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A REVIEW OF *AT THE HAWK'S WELL* (A *SÓLYAM KÚTJÁNÁL*)

At the Hawk's Well (A *sólyam kútjánál*), live theatrical production, Theatre One, Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, Limerick University, 15 October 2015.

Reviewed by Matthew M. DeForrest

At this point in my career, it is an unusual thing to find myself alienated from William Butler Yeats's work—especially a work that I have studied somewhat carefully in the past. It is all the more shocking to discover it happening immediately after hearing it read aloud. And yet, that is precisely what happened not only to myself, but to most of the non-Hungarian speaking audience of *At the Hawk's Well* (A *sólyam kútjánál*) on the night of Thursday, 15 October in Theatre One of the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at Limerick University during the inaugural Conference of the International Yeats Society.

I had been surprised by the performance of a Yeats play before. I still vividly recall how, in February 1996, the Contemporary Theater's staging of *Purgatory* startled me because the power dynamic between the Old Man and his son, the Boy, was the reverse of how I had read it. I had always seen the physicality of the Boy, stressed so often in the play, as a path by which he had begun to dominate his aging father—the moment of the interchange of the gyres having passed and the son overshadowing his father. In their performance, however, it was the Boy who was timid and dominated by the intensity of his father's will despite his struggles against it. And yet, this interpretation of the characters, enlightening to me though it was, did not alienate me from the text, which remained familiar in a way the Hungarian Yeats Society's production was not.

For those who were not there, the performance began, as we sometimes forget, just outside the theater doors with the audience's anticipation what was to come. In this particular case, the audience consisted of Istvan S. Pálffy, the Hungarian Ambassador to Ireland; Susan O'Keeffe, Senator of the Irish Republic; Professor Michael Gilsenan, who was to be honored by the Glucksman Library of the University of Limerick the next day; other assorted dignitaries; and an impressive assembly of new and noted Yeats scholars. As such, the players could count on a receptive, if initially hesitant, audience. The program had made it clear we would be seeing *At the Hawk's Well* performed in Hungarian. A handful of those in attendance had heard Professor Margaret Mills Harper describe how impressed she had been by the performance, which she had seen in Hungary in May, and how excited she was to have the players perform it as a part of the conference. So, there was no question raised as to the quality of

the performance to come. There was, nevertheless, the usual trepidation that comes from any encounter with the unknown—only partially mitigated by the news that there would be a reading of the play offered in English prior to the performance so that the audience would have Yeats's language and the play's story fresh in their memories. How, after all, were we to appreciate the action of the play without Yeats's words?

After the doors opened, the first in were seated in the round on the stage floor—with the dignitaries further back, sitting in stadium-style seating. Professor Harper and Ambassador Palfy offered appropriately warm and dignified greetings conveying an excitement that they felt for what we would soon experience. They, of course, knew what was coming.

The stage reading immediately followed. The four readers entered and took up places on the floor equidistant from one another and paced out a circle. The reading was international, with Hungarian (Melinda Szüts reading the stage directions), French (Alexandra Poulain reading the part of the Singers), and Irish (Matthew Campbell reading the part of the Old Man and Dan Mortell reading the part of the Young Man) voices delivering the lines from different editions of the text in hand: a larger edition and pocket edition in softcover, a photocopy, and an electronic version read from a mobile phone. The difference in the format struck me at the time, as it spoke to something that die-hard champions of the physical book sometimes overlook. It is the story transmitted, and not the format of its transmission, that keeps us coming back to tales like the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and makes us excited when twenty missing lines of *Gilgamesh* are re-discovered, even when they are written in the foreign script of a dead language on crumbling clay tablets that we will likely never see, let alone be able to read. The magic of its translated transmission across time, regardless of the medium it inhabits, is enough for us.

While I considered this, the readers made their way around their circle—a staging that captured something of the play's ritual elements. The reading had all the power one would expect Yeats's lines to offer when delivered by those who are not only intimately familiar with them but clearly take great joy from them.

Following this reading, the six players entered in silence along with the musicians (not to be confused with the Three Musicians of the cast) Réka Nemes, Barbara Kriesch, and Ákos Lystyik, whose accompaniment on the flute, harp, and drums, respectively, would subtly but powerfully color the performance. The Three Musicians of the play, portrayed by Blanka Bede, Adrienn Illés, and Gergő Simon, were dressed all in black and their faces made up in clown white with black triangles pointing in different directions. Szüts later explained to me that the triangles pointed at one of the organs of sense on the face—one that was initially developed by the individual player, who then passed the movement from one to the next around the circle they made.¹ The large cloth was

opened and, after the opening lines were chanted, draped over the Guardian of the Well, portrayed by Eszter Rembeczki, where it then simultaneously became an enveloping cloak and bird's wings. At the center of the stage, a small silver-grey triangle of cloth marked the well.

The arrangement and movement of the players and the movement of the three named characters, as Szüts explained during her presentation later in the conference, were based on circles and triangles—an arrangement she finds omnipresent in Yeats's construction for his plays for dancers and which she believes was captured by Csaba Valdar in the image used on the play's poster.² The two triads of the play (the Three Musicians and the triumvirate of the Old Man, Young Man, and Guardian of the Well) circled the central well, investing in it a more solid sense of place than the cloth triangle could have carried on its own.

