*, March 24, 1925.

81 *Esti Kurír*, April 12, 1925.

82 *Esti Kurír*, March 24, 1925.

83 *Magyarország*, May 1, 1925.

84 Imre Roboz’s letter to Jack Haskell, April 22, 1925. OSZT SzT Irattár 374.

85 *Budapesti Hírlap*, May 9, 1925.

generate interest.⁸⁶ Despite being a financial disaster for the Operetta Theatre, the show had an enormous impact on Hungarian-speaking theatre.

Its first (found) parody, also titled *Halló, Budapest!*, opened in February 1925, at *Vidám Színpad*.⁸⁷ The venue was located in the Operetta Theatre, the home of the original production.⁸⁸ One of its managers was László Békeffi, who performed in the original cast of the Operetta Theatre production, and thus apart from being a parody, it could have been cross-promotion as well. Another parody appeared in the *Apollo Cabaret*,⁸⁹ and one after the original run in the second Summer Cabaret of *Vígszínház*⁹⁰ [Comedy Theatre] (a venue which also belonged to Ben Blumenthal), directed by Ernő Szabolcs, who was in the creative team of the original production. The show was called *Halló, Mucsa!* [Hallo, Hick Town!] and it was advertised “as one would stage this show in Hick Town, or maybe as it is staged already.”⁹¹ The finale of this cabaret production was the original Ladder-finale of *Halló, Amerika!*, recontextualised. Thirty girls were dressed as firefighters, which provided a good “reason” to climb the ladders – making fun of the abstraction of the original production. The scene and the related advertisement was the theatre’s reflection of their original show’s provincial reflections, which happened extremely fast. After the Operetta Theatre’s production opened, managers all around the country set aside any other plans they had for the season. Driven by their local pride,⁹² provincial theatre managers also became interested in producing a revue – or at least their own take on one. It was out of the question that any provincial theatre could host the original production;⁹³ so they had to come up with their

86 *Világ*, May 27, 1925.

87 Ágnes Alpár, *A cabaret - A fővárosi kabarék műsora, 1901–1944* [Show catalogue of the cabarets of Budapest, 1901–1944] (Budapest: MSZI, 1978), 459.

88 The venue of *Vidám Színpad* was separated three years earlier to make it easier to sublet. It had one season only; after several management changes, the venue reached international fame as the Moulin Rouge nightclub in the 1930s.

89 March 7, 1925. See Alpár, *A cabaret - A fővárosi kabarék műsora*, 179.

90 Premiered on 4 July 1925. Károlyné A. Berczeli, *A Vígszínház műsora 1896–1949* [Show catalogue of Vígszínház] (Budapest: MSZI, 1960), 67.

91 *Színházi Élet* XV, no. 28 (12–18 July 1925): 9, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00570/pdf/>.

92 They were generally considered secondary and artistically behind the Budapest theatre scene; a view which is still present to this day.

93 When an idea emerged that the original production would eventually move to Vienna, provincial theatres were not even considered. “It is a custom in England and in America that a piece tours with its original cast and sets in other major cities. Hungarian provincial cities cannot be counted because their theatres do not have a large

own versions. Imre Harmath, the lyricist of the original show proposed a whole “franchise”:

*Provincial theatre managers approached me several times that I should write a revue for them with local topics. This is certainly impossible, because I should spend one or two months in each city. But I liked the idea so I wrote a standard revue plot which can work in every city and I provided one or two scenes with local references too. The first revue will be staged in Újpest as Halló, Újpest! followed by Halló, Szeged! Halló, Pécs! and Halló, Debrecen!*⁹⁴

Sources do not confirm that any of Harmath’s planned shows were staged. Instead, each provincial theatre produced its own show with a local creative team. In the following paragraphs I attempt to analyse what “staging a revue” meant in provincial Hungarian theatres, how these regional productions were inspired by the original *Halló, Amerika!*, and how successful they were.

