

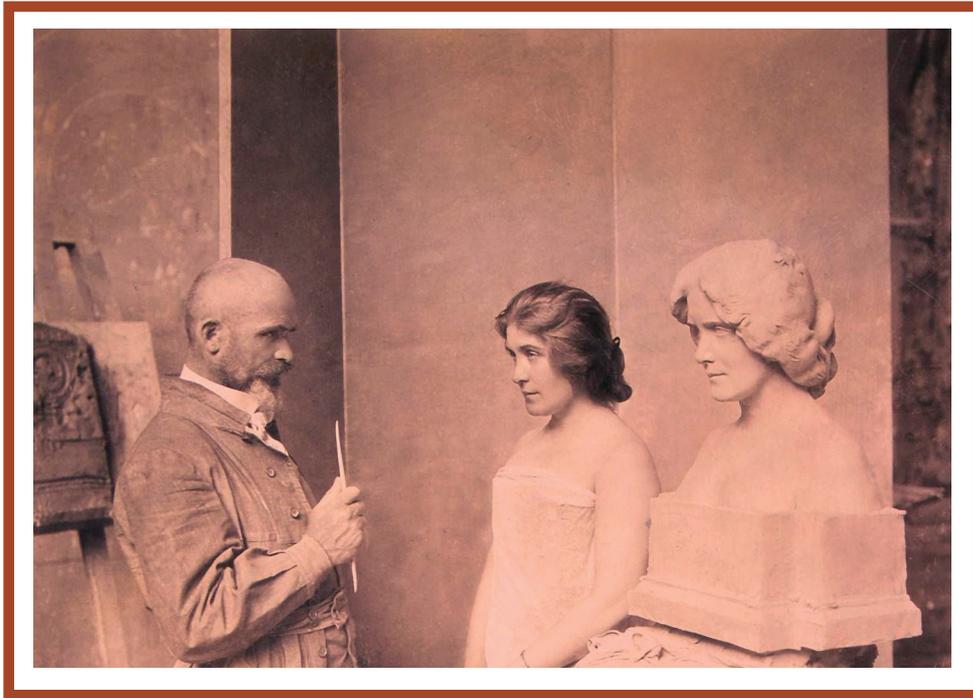
„...AND I SEE MYSELF, NOT AGED, BUT REJUVENATED”

EMÍLIA MÁRKUS CHAMBER EXHIBITION IN THE THEATRE HISTORY COLLECTION



Emília Márkus, the actress revered as the Blond Wonder by her audience, was born on 10 September 1860 in Szombathely according to both of her biographers, Mihály Cenner and Kinga Mária Nijinsky-Gaspers (whose 1993 family-based biography manuscript can be found in the National Library's Theatre History Collection). However, in the National Theatre payroll compiled in 1917, her date of birth appears as 8 September 1862, and this date followed Emília Márkus all the way through the various administrative channels of the institution. Was it the vanity of a woman and an actress or rather the lapsus calami of an administrator? Possibly both, but either way, it was surely neither the first nor the last time such a thing happened. In any case, posterity celebrated the 150th anniversary of Emília Márkus' birth in 2010. Márkus entered the National Drama School in 1874 with special dispensation regarding her age, since the lower age limit for women was 15. Her first public appearance on stage was not an exam performance, but as a stand-in in *Monsieur Alphonse*, a comedy by Alexandre Dumas Jr. Her next appearance in the National Theatre as the heroine of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* – by then she was a contracted member and armed with all the skills an actress needed – was in 1877 and made her a household name. Her partner in the play was Imre Nagy, one of the real star actors of the era. Emília Márkus belonged to the National Theatre Company until her death, becoming a life member in 1928. During her 75-year long career, she played 350 roles. Having appeared in classical and contemporary plays by both Hungarian and foreign playwrights, she had a varied life on stage as an actress; she portrayed all kinds of characters and feelings in various situations and stories. At the beginning of her career she played ingénues; later, in the 1880s, she started to appear in a new kind of role: she became the drama heroine of the theatre; the actress who played the part of characters created by Alexandre Dumas Jr, Victorien Sardou, José Echegaray, Henri Bataille, Henrik Ibsen and Maurice Maeterlinck –

