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## 'Oriental' magicians, 'Hungarian' acrobats, 'Gypsy' jugglers. The past and present of culture-themed acts

All this will make more sense with the pictures I can't include here.

[This](#) is a juggling act performed by Hungarian artists with a 'Gypsy' look. The performance uses the elements from the romanticised image of Roma and Sinti people; it's claiming 'authenticity' and extremely sexualises women. Unnecessarily reinforces the stereotypes, because the juggling act could be performed without it. Or could it? In the following, I attempt to trace back the origins of such productions and their role during the cca. 150 years of institutionalised entertainment business and explore the question what to do with these if we're trying to be politically correct or rather empathetic?

### Acts and themes

What is an act? Borrowing the professionals' description of circus a hundred years ago, we can say an act is *was ich noch nicht geseh'n habe*, something I haven't seen before. Most of the artists are autodidacts; in some cases (especially with a family background) acts are developed in a master and apprentice relationship; with the occasional input or influence of agents and managers. After 1949, Soviet proxy states established state ballet, circus and musical theatre education, but this system hardly changed.

What is a theme? The appearance, an additional layer to the act, which can be simply a stage name with a foreign ring, or a complete sound and look. A theme never overrides or influences the structure or dramaturgy of an act. Generally speaking, cultural representations are based mostly on the performer's understanding of them; and on their assumption of their audience's understanding of the given culture. This horizon of expectations can be challenged by the performers, but rarely is. Nevertheless, the performer's costume, props and sets are rarely original folk pieces. These are working tools, the performer has to be able to perform his act in them, so regardless how original folk dresses look like, alterations (adding extra pockets, adjusting length, sleeve design) are necessary. Not to mention that original folkwear is expensive and not easily available. The key factor and draw of such acts is the promise of authenticity: that the spectator encounters not only the special body technique or other outstanding qualities of the performer, but a genuine representation of the respective culture or theme it represents. (Paradoxically, nationality is the least important thing for travelling performers. It only matters when they are crossing the border and when they are paying taxes. This is why we cannot talk about nation – but only region or country-based performance histories.) Any act could be performed using any theme, but not every theme works with every act. Should I try to perform a fakir act on a nail bed wearing a Hungarian folkish costume, you would be confused because this not what you associate with Hungarian culture. (Although being a Hungarian often feels like that.) The theme must be consistent through the act: if I was entering the stage wearing a plaid kilt, many of you would assume I'm a proud Scotsman. As long as I didn't open my mouth, because my funky accent would cause a dissonance. There are acts which are not traditionally themed (e.g. a human calculator act). Some acts however, are almost always tied to a theme, like a fakir act is usually tied to the

European orientalist fantasy of the Middle East; snake and camel acts too, despite the fact there are plenty of those in Mongolia as well. And there are acts, which have nothing to do with a specific cultural representation but they are usually performed in such. An example of this are teeterboard (*Schleuderbrett*) acts, which are not part of the Hungarian folk image at all, but a Hungarian group of artists developed it at the end of the 19th century, therefore it is usually considered a 'Hungarian' genre.

Which cultures can be viable for being the theme of an act? Having an existing stereotype in public consciousness is not enough: it is necessary to have a distinctive visual (such as costume, body technique style - e.g. a 'national' dance) and a distinctive musical style. (Let's disregard the textual level now for simplicity.) There are additional features, such as distinctive animal species which are suitable for a music hall production (dog breeds, etc.); a distinctive landscape, attributes or a popular metaphor like food. For many, the blood in my veins is not just blood; it's mixed with paprika!

When a performer decides to perform themselves as a representative of another culture, their intention usually is not to mock or humiliate it – such thing happens only in extremist political contexts. When a performer dresses up as a Scotsman or a Hungarian farmer, their goal is not to show the audience its life or make them feel its dilemmas and struggles but to show something for which they will get paid. And this leads us to the question of exploitation, which I will illustrate on the appropriation of Hungarian folklore.

### Exploiting folklore

My premise is that folklore and its artwork primarily belongs to the local communities which originally produced them for their own purposes. It is very questionable how much these communities benefitted directly or indirectly from the uses I am about to present; therefore, I would argue that the following cases can be described as appropriation and exploitation.

The conscious exploitation of Hungarian folk arts began around 1900, when the 'elite' culture discovered and appropriated its music (see the works of Zoltán Kodály and Béla Bartók; but let's not open that can of worms now) and its visual aesthetics for decorative arts and later tailoring. By the 1930s, folk arts were widely acknowledged as cultural heritage and a collective identification point – even by the urban cosmopolitan society. Romanticised folklore was the main subject of state tourism posters. The Hungarian identity was already a selling point in the newly institutionalised European show business of the 1890s, but the folklore was first consciously exploited on a larger scale from the 1930s. By that time, Budapest showbusiness – especially nightlife – reached international fame in the Western world: royals and celebrities visited the city and its luxury clubs. Due to the touristic boom, club managers thought that they will provide an 'authentic' Hungarian folk experience for the tourists 'who can't make it to the countryside'. The Moulin Rouge produced the first folklore-inspired showgirl act in April 1937, which was subsequently copied by other clubs. This took an even uglier turn by 1941, when Jewish managers were replaced by 'Hungarian' ones aligning with radical nationalist ideas. They did not know much about show business, but they were eager to fulfil the expectations towards them: using the stage to express and represent

nationalist ideas in a traditionally cosmopolitan field. This transformation (cynically called 'adjustment') did not target tourists, and not only because WWII drastically reduced tourism. The goal was manifesting the 'Hungarian' quality of the productions and their performers regardless of the effect – so much so that even stage names were to be abolished so that artists should represent their 'Hungarian' quality in- and outside Hungary.