Halló, Pécs! was the first provincial revue show produced at the end of March, 1925.⁹⁵ The piece was the work of a local cantor, the first-time composer István Petrovics (1888–?) and a local teacher, Károly Góbel (1882–?). They did not aim to copy the Budapest version (they might not have seen it at all), but to make their own for the local theatre company. They kept the “plotless” structure, but instead of visual compositions the emphasis was on comic sketches based on local topics. A gypsy band provided the music, which they might have found more suitable for the local audience’s musical taste. Provincial theatre critics are generally less harsh and more forgiving due to their interpersonal relationships with the performers and other members of the local community. However, the critic of the local paper found the show defective: “*the theatre, aside from two backdrops, did not spent much on the visuals, so the genre’s main ingredient, the spectacle was missing.*”⁹⁶ Moreover, the author of the review claimed the main flaw of the

auditorium, their stage is not suitable for such production and their limited income excludes that such a big revue like Halló, Amerika! could be presented on their stage.” *Az Est*, February 27, 1925.

94 *Színházi Élet* XV, no. 12 (22–28 March 1925): 74, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00554/pdf>.

95 Opening night 26 March 1925; according to the show catalogue, it had 4 performances. See Hajna Futaky, *A Pécsi Nemzeti Színház műsorának repertóriuma I* [Show catalogue of the Pécs National Theatre I] (Budapest: OSZMI, 1992), 355.

96 *Dunántúl*, March 27, 1925.

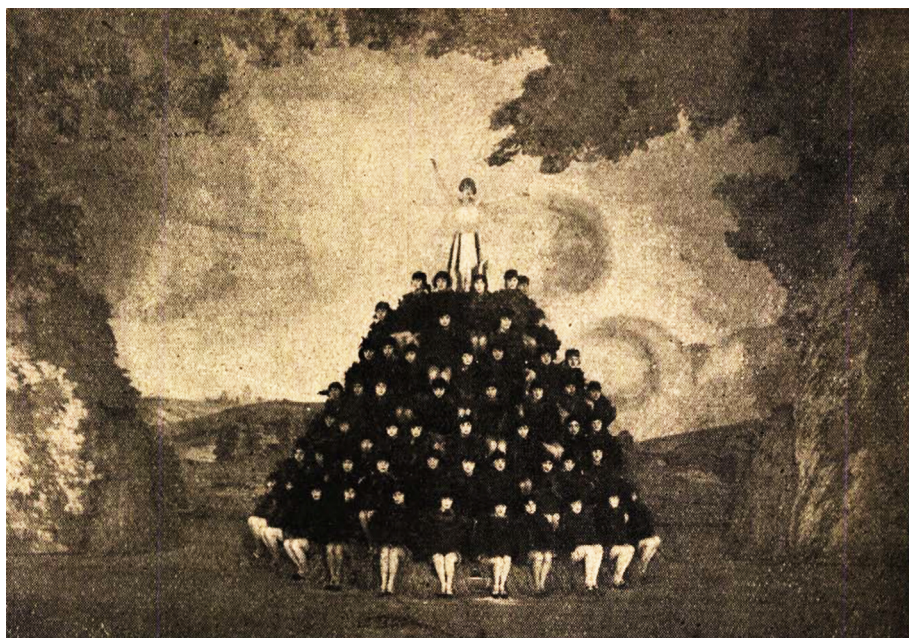


Figure 4: The haystack (poppy) scene from *Halló, Amerika!* *Színházi Élet* XV, no. 7 (15–21 February 1925): 15.



Figure 5: The haystack-scene of *Halló, Amerika!* staged at Nyíregyháza. *Színházi Élet* XV, no. 24 (June 14–20, 1925): 69.

show was the dominance of serious musical numbers instead of happier ones. However, he wrote that

The patriotic structure of Nagy dolog a háború [War is a big deal], Meg vagyunk szállva [We are occupied] and Jönnek a mieink [Our boys are coming] scenes is effective and uplifting.

So the cosmopolitan tone of the original was completely changed to a nationalistic one.

Despite the fact that the original production could not be staged in provincial theatres, Jenő Heltai (1871–1957), a well-known writer and a Budapest intellectual, attempted to create a smaller scale version of the original *Halló, Amerika!* at Nyíregyháza. His “English girls” were Hungarian, but according to a promotional article they were obliged to not to speak in the town so that nobody would learn this,⁹⁷ although this might have been only a joke. The management also engaged Tibor Halmay, one of the stars of the original production, but this relatively low-budget show flopped.⁹⁸ Mainly because the downgraded show was not a spectacle anymore. The haystack-scene (see Figures 4 and 5) illustrates this problem very well. The original is described as follows:

Around it [the haystack] again that exceptional group of dancers, this time in the stylised costume of Hungarian peasant girls, wearing a black silk scarf. At a sign they all rush up the haystack, pull up their skirts, which are rich ruffled red tulle. The stack starts rotating like a merry-go-round, and the girls in the mystical light look like giant poppies in a bouquet.⁹⁹

The Nyíregyháza production failed to create an abstraction of the scene. But even if it succeeded, the visual code of the show had a different meaning in a different cultural context outside Budapest. The folk costumes on the stage did not present an image of the idealised Hungarian “essence” for the local audience because for many it was only an outfit, which they regularly wore. We should also remember that Budapest audiences had been introduced to the original through countless articles about the genre, which did not happen before this local production.

