



Cover art by Scott McKowen

The Guardsman

by

Ferenc Molnár

in a new adaptation by Bonnie J. Monte

from a translation by Gábor Lukin

Know-the-Show Audience Guide

Compiled by the
Education Department of
The Shakespeare Theatre
of New Jersey





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The Life Of Ferenc Molnár



Ferenc Molnár (The New York Public Library Digital Collections)

With 42 plays to his name, Ferenc Molnár (1878-1952) was the first Hungarian dramatist to achieve international renown. Active during a turbulent time of rapid advancement in Budapest, he was instrumental in the formation of a body of Hungarian national drama. Ranked among Europe's foremost writers, he was referred to as "the Hungarian Molière," "the sparkling Aristophanes of

the cafés," "the monocled Swift of Budapest," and "the Voltaire of the boulevards."

Though the Budapest public took it for granted that the details of Molnár's private life were laid bare in his plays, Molnár was protective of details about his early life, refusing

to write a serious autobiography. It is known that on January 12, 1878, he was born to the physician Dr. Mór Neumann and his wife, Jozefa Wallfisch. He had an uneventful childhood in a middle-class home; the monotony of his home life prompted him to become an avid reader at an early age.

After completing his secondary education in 1895, Molnár enrolled in the University of Budapest to study law. At this time, he acquired a habit of working in the cafés, so his father sent him to Geneva, where he would be free from distraction, to complete his legal studies. While abroad, he began writing. He also visited Paris to work on his French and observe contemporary plays — a journey that was formative in the evolution of his dramatic style.

Molnár astonished his family when, in 1896, at the age of eighteen, he abandoned his law career and returned to Budapest to pursue a career as a journalist. He changed his name from Neumann to Molnár and began working for the *Budapesti Napló* newspaper under József Vészti. He wrote in a captivating style and was immediately celebrated as a journalist and short story writer. He wrote his first play, *A doktor úr* (*The Lawyer*) when he was twenty-three, and his second, *Józsi*, when he was twenty five. He continued to write for the newspaper and publish volumes of short stories and essays. Soon, however, his career as a playwright eclipsed his notoriety as a journalist.

MOLNÁR'S

PEN NAME:

Molnár's birth name was Neumann – a German name. He changed it to Molnár as a gesture of patriotism. He felt it would be unfair to Hungarian literature for him to write under a German name. He chose the name because a favorite uncle of his was a miller: Molnár means "miller" in Magyar.



Molnár quickly gained a reputation as a cosmopolitan and was well known in the cafés and clubs of Budapest. At the age of twenty, he began wearing a monocle to complement the well-tailored suits that were a staple of his wardrobe. Not only was he well read, consuming about three or four books a day, but he was also extremely well informed about current affairs. He was brilliant, but not a rarefied intellectual; he was a charismatic hedonist with a taste for red wine, plum brandy, cognac-flavored espressos and Turkish cigarettes, which made him a favorite of Budapest's social set. His most magnetic quality, however, was his verbal acumen. Skilled as he was at puns, axioms and bon mots, he was undisputedly the premier wit in a city full of great conversationalists.

József Vészi, Molnár's boss at the *Napló* and the most influential editor in the country, was of the bourgeois class that entertained and hosted social gatherings, at which he hosted brilliant young intellectuals. Molnár, a frequent guest, became acquainted with one of Vészi's daughters, Margit, at these gatherings. When they met, Margit was only sixteen but had attracted attention as a writer and artist in her own right. Ferenc and Margit courted for six years before they were finally married in 1906. The wedding was a spectacular social event, and a year later they had a daughter, Márta. By this time however, the marriage was already beginning to unravel. Biographer Clara Györgyey wrote of the couple: "Both of

them were stars, and since there could only be one star for either of them, the incompatibility was obvious...The separation was as quick as the courtship had been long."

After Molnár separated from Margit, he began to acquire another reputation to complement his intellectual accolades: he came to be



Irén Varsányi, inspiration for
The Guardsman

known as an ardent admirer of women, always involved in some kind of affair or entanglement. Only a few months after separating from Margit Vészi, he became involved with Irén Varsányi, Hungary's premier actress. At the time, Varsányi was married to a wealthy manufacturer, Illés Szécsi. Audiences accepted that Molnár's play *The Devil*, in which an actress is tempted to abandon her insipid husband, was written for Varsányi. When *The Devil* was first performed in 1907, it earned Molnár international fame, as well as membership in Budapest's exclusive Petőfi Society. It also earned him a two-week jail sentence following a duel with Varsányi's jealous husband. Yet despite the drama in his personal life, Molnár found time to write three novels that year, among them the highly acclaimed novel *A Pál-utcai Fiúk*

(*The Paul Street Boys*), about street gangs.