### Foreign desires

The commercialisation of folklore in the 1930s was so successful, that there was a foreign demand of such acts in the 1950s as well, especially in German-speaking regions. However, the Stalinist turn and the nationalisations changed the entertainment landscape completely. The primary role of state-controlled show business was state political representation. Hungary's borders were sealed in 1949, and the question of travelling performers was so far from being political priority that artists could only travel to other socialist countries in 1952. Because Hungary was not delivering the created romantic illusion of itself, both East and West Germany created their own. (There was a small number of performers who emigrated before 1949, or escaped later but not enough to fulfil the demand.) The East German Aros Circus staged a whole 'Hungarian' segment in its 1956 ice revue without any Hungarian performers – even though by that time Hungarian artists were allowed to travel there. (By the way, skating is also not linked to Hungarian folklore directly – it was likely based on 'national' dances.) After the 1956 Revolution, the governing style changed to the so-called goulash communism and the isolation of the 1950s ceased. In collaboration with the largest representative East German revue theatre, the Friedrichstadt-Palast, three shows were produced with enormous success – as they finally delivered the 'authentic' romantic image of the country which was impossible for most to experience in person. Only the second show met some criticism in the Hungarian press, claiming that it's just reinforcing the stereotype and does not help to create a modern image of the country. However, being the 1960s, the critic also had an angle of promoting 'modern, socialist Hungary', an image nobody was interested in.

Hungarian-themed acts were also popular in neighbouring states, where there was a Hungarian community living as minority. The fact, that the respective states and the majority society tolerated but did not acknowledge them, contributed to this. They still appeared as the exotic 'other', the foreign and not one of 'us'.

### Gulyás Party

From the 1960s, socialist Hungary reestablished tourism infrastructure with the intention of milking the sector – as it was a relatively easy way to get hard currencies. In 1967, the state tourism company (*IBUSz*) launched a very successful entertainment venture, called *Gulyás Party*. Tourist groups were taken to a purpose-built Hungarian tavern (*csárda*) set in the Buda hills, where they were served an all-you-can-eat dinner accompanied by a master of ceremonies and a folk-inspired variety show. This was a dinner theatre where performers were also waiters and the service, just like in a travelling circus. By 1984, the show had 2000 performances for 600.000 spectators and due to the demand, another production called *Paprika-Show* was created. The *Gulyás Party* was highly criticised in Hungarian press from the 1970s. Listen to the

response of its founder-producer-manager, an acclaimed magician and entertainer János Gálfi:

*-Some people judge your production claiming you falsify original folk dances and songs and promote the so-called 'gulasch-tschikosch-fokosch-romanticism'.  
-These people have never seen the show or they do not understand the genre.  
Every musical or dance number is an authentic representation of Hungarian folk arts. Our choreographer, Gyula Berger was a dancer and choreographer of the Duna Dance Company, the six-member orchestra led by József Németh is among the best Hungarian folk ensembles.*

He was convinced of the 'authentic' quality of his show and to a certain extent, he was right: his creative team included the 'experts' which legitimised the production. Still, as a traditional entertainer, he did not use the opportunity to challenge or criticise the romantic image. He delivered it on the assumption that 'this is what people want' or 'this is working' and felt that the enormous success proves his point. After 1989, when the state lost its monopoly for tourism and entertainment other entrepreneurs immediately copied his concept. Nevertheless, *gulyás parties* could not survive without the organised, 'stable' tourism from other socialist countries (the host was also not getting younger) and the original show closed in 1994. Its legacy is still there: foreign Hungarian communities in Spain, Germany, Canada still use this name for their gatherings.

### And now?

Since the fall of communism, being a variety performer is a private venture again and themed acts are still created and performed to this day all over Europe. It's very easy to dismiss these productions simply as harmful and disrespectful. They mostly are. But it would be short sighted to disregard their significance and impact in the past regarding their entertainment value and introducing different ideas and cultures to the masses – especially in the lower strata. Certainly the latter argument is not valid anymore with mass tourism and radical changes in access to information. Revivals in this sphere of show business are not a danger (although I was seriously approached once by a major theatre to stage a production of the Moulin Rouge from the 1930s 'as it was'); creating new acts in such style shall be avoided or reconsidered. For many performers this would mean breaking the tradition – this would not be the first time, but it is not easy. A hostess of the 2022 Circus Festival in Budapest was dressed in a 'folk inspired' attire on wooden longlegs. That dress symbolised a hundred years of showbusiness stuck in its own tradition bubble; in a tradition, which entertained many people in many countries – while appropriated and exploited other cultures. The seclusion and professional marginalisation contributed to this bubble, often internalising a feeling of inferiority and insignificance – which is only partially explained by the travelling lifestyle. This is the responsibility of fellow theatremakers, intellectuals and cultural politicians: not to look down on certain genres of entertainment (let it be circus or a musical) just because their technique, effects and goals are different. If the next generation of performers understands that what they do on stage matters and its cultural value is not less than that of other forms of performing arts, that would reduce the chances of sticking in such bubble again.

So far I was talking mostly about the performers but there is an audience, without whom such acts would not exist. As long as there are people believing that a fictional Netflix series about the British royal family is a documentary, there will be an audience for such productions as well. The only solution is education; educating both performers and audiences that such oversimplified, sexualised and misappropriated cultural representations can be harmful and disrespectful; also that everything we watch was produced by someone with an angle. To summarise: I believe the key is less judgement, more empathy and a better understanding of the world we live in.