97 *Az Est*, May 15, 1925.

98 *Színházi Élet* XV, no. 24 (14–20 June 1925): 69, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00566/pdf/>.

99 *Az Ujság*, January 18, 1925.

Halló, Miskolc!, however, was a successful production which ran for two weeks in the Miskolc theatre in April 1925.¹⁰⁰ The creators of the show, Csaba Sassy and Vilmos Lóránth,¹⁰¹ had been planning their production since February.¹⁰² It depended heavily on local references and on satirising local personalities (the hairdresser gathered photos of all the local personalities in order to represent them faithfully on stage). However, a couple of days later the authors decided to withdraw their representation of the mayor: “we realised that such a good friend of the theatre cannot be satirised even in a revue.”¹⁰³ If the mayor was such a good friend of the theatre it is hard to believe that he would mind being parodied – this might be one of those rare public indicators how the local political interest limits creative freedom. The mayor also requested that the opening night be moved forward due to his scheduled journey to Rome, “because he wants to laugh at the show on the way.”¹⁰⁴ The production consisted of 12 scenes with 24 new musical numbers by Jenő Hoppe and Emil Győry. Beside the regular theatre band, a gypsy band and a “*Pennsylvania jazz band*” played in the show¹⁰⁵ because the composers were keen on having a kaleidoscope of styles, including cancan, foxtrot, waltz, shimmy and Hungarian songs.¹⁰⁶ As for the spectacle, they borrowed costumes from *Városi Színház* [Municipal Theatre, Budapest] and an unnamed set painter was also engaged from there.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, the main spectacle of the show was a film, which also served as a framing device.¹⁰⁸ Nowadays it is very common to merge film and live action in theatre,¹⁰⁹ but for the Miskolc audience it might have been the first time. As the filmed scene in front of the railway station started playing, the

100 From April 18, to May 4, 1925.

101 Vilmos Lóránth (1889–1972?) became a successful operetta and revue director in Budapest during the 1930s. He emigrated to Australia in 1949.

102 *Reggeli Hírlap*, February 15, 1925.

103 *Miskolci Napló*, April 12, 1925.

104 *Miskolci Napló*, April 12, 1925.

105 *Miskolci Napló*, April 24, 1925. Both the gypsy and the jazz band was playing regularly in the local Pannonia Bar.

106 *Miskolci Napló*, April 7, 1925.

107 *Reggeli Hírlap*, April 18, 1925.

108 The finale of the show was another film scene with special effects, representing the town in 100 years’ time and how contemporary townsfolk were remembered. For instance, the manager of the theatre had a sculpture depicting him on the altar of the Muses, as he burns plays “written by the enemies of the theatre.” *Miskolci Napló*, April 16, 1925.

109 The aforementioned 1906 Budapest spectacle, *Madár Matyi* also included a film screening.

actors came on stage as townsfolk. According to the story, the American billionaire Mr. Linkell arrives to Miskolc, received by the prominent people of the town. The townsfolk sing the *Királyhágó*-song from *A nótás kapitány* in his honour, “by which Linkell was touched.”¹¹⁰ It turns out however that Linkell is not a billionaire but a fraud; so the mob takes him to the Miskolc Theatre as a punishment (!) and the show begins. This story is an interpretation of the cultural conflict around *Halló, Amerika!*, but it also ironically reflects the relationship (or actual reality) between capital and provincial productions. The seventh scene of the show was called “Gala night in the Miskolc Theatre”;¹¹¹ which might have drawn something from the style of the original production.

