Silenced Voices: Hungarian Plays from Transylvania. Selected and translated by Csilla Bertha and Donald E. Morse. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2008. 283 pages.

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This finely produced volume contains five plays by Hungarian authors living in Transylvania (part of Romania since 1920) in the last decades of the twentieth century, whom we are justified to call, according to the translators' introduction, "the forgotten playwrights of Central Europe" (1). "Falling through the Cracks" as the subtitle of the introduction encapsulates the idea that since the Trianon Peace Treaty following World War I with the significant border changes of the region, Hungarian writers living in Romania and continuing to use the Hungarian language in their literary works, have scarcely reached a wider audience chiefly because of their minority status. Therefore it is really a cause for celebration that a volume of plays by eminent Transylvanian playwrights is now added to the few previously published English translations of the considerable bulk of quality Hungarian literature coming from Romania. The careful selection and successful translation of the material praises the unique collaboration of Csilla Bertha and Donald E. Morse, a married couple whose names are well-known in international scholarship, in the field of Irish, American and Comparative Studies. She is Hungarian and he is American, forming a combination which, in this case, has resulted in fruitfully joining an intimate understanding of the historical, socio-cultural and Biblical embeddedness of the Hungarian texts with reliable knowledge of what will sound acceptable, meaningful as well as accurately nuanced to an English-speaking audience. Their ambitiously written introduction sets the tone of trying to make more friends for this neglected segment of world literature as well as offering indispensable information to assist readers (theatre practitioners among them, hopefully) in enjoying the artistic values of the plays following as fully as possible.

The works published in the volume were completed under Nicolae Ceauşescu's infamous dictatorship during the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, exemplifying that drama (and literature in general) tends to flourish in spite of the harshest circumstances, or sometimes even because of them. Hungarians living in Romania at that time had to endure double oppression due to the inhumanity and racism of the police state. Transylvanian playwrights themselves suffered from discrimination, and on occasion were even physically attacked for speaking, if only in coded ways, about uncomfortable truths. As late as spring 1990, the leading figure among them, András Sütő (1927-2006) lost one of his eyes while being beaten by a Romanian mob incited by the Secret Police. Thus it is hardly surprising that most of the Transylvanian-Hungarian plays written in the Ceauşescu era had to have their premiere in the mother country, Hungary, where theatre people made serious efforts to stage them. Sütő's

major play, *Advent in the Hargita Mountains* (1984), which comes first in the present volume premiered in Budapest with enormous success, inspiring standing ovation, but without the author since Romania would not allow Sütő to travel to Hungary for the occasion. The questions the play raises about the life and prospects of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania are political, yet the form could not be further removed from docudrama: Sütő combines and layers the liturgical implications of Advent with folktale- and ballad-like elements, folk songs, folk customs, games and rituals, while introducing fantasy, magic realism and metaphors. Clearly, advent waiting in the drama suggests the hopes of the Hungarians living under "Great Destruction" (as the mountain peak is called) in communist Romania, against a strong sense of loss manifested again and again in the turns of the story and the covert references to the threat of impending terrors and deprivations. Waiting becomes a kind of duty towards one's community, as one of the protagonists, the old man Bódi says: "We'll look for each other among the living as long as we live and our dead will look for us after that. Let's hope we'll have enough lamps for the waiting" (97). Intertwining a rich array of subtle artistic devices and techniques to achieve a complex political statement about the national community through individual psychology, the play offers parallels with the theatre of other oppressed and marginalized people in the world.

Different from the style of Sütő's *Advent*, *Caligula's Governor* (1972) by János Székely (1929-1992) also deserves to be called a highlight of the volume. Using a pseudo-historical setting, this work qualifies as a play of ideas, a fairly modern sub-genre, while dramatizing philosophical and moral issues following the Hungarian traditions of the debate drama the origins of which date back to the religious controversies of the 16th century. Székely confronts Petronius, representing the Roman Empire and Roman polytheism with Barakias, representing Palestine and Judaic monotheism. Both are intelligent people who quickly respond to one another's thoughts, enhanced by the poetic language the drama employs. Yet their antagonism is rooted outside them, in the emperor's mad wishes which do not acknowledge any limit even when the destruction of whole cultures and communities is at stake. A notable merit of the play is that it establishes a precarious balance between concrete and general levels. Caligula's irrational power can be easily associated with that of Ceauşescu, who also had people murdered for no valid reason, but to sustain the general fear of terror. At the same time the debate between Petronius and Barakias addresses the philosophical and ethical issue of the nature and the effects of absolute power on its subjects in more general terms. On the whole, the play poses questions about the chances of the individual, whether positioned high or low in the power structure, to remain honest and humane under the circumstances of dictatorship. Tyranny takes its human toll, not sparing anyone including the tyrant himself, so the epilogue of the play leaves the reader with some vague sense of hope again.

Csaba Lászlóffy's (1938-) play entitled *The Heretic* (1970) manipulates the mode of satire to focus on the grotesque logic underlying the work of the Secret Police. It envisages a future with no trace of political resistance, therefore without the

need for torturers and investigators. In the course of the action the officers lose their mandhood while perversely insisting on keeping their position, and the interrogation room turns into its own parody. Géza Páskándi (1933-1995) is represented in the volume by a work displaying features of the Central-European version of absurd drama, which, in contrast with the metaphysical concern of its Western counterpart, is politically sensitive. The author himself, the introduction informs us, "was imprisoned for six years at hard labour for sympathizing publicly with the Hungarian Revolution of 1956" (12). *In The Avenger, the Gatekeeper, or It is Requested that You Wipe Your Feet* (1969), with the help of the grotesque and the fantastic Páskándi ridicules the insensible excesses and unadmitted failures of dictatorial communism while exposing the tragic consequences of the totalitarian system on the personal and moral integrity of individuals. Bertha and Morse call attention to the fact that the writer "coined the term 'absurdoid' to describe his kind of drama that differs from Beckett's since his emphasis does not fall on the total meaninglessness of all existence, and he does not view the crisis of transcendence, freedom, and rationality as absolute" (12-13). The volume closes with poet Géza Szőcs's (1953-) radio drama *A Christmas Play or Uncle Louie and the Little Ones* (1988). Resorting to the theme of Christmas in a most unusual way, the drama is a grotesque comedy which portrays the insanities of Herod's despotic regime. Again, the story functions to evoke a parallel, namely Ceauşescu's inhuman decrees that robbed tens of thousands of their future. Also, it serves to attack the official Romanian policy of restricting Hungarian-language education and the work of Hungarian cultural institutions by envisioning the total loss of these values.

With great attention to detail and achieving stylistic elegance, the translation of the five plays certainly does credit to the original works; Bertha and Morse completed it out of admiration for and as a sign of loving service to the culture of Hungarians living in Transylvania and to Hungarian culture in general. Bearing the potential reader in mind, they underline that the plays make us recognize the dynamics of "choice and chance, power and powerlessness that remain valid no matter where and under what circumstances one lives. Written during the darkest days of a brutal, unrelenting dictatorship, the plays in *Silenced Voices* constitute a stern warning against allowing conditions to ripen for such dictatorships in whatever country" (17). Written within an oppressive regime, the plays offer a memento of the near past and remind all of its possible influence on the present. The volume was published by Carysfort Press, Dublin, and was launched in the Abbey Theatre. It seems a telling coincidence that the book saw the light in a country which is equally aware of the weight of national history and the self-reviving importance of storing the voices of memory in the various moulds of art, literature and the theatre.