Around this time, Molnár's life acquired a sensational aspect; the Budapest public flocked to his plays not just for their entertainment value, but also for the intimate details of the affair between the



country's most celebrated writer and actress. *Liliom*, which featured Varsányi in the lead, was read as an explanation of his first marriage, while his next plays, *The Guardsman* and *The Wolf*, were accepted as obvious illustrations of his relationship with Varsányi.

When Varsányi and Molnár finally began to make formal arrangements to move in together, Varsányi's young daughter suddenly fell ill. Overcome with guilt for the turmoil she'd put her family through during her affair with the playwright, Varsányi swiftly returned to her family and abruptly terminated her affair with Molnár. This sudden disappointment of his hopes sent him into a deep depression. He began to drink heavily and attempted suicide. It was in response to his abandonment at the hands of Irén Varsányi that he wrote *The Guardsman*, converting what had been a tragic experience into a comedy. Irén Varsányi played the Actress, the character she had inspired.

He continued to write throughout his recovery, publishing more volumes of collected essays and translations of French plays. When World War I broke out, Molnár reported from the front lines alongside the Austro-Hungarian forces. His vivid reports were regularly published in the *London Morning Post* and *The New York Times*, despite the fact that Hungary was an enemy of the Allied forces. He also continued to work on plays and novels. His first post-war play, *The Swan*, premiered in 1920 and played successfully throughout Europe. With income from the play assured, he nevertheless continued to write prolifically, completing six plays in four years.

In 1922, following a ten year love affair, Molnár married Sári Fedák, a well-known Hungarian actress and singer. The new marriage was, from the outside, eerily similar to his first, particularly for the fact that it, too, began to disintegrate immediately following the nuptials. At the time of the marriage, Molnár was already emotionally involved with another actress, the Hungarian stage star Lili Darvas. She played the lead in *Lanuzi* with such talent that Molnár wrote *The Red Mill* and *The Glass Slipper* specifically for her. Fedák, enraged, asked Melchior Lengyel (one of Molnár's rival playwrights) to write a play for her, which resulted in a divorce in 1924.

As before, the public tracked Molnár's scandalous affairs with keen interest, and fights between Fedák and Molnár were recounted in gossip columns, but the Budapest literary elite were no longer tolerant. Despite (or perhaps partially because of) his international fame and renown, the crowd that had once surrounded him at the cafés began to diminish and his former literary friends cast him out of their society and began to criticize him openly. Many found his commercial success and the revenue he collected from his plays abroad to be vulgar.

Facing criticism and legal entanglements at home, Molnár moved to Vienna in 1925 and married Lili Darvas. In 1926, he premiered *The Play's The Thing*, a play so entertaining that not even his enemies could criticize it; it temporarily restored the Budapest intelligentsia's esteem for the playwright. From 1925-28, Molnár traveled throughout Europe and America collecting accolades, including an invitation



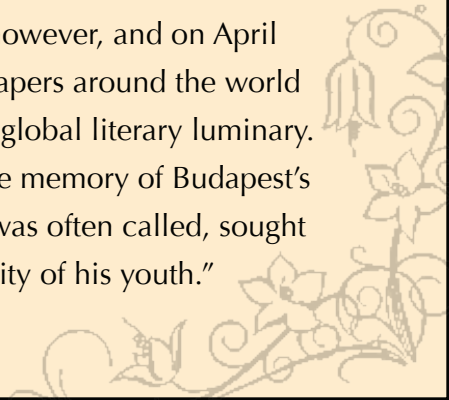
for Molnár to join the contributors' staff of *Vanity Fair*. Molnár and Darvas were celebrities in New York; their activities and social engagements were tracked closely in *The New York Times*. One story reported that the publisher Condé Montrose Nast honored the couple with a dinner dance in his apartment, listing Gershwins and Vanderbilts among the guests.

Molnár and Darvas returned to Budapest in 1928, but as Darvas became a global celebrity, her work required her to travel extensively. Both Molnár and Darvas accepted that Darvas was in no position to be the attentive wife to the aging Molnár. Though they remained married and friends until Molnár's death, they lived separately.