In June, *Halló, Amerika!* was presented in Kolozsvár [Cluj-Napoca, Romania] in an unknown version by the company of Nagyvárad [Oradea, Romania] and toured in other Transylvanian cities – reaching Hungarian audiences outside of the borders.¹¹² Szeged also started preparations to produce a revue “not less than the Budapest production,” including four original local comic sketches by the Budapest comedian László Békeffi.¹¹³ The production remained only a plan, however, due to the financial crisis faced by the theatre. In August, a casino in the holiday resort town at Lake Balaton produced *Halló, Siófok!* for one night, featuring 15 girls and a gypsy band,¹¹⁴ and even the amateur company of the Orosháza Tennis Club produced a *Halló, Orosháza!*, “a big revue in nine scenes.”¹¹⁵

*Halló Városliget!*¹¹⁶ was presented by the company of *Városligeti Műszínikör* [Budapest City Park Performers] in July 1925. Even though this was a Budapest production, its cultural distance from acknowledged theatre life was so great that it fits better here. The Városliget had already been a traditional entertainment district for a hundred years at the time. It was particularly developed as one of the main sites of the major celebrations and exhibitions (1896). In the 1920s, this bygone era had a large nostalgic

110 *Színházi Élet* XV, no. 17 (4 April–2 May 1925): 84, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00559/pdf/>.

111 *Miskolci Napló*, March 25, 1925.

112 *Vágóhíd*, June 18, 1925.

113 *Szegedi Új Nemzedék*, April 15, 1925.

114 *Színházi Élet* XV, no. 32 (9–15 August 1925): 73, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00574/pdf/>.

115 *Színházi Élet* XV, no. 33 (16–22 August 1925): 86, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00575/pdf/>.

116 Opened on August 6, 1925, music by Jenő Kerner and Mihály Erdélyi. Ágnes Alpár, *A Városligeti színházai* [The theatres of Városliget] (Budapest: OSZMI, 2001), 61.

value, which served as a recurring subject in the venue's shows. Its audience was drawn from among the poorest and the lowest of the Budapest society, for whom even the Operetta Theatre was too expensive; and, as a journalist wrote, “servants, burglars, seamstresses, everybody was interested in *Halló, Városliget!*, and to see the local *Biller and Halmai*.”¹¹⁷ Mihály Erdélyi, the director of the show, arranged 20 scenes framed by a folk tale told by a grandfather:

1. Introduction of the protagonists; 2. Grandfather's tales; 3. The exploded village; 4. Protest in the Harem; 5. Constantinople; 6. Boxing on the sea; 7. A storm is coming; 8. The ship is burning; 9. Party in the seabed; 10. A memory from Városliget; 11. The land of Fairies; 12. The collapsed Trianon; 13. Registration office in Hell; 14. Cabaret in Hell; 15. Harvest in Tokaj; 16. Where is the old Városliget now?; 17. On the way home; 18. Fall from the balloon; 19. The dream...; 20. No, no, never...!¹¹⁸

The production was built around three main themes: exoticism (4, 5, 6, 11, 19), nostalgia (2, 10, 16, 17) and nationalism – irredentism (3,¹¹⁹ 12, 15, 20; “No, no, never” was a widely used slogan against accepting the Treaty of Trianon since 1920). Other scenes contained several references to the original *Halló, Amerika!*: girls in the Harem scene, and even the hit melody of the show (*Katóka légy a babám*) with new lyrics, entitled *Nyalóka* [Popsickle]. The *Műszínikör* had hardly any stage equipment, but they still attempted to create (or mimic) visual effects (7, 8, 18) and sketches, reflecting the problems of their audience.¹²⁰

The *Műszínikör*'s productions were usually not reviewed at all, but in this case both *Színházi Élet* and *Új Nemzedék* wrote long columns about *Halló, Városliget!*, generally praising the show. The reviewer of *Új Nemzedék* put the show above the original *Halló, Amerika!*, adding that Mihály Erdélyi had more ideas than Jack Haskell. Despite the fact that the cultur-

117 *Új Nemzedék*, July 22, 1925. This social environment served as a basis for Ferenc Molnár's play, *Liliom* (1909).

118 Alpár, *A Városliget színházai*, 61.

119 We suspect that this is a reference to Dezső Szabó's 1919 roman, *Az elsodort falu* [The drifted village] about rural Hungary during WWI.

120 “[...] our heroes are in love and joke merrily, until the governing powers of the seabed chase their disturbing company to the hell. Here they are struggling with the local registration office, but their good Hungarian gaiety saves them from being expelled.” *Színházi Élet* XV, no. 31 (2–8 August 1925): 13, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00573/pdf/>.



