

Performing Womanhood and Carefare in Hungary

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In the present article,¹ I will examine how topics of domestic work, care and family values were critically addressed by female performers in 2022 on various Hungarian stages. Two short analyses will show that the notion of womanhood is deconstructed through questioning superficial and populist images of traditional female roles. While *Baby Bumm – Propinquity Effect*, a community theatre production highlights the actual toll of becoming a mother, a one-woman-show titled *God, Home, Kitchen* detects the numerous and often contradicting roles assigned to an average Hungarian female citizen by politicians. Both productions build on the physical limits of the performers' bodies, the actual burden of taking care of children, as well as fulfilling duties in and outside the household, to show the unreal nature of politicized ideas on women. This is a public topic that further emerged in post-pandemic times, especially in the light of the government's determination of acceptable social participation for women.

Free, sacred, unpaid

In December 2020, after a period of Covid-19 lockdowns, the Minister for Families in Hungary – until February 2024 the first female president of the country – sent the following message to women: 'Don't believe that we, women must always compete with men. Don't believe that every waking moment of our lives must be spent with comparing ourselves to men, or that we must have the same position, the same salary as them ... Let's be happy that we were given the gift of being able to love and take care of others.'² Katalin Novák's words underlined a restrictive understanding of women's role in contemporary society which characterized the last thirteen years of the Hungarian government. Restrictive views came together with increasing demands on women, as public statements by prestigious members of the Orbán administration showed repeatedly, especially regarding childbearing. Creating financial incentives and political propaganda to raise childbirth in the nation, pronatalist policies of the state are also connected to unpaid reproductive care work depicted as feminized, sacred and obligatory. Pronatalism, therefore, has become a normative cultural narrative in which women's roles are associated with unpaid devotion, voluntary sacrifice and natural caregiving.

It is, however, not a unique situation in the region. During the past decade most right-wing nationalist governments in east and central Europe, such as in Poland and Hungary, introduced various policies and regulations that influenced women's rights. The examples included restrictions on the right to abortion, cutting back social benefits and reorganizing welfare policies. In the case of Hungary, a specific social

welfare system has been created since 2010, which, according to sociologist Éva Fodor, can be called a carefare system and is a 'response to the globally observed crisis of care, that is, the tension created by the rapidly increasing simultaneous demand for women's paid as well as unpaid work'.³ Fodor's recent work on gender regimes shows that although officially aimed at boosting the birth rate in the country, Hungarian carefare policies were only beneficial for normative families; furthermore, the policies deepened gender inequalities and the burden of women's free and devalued work.⁴ Consequently, women's triple shift⁵ has been consolidated through government policies.

Carefare logic also means that the basis of state support is no longer connected to an individual's financial need, but rather the care duties of families.⁶ Generous benefits became available to 'heterosexual, married, working couples with children or who plan to have children'.⁷ Reproductive care work was thus not only in the forefront of the Hungarian government's communication and propaganda, but it also dominated welfare financial incentives and social benefits in the last decade. Carefare social politics established a system according to which women must fulfil their paid as well as increased unpaid work hours, as family benefits are bound to families 'with a stable income level, which itself often necessitates that both spouses are employed'.⁸ During the Covid-19 lockdowns, when schools and childcare facilities were closed, the unbearable amount of care work and home office work became a daily experience for many households. In Hungary women's contributions to childcare work grew significantly more than men's during this period, and recent research shows that gender inequality was increased during the pandemic the most among the highest educated, middle-class city-dwellers.⁹

In the light of this, it is certainly not by chance that throughout the last years, more and more Hungarian performers aimed at taking back the right to talk about womanhood and parenthood, women's roles in contemporary societies, and deconstructing stereotypical and unreal understandings of family dynamics.

Babies on board (always)¹⁰

In 2021 author and dramaturge Bori Sebók and applied theatre professional Tímea Török initiated a workshop titled 'Baby Blues' for new mothers. They wanted to react to the challenges of parenthood, including loneliness, fatigue, depression and increasing demands, especially during the pandemic, and thus offered a mixture of community experience and theatre art based on personal stories about becoming a mother. An important element was that the participants could bring their babies along and did not have to choose between their duties and creative interests. The community theatre production titled *Baby Bumm – Propinquity Effect*¹¹ grew out of this workshop as a public piece on motherhood in present-day Hungary. The group of eight performers included civilians and professional theatre makers alike, mostly from middle-class backgrounds (Fig. 1).