feminine characters who were passionate and sometimes temperamental, but emancipated in their feelings and desires, and sometimes in their actions. She was contemporary and modern, an actress who transformed even classical plays into contemporary social dramas. She metamorphosed the heroines of dramas in the same way as Maeterlinck hid the problem of adultery in a modern marriage in his *Monna Vanna*, set in the 15th century. Emília Márkus achieved one of her most outstanding successes in the main role of this play as Giovanna. Whether the task was veiling a modern conflict behind a fairy-tale-like story, or expressing contemporary sentiments through a classical text, it was achieved in an exciting way in the performances of this interesting actress, who was an irregular beauty according to the ideals of the 1890s and 1900s. Her critics and her audience united in their admiration of her; there were legends about her great mass of amazingly shiny blond flowing hair, which always fell onto her shoulders at the right moment to create dramatic effect. In 1911 Sándor Bródy highlighted the fact that the glance of her dark blue eyes had expressiveness and a gripping force with which she attracted the attention of the audience. He also mentioned her voice, which “never cracks and never quivers, but is always bright and uniquely sensual” (we also enjoy its wide amplitude and girlish tunefulness too from a radio recording made in 1937(!)). Emília Márkus used the acting skills and devices at her disposal to form characters the tormented turn of the 19-20th century liked to describe as femmes fatales and deadly women. In one of his early reviews in 1901, Ady enthused of her as personifying the eternal woman: “the great Emília, who wants to uncover the most hidden secrets of the ‘eternal woman’ and womanliness in such a way that not even our grandchildren will be able to say anything new or more about women after what Madame Emília told us.” The next generation – for whom the thrills of modernity at the turn of the century and the 19th century realistic school of acting already seemed to be a thing of the past –



Emília P. Márkus in Alajos Stróbl's studio in 1896.
(From the Theatre History Collection)

appreciated above all the force of her acting. In 1920 and with regard to her personification of Mathilde (in Echegaray's *Try Who Washes*) which she acted out continuously from 1898 onwards, one of her most successful roles, Dezsó Kosztolányi defined her place in the style history of Hungarian acting with great accuracy. "The pale, blond and nervous little girl" – as an old Hungarian encyclopaedia describes her – appeared when the mysterious lights of western literature of the end of the century had already arrived in Hungary, and Sardau and Dumas had already affected us like revitalising rain. However, her connection with romanticism became a vital factor throughout her career. She was the heroine of the peaceful and quiet Hungarian golden age after '67. By then, the old-fashioned 'great style' of Vienna Burgtheater had faded, but neither purifying naturalism nor new and stylised romanticism had yet appeared. She moved between two eras without representing any particular school of acting or literature, only her own inborn talent." We should also mention the principle of Ede Paulay, her mentor and the leader of the National Theatre's drama section, according to which: "The main rule for actors: comprehend characters as ideals,

which means that we should regard the role to be performed as the representation of an ideal [...] the audience should see a general conception that has become clothed in an individual form appearing on stage." The foundation on which the creation of a harmonious balance in drama between the ideal and the individual is based is imagination, and one of its most important tools is the human voice. This is not a conversational tone, but a kind of stage speech that causes the

text to resound, and can also convey the "frame of mind". Emília Márkus started out with these role-formulating principles, kept them throughout her career, and eventually grew into the modernity of newly appearing themes and feelings rather than the style of acting that was slowly changing at the turn of the century. She lived a long life, dying on 24 December 1949. For the motto of the exhibition we chose the words that Emília Márkus used in her letter to Paulay when she was 28 years-old. The collection, which evoked Emília Márkus' faces and figure with the help of a number of photos, costume designs, artistic portraits, and other documents was the remarkable work of Edit Rajnai, and commemorated the actress, born 150 years ago, in such a way as to acquaint visitors with her art and roles and to give us the opportunity to contemplate for ourselves the issues of our 21st-century life – through the figure of the woman, the actress, the woman with roles in society, the young girl, the mature woman, and then the elderly lady. This kind of remembrance is what we later generations need in order to connect the chains of history and culture by comparing ourselves to the great figures of the past.

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