Figure 6: The performers and writers of *Hulló, Városliget!*

Színházi Élet XV, no. 31 (2–8 August 1925): 13, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00573/pdf/>



Figure 7: Performers of the *Népliget* revue, in the middle is Jenő László, the author

Színházi Élet XV, no. 17 (4 April–2 May 1925): 20, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00559/pdf/>

al status and quality of the venue was considered to be extremely low, they praised the production as it was considered to be Hungarian, and reflected the main national sentiments of the era.

Halló, Népliget!, a large-scale operetta revue with songs and dances in eight scenes, was produced in another less prestigious fairground of Budapest.¹²¹ The Népliget venue had serious problems with electricity, so they began the show in a complete darkness. According to one reviewer, the most memorable scene concerned the brutal murder of Ferenc Kodelka in January 1925, whose perpetrator had recently been sentenced to be hanged.

These new, local productions were advertised as being on the same level as the original Budapest show; however, none of the local theatres had the financial power to stage a spectacular like the one in Budapest, and most of them clearly did not intend to. Nevertheless, all of these provincial productions were staged in the following months after the original's premiere, and by the start of the next season in September, the *Halló*-fever was already over. One factor behind this rush might have been the producers' urge to prove (mostly to themselves and to audiences) that they were keeping up with the latest Hungarian musical theatre trends and their quality was similar to that seen in Budapest. The *görl* as a social type was meaningless in provincial Hungary, therefore if it appeared in the shows it was mostly parodied. They used this "new genre" to show the local history focusing on what they considered as important values, instead of a cosmopolitan spectacle. While the original *Halló, Amerika!* was a tool of escapism, provincial mutations frequently used their *Halló* shows as a tool to collectively cope with the trauma and mourning of recent years. According to the plans of the Operetta Theatre, such themes would have appeared in their next production, *Halló, Budapest!*, as well.¹²² Neither approach is better or worse than the other, they just serve different purposes and the demands of different audiences.

Halló, Amerika! was a spectacle of a previously unexperienced size and quality in Hungary. This was its major flaw: it was oversized for a city like Budapest, particularly during the time of hyperinflation. The actual mental state of Budapest society, traumatised by the territorial loss of the country, might also not have provided the right moment for such a radical change

121 *Színházi Élet* XV, no. 17 (4 April–2 May 1925): 20–1, <https://epa.oszk.hu/02300/02343/00559/pdf/>.

122 The composer Béla Zerkovitz said: "In one of the hit songs created for Irén Biller, I present three eras of Budapest. The good old times, the so-called slithered era, and the era of complete breakdown." *Magyarország*, April 8, 1925.

in the repertoire. The debates around the production were merely political, not professional (despite Jack Haskell's inhuman behaviour). The show reached a wide audience, from the aristocracy to the poor, and it introduced Hungary the concept of modern revues and entertainment. It added the new word, *görl*, to the everyday Hungarian vocabulary and due to other shows staged in the following years,¹²³ the social type of showgirls appeared in Budapest and remained for the next 25 years. The phrase *Halló, Amerika!* remained in the collective memory: in September 1928, the new telephone line between New York and Budapest was inaugurated with it,¹²⁴ just like the Hungarian Radio's first broadcast in the USA.¹²⁵ The title pattern was still copied even ten years later.¹²⁶

The fundamental research into musical stage entertainment in Budapest has hardly begun – it should be continued using the tools of historiography, the history of mentalities, sociology and gender studies in order to reach well-grounded conclusions.

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- 123 The Operetta Theatre attempted to revive the American theme in a new operetta, *Miss Amerika* in 1929. Despite of the Hungarian composer, Mihály Eisemann and Erzsi Péchy in the title role, critics did not see anything else in it but a smaller version of *Halló, Amerika!*
- 124 *Az Est*, November 14, 1928.
- 125 “*Halló Amerika first Communication of the Hungarian broadcasting, to the Columbia Corporation Amerika*” [sic], *Az Ujság*, May 3, 1932.
- 126 See *Halló, Tel-Aviv!* (1936) and *Halló, Sanghai!* (1939) in *Komédia Kabaré* [Comedy Cabaret]. See Alpár, *A cabaret - A fővárosi kabarék műsora*, 492.

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