Baby Bumm is built on a series of confessions about motherhood's effect on a person's life, including the relation to partners and spouses, close relatives and friends, as well as new routines, modes of perception, and the immense workload and



FIG. 1 Scene from *Baby Bumm – Propinquity Effect*, 2022. Photograph by Iringó Simon.

responsibility, which usually cannot be shared – neither physically, nor emotionally. However, the performers are not alone on the stage, as their babies and toddlers accompany them the whole time, creating an unexpected, loud and energetic environment with the need of constant (care) work. In this way, the production powerfully makes the invisible care work visible through showing the performers' continuous juggling between telling their stories to the audience and providing safety through changing nappies, preventing accidents, dressing the children, or playing with them. The babies' constant and often overwhelming presence is not only challenging the performers' focusing skills, but also the audience's, as the little ones are almost always there, running around, shouting, screaming, giggling, speaking, mumbling and laughing.

The unbreakable and often uneasy unity of mother and child is nuanced by the performers' scenes. While seven performers brought their own children on stage, one of them turns out to be carrying a fake infant when she drops the puppet: Veronika Szabó functions as a narrator in the production. She introduces the audience to the rules of the production (e.g. 'please, don't feed the babies'), moderates various scenes and offers a monologue at the end. In her speech she deconstructs the possibilities of resistance under the current political regime, as childbearing is presented as an ultimate form of revolution in an individualistic world. Szabó's distinctive role, on the other hand, also suggests that narrating and managing scenes is only possible when a person's responsibility embraces a puppet child, not a real one.

The other performers' constant oscillation between the children's wellbeing and the performance's success is the most significant element of the dramaturgy. The production does not want to hide the toll of constant care work, nor does it present motherhood as a non-realistic, sacred activity, which is so frequent in various public – specifically, political – talks on the topic. Instead, it affectionately speaks about real Hungarian mothers' experience and the social and personal responsibility of changing – and through this, healing – patriarchal interpretations of parenthood.

A kitchen of one's own

Mikolt Tózsza's one-woman show titled *God, Home, Kitchen – or I have already parked in the middle of Bajcsy Street today*¹² presents a wider range of politicized expectations on Hungarian women to perfectly fit the normative image by fulfilling duties at home and elsewhere, as caregivers, attractive housewives, and work professionals. The title refers to an overused catchphrase (God, Home, Family) of the Hungarian government. However, the term 'family' has been replaced by a stereotypical feminized space, i.e. the kitchen, various elements of which are spreading in the performance space. Glasses and plates, a blender, a bowl, a kettle and a handmixer are staged like artefacts in a museum on white or glass stands. Among these items, Tózsza performs a variety of patriarchal gender role expectations assigned to women. For instance, she wears high heels and a short dress, talks about a recent romantic relationship, and gives away an ex-boyfriend's belongings (ashtray, noodle chopper, leftover food, stuffed animals) to spectators, then engages in various kitchen practices (see Fig. 2).

In a memorable scene, the performer sets a glass dining table with various drinks and foods, while wearing a fitness dress and high heels. She crawls under the table and lifts it with her back, then moves it slowly on hands and knees, without spilling the liquids, and recites ex-Minister Katalin Novák's above-mentioned sentences on Hungarian women's duties. While the literal image of a glass ceiling emerges, the



FIG. 2 Mikolt Tózsza in *God, Home, Kitchen*, 2022. Photograph by Olga Kocsi.

minister's re-enacted speech strengthens the ideological background of Hungarian carefare policies: 'I can give birth through giving birth to a child, and I can give real life through responsible care work as well.'