Szüts's staging of the play, however, did not exclusively focus on the cast as they moved around the plane of the stage. She concerned herself with three dimensional placement and its significance for the characters. The Old Man, portrayed by Tamás Varga, remained continuously grounded in his movements. His feet and, at times, his full body, were pulled down by the stage floor by an oppressive gravity. In contrast, the Young Man, portrayed by Mate Czako, who also choreographed the dances, was continuously vertical—always preparing to leap upward with bird-like movements that shifted from one pose to another—as if he were continuously practicing the forms of a martial art. This upward movement, Czako later explained to me, was designed to bridge the worlds of the Old Man and the Guardian of the Well.³ The Guardian's movements alone were fluid and free—at least when the action of the play allowed her to move. Initially, she was still upon the stage, waiting for the moment of revelation. As it approached, however, she explosively shifted from one held pose to another until she was finally free, stood, and stalked about the stage in the prelude to her dance.

It was at this moment that the players—importantly—shifted their styles of movement in a manner akin to the way the musicians had passed their face-based movements around their circle. The Old Man, overwhelmed by the stress of the Guardian's regard, swooned into the immobility that had held the Guardian in place moments before. The Young Man, undeterred by the Guardian, attempted to ground himself as the Old Man did, ignoring the Guardian and watching the well. The Guardian, having begun to dance, became increasingly bird-like in her movements as her dance drew the Young Man back up from his grounded state. His jerky, marionette-like response to her dance conveyed his failed attempt to resist the Guardian's building power. However, the Young Man was overwhelmed by the Guardian, who drew him into her plane as if he was held by invisible strings; there, he was subjected to an entranced dance, a state that he would be unable to sustain—an ironic fate, given his quest for

immortality. Once she drew him from the stage floor, she indifferently dropped him back into the mundane world, where he would search for the prosaic hawk that led him to the well.

It is worth pausing to note here that the Young Man's movements at this point in the dance was the only moment in Szüts's staging where the action conformed to Yeats's stage directions as he describes the entrance of the Old Man: "His movements, like those of the other persons of the play, suggest a marionette" (*CPI* 210). By breaking from this aspect of the stylized movement for the dancers, Szüts highlighted the control being exerted over the Young Man by the Guardian and hinted at the Guardian's role as (to mortal eyes) a cruel Otherworld puppet master—foiling the Old Man's desires for the water and re-directing the Young Man away from her well. Likewise, it stressed her inhuman impartiality. The Guardian doesn't just leave those who do not seek her well unmolested; she ignores them as things of supreme indifference. Only those who might yet drink become the focus of her attention, as was seen when she focused on the Old Man just long enough to drive him to the floor. Following that, her focus remained on the Young Man until he was driven from the stage.

As the Guardian returned to her place on the stage following her dance, the Old Man stirred to life and dragged himself, like a wounded animal, to the brink of the well. Although the words torn from him at the discovery of the wetted stones were in Hungarian, there was no mistaking their emotional import. Absent were the measured, oracular tones of the earlier stage reading and of other performances I had seen. Varga, as directed by Szüts, captured the heart-wrenching despair of one who had been cheated of his life's meaning and ultimate goal and his knowledge that he would have no other chances to achieve either. The pain of this made the attempt to reach out to the Young Man as he heard the call to battle—"O do not go! The mountain is accursed; / Stay with me, I have nothing more to lose, / I do not now deceive you." (*CPI* 218)—all the more powerful, even when it was spoken in a language whose words were opaque.

That the performance was wholly in Hungarian meant that I had to concentrate on the movement, expression, and action of the players—but not their (or Yeats's) words. As a result, I experienced a much different performance than I did in Sligo when, in the early 1990s, I first saw *At the Hawks Well* performed in a black box lit to the level of deepest twilight. This is not to say that the actors and actresses of the performance in Sligo were any less than capable, comfortable, or confident. It has everything to do with my role as a member of the audience. Being fully divorced from the language meant that I was less focused on the magic of Yeats's words and was more fully present to the actions of the players and what their tone and movements conveyed.

In this sense, *At the Hawk's Well* (*A sólyam kútjánál*) made crystal clear to me something I should have been more consciously aware of as I entered the theater. It is the story or, in the case, the play that is the thing and not its text. By fully alienating me from the words, I was not just exposed to the physicality of the story. I witnessed the incarnation of Yeats's desire to incorporate multiple forms of art into a whole, as can be read in his work, such as in *A Vision* (1925) where the Judwalis sect dance the geometries of the system on the sand, and as in his plays for dancers.

All this makes abundantly clear how enlightening a well-researched, well-staged performance like this can be. I learned as much, if not more, about *At the Hawk's Well* from this performance than I have from scholarly monographs and my own reading of the play—although I suspect explaining how I was granted a deeper awareness of the play's meaning would elude me. In brief, the performance—like all good performances—made manifest Yeats's assessment of higher levels of knowledge: “Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.”⁴

Notes

1. Melinda Szüts. Personal Conversation. Parteen, Co. Clare, Ireland. 15 October 2015.
2. Melinda Szüts. “The Space Minded Dramaturgy of *At the Hawk's Well*—Theory vs. Practice.” “A Writer Young and Old: Yeats at 150”: The Inaugural Conference of the International Yeats Society, Limerick University, Limerick, Ireland. 17 October 2015.
3. Czako, Mate. Personal Conversation. Parteen, Co. Clare, Ireland. 15 October 2015.
4. WBY to Lady Elizabeth Pelham, 4 January [1939], *CL InteLex* #7362.