The performer later shows the physically demanding and unfulfillable nature of government propaganda by literally covering a wide range of care, domestic and intellectual work on stage, while keeping up an attractive appearance. Tózsá, now in a Barbie-like wig and gold female overall, performs all the needed bits of female triple shifts in an accelerating tempo. Accompanied by the loud noises of kitchen equipment, she whips eggs, squeezes fruits, pours wine, builds towers out of books, wears a baby carrier, restarts a musical toy, boils water, does yoga movements, while the prime minister Viktor Orbán's words from a loudspeaker are filling the stage: 'In the past those who had more children, lived better.'¹³ At the end, the performer reads and eats a booklet of the Hungarian constitution, page by page. In this way, she reverses the metaphorical process of state (and propaganda) consumption of female bodies.

My further claim is that Tózsá's piece is not only special because of staging the clash between actual female bodies and propaganda talks, but also because of its infrastructural background. It has been created within the Theatre and Performance class of the educational system freeSZFE Society,¹⁴ the offspring of the months-long student protest and blockage in 2020 at the Hungarian Theatre and Film Arts University. The latter institution was forced to privatization by the government through replacing the senate with a board of agents close to the Orbán administration. As there are numerous overlaps among the government's restrictive treatment of civil, educational and art sectors in Hungary, it is an outcome of the current theatre system that productions which openly discuss gender inequalities and the burden of unpaid duties assigned to women would only come from the field of independent theatre.¹⁵

The two pieces above highlight the need for talking about the over-politicized term of gender in more nuanced ways. Focusing on invisible female work, the performers question the real outcome of carefare policies regarding unpaid work, the physical and mental toll of care work, and the propaganda's influence on the body. Because, after all, no real home can be built on exhausted individuals, locked in a kitchen.

NOTES

- 1 While writing the article, I was supported by the Bolyai Research Fellowship at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and the ÚNKP-22/23-5 New National Excellence Program of the Ministry for Culture and Innovation from the source of the NRDI Fund.
- 2 Axióma, 13 December 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/axiomamedia/videos/224659149173546/> (retrieved 9 July 2023).
- 3 Éva Fodor, 'More Babies for the State: The "Carefare" Regime of Anti-Liberal Hungary', *New Labor Forum*, 31, 1 (2022), pp. 34–41, here p. 35.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- 5 Triple shift refers to women's paid jobs, unpaid domestic work, and unpaid emotional work. See Jean Duncombe and Dennis Marsden, "'Workaholics" and "Whingeing Women": Theorising Intimacy and Emotion Work – The Last Frontier of Gender Inequality?', *The Sociological Review*, 43, 1 (1995), pp. 150–69.
- 6 Fodor, 'More Babies for the State', p. 37.

- 7 Ibid., p. 37.
- 8 Ibid., p. 39.
- 9 Éva Fodor, Anikó Gregor, Júlia Koltai and Eszter Kováts, 'The Impact of COVID-19 on the Gender Division of Childcare Work in Hungary', *European Societies*, 23, 1 (2021), pp. 95–110.
- 10 I am expressing my gratitude to dramaturge and researcher Noémi Herczog, who helped via personal interviews in understanding the background of the production.
- 11 *Baby Bumm – Propinquity Effect*. Performers: Szilvi Balogh, Anna Csábi, Piroska Móga, Veronika Németh, Hedvig Oláhné Czeizing, Zsófia Pénczvártó, Veronika Szabó and Hanna Sztripszky. Help with childcare on stage: Alexandra Kardos. Applied Theatre Professional: Tímea Török. Dramaturge: Noémi Herczog. Director: Bori Sebők. Premiere: Budapest, MU Theatre, 28 May 2022.
- 12 Mikolt Tózsza: *God, Home, Kitchen – or I have already parked in the middle of Bajcsy Street today*. Premiere: Budapest, freeSZFE – Artus, 10 June 2022.
- 13 Interview with Viktor Orbán on Radio Kossuth, 24 September 2021.
- 14 Freeszfe Society, at https://www.freeszfe.hu/about_us/ (retrieved 9 July 2023).
- 15 Echoing the logic of carefare policies, normative images also influence the funding possibilities of theatres, leaving independent groups of theatre and dance with diminishing if not disappearing possibilities of survival in 2023.

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