Molnár remained prolific throughout the 1930s, though the impending crisis of World War II was being felt throughout Europe. In 1937, Molnár attended the last Budapest opening of one of his plays, *Delila (Blue Danube)*, and shortly thereafter departed his native city for the last time as he fled from the Nazis. Györgyey writes that, in the years leading up to the outbreak of World War II, "the easy mechanics of levity served [Molnár] no more; the scope for comedy had shrunk because the world was on the verge of tragedy." On December 31, 1939, he sailed for New York where, upon his arrival, he moved into Room 835 of the Plaza Hotel. Though he spoke no English, the pace of the city was stimulating and he was welcomed to New York by his wife, Lili Darvas. He wrote more plays, received promises of contracts from Hollywood and worked on additional manuscripts.

He commemorated the conclusion of the war with the publication of a new novel, *Itzen veled szivem (Farewell My Heart)* and the English edition of an earlier short story of his. As word spread of Nazi atrocities in Europe, Molnár was profoundly affected in ways that would prove severely detrimental to his working habits. He was tremendously disturbed to hear about the tragic fate of hundreds of his Jewish friends and colleagues in Europe, and in 1943, he suffered a massive heart attack that impeded his work for almost a year. Then, in 1947, Wanda Bartha, a devoted secretary and close companion of Molnár's who had been with him since 1932, took her own life, perhaps in response to the loss of her family who were murdered by the Nazis. Molnár's sense of abandonment following Bartha's death was immense. In *Companion in Exile*, a volume compiling autobiographical notes on his life with Wanda, he wrote: "Wanda died – my one light went out...There is no more hope in life!" He bequeathed all of the manuscripts and newspaper clippings about his work that Bartha had maintained to the New York Public Library "in the memory of [his] beloved friend and literary advisor."

Following Bartha's death, Molnár tried to find solace in work, attempting to maintain the productivity that he'd had his entire life. This proved difficult as his health declined however, and on April 1, 1952, he died of stomach cancer. Newspapers around the world published obituaries lamenting the loss of a global literary luminary. *The New York Times* wrote: "Immersed in the memory of Budapest's golden days, the Hungarian Molière, as he was often called, sought but never found here an equivalent for the city of his youth."





Molnár's Life

A Chronology

1878 – On January 12, Molnár is born in Budapest, the second son of Dr. Mór Neumann and Jozefa Wallfisch.

1887-1895 – Molnár attends high school in Budapest.

1895-1896 – Molnár studies law in Budapest and Geneva, travels to Paris, begins working as a journalist, returns to Budapest and changes his name from Neumann to Molnár.

1898 – Molnár's mother dies. He travels in Europe and publishes *Magdolna*, his first novella.

1901 – Molnár publishes his first novel, *Az éhes város (The Hungry City)*.

1902 - *A doktor úr, (The Lawyer)* Molnár's first play, opens in Budapest.

Doktor/ Lawyer:

A *doktor úr*, the title of Molnár's first play, means "Doctor juris:" as in, a doctor of the law.

1906 – While working for the newspaper *Budapesti Napló*, Molnár marries his editor's daughter, Margit Vészi.

1907 – Molnár's first and only child, his

daughter Márta, is born. He also publishes what would go on to be his most famous novel, *The Paul Street Boys*, and *The Devil* opens in Budapest.

1908 – Molnár's father dies; *The Devil* is performed throughout Europe and in New York, and Molnár is elected to the Petőfi Society.

1909 – *Liliom* is produced in Budapest and is a failure; Molnár suffers a long illness.

1910 – Molnár divorces Margit Vészi; *The Guardsman* opens in Budapest

1911 – Molnár attempts suicide, recovers in Austria. He is elected to the Kiszaludy Literary Society.

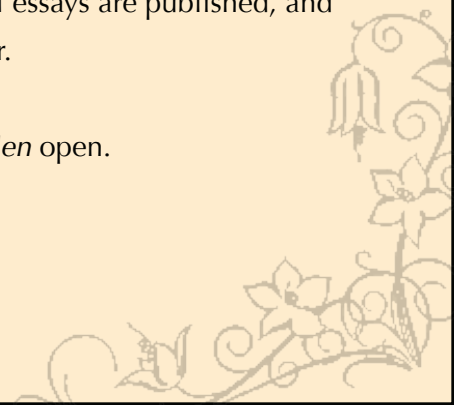
1912 – *The Wolf* opens in Budapest, and opens in New York two years later. Molnár publishes two short story collections.

1914-1915 – Molnár serves as a war correspondent on the Galician front.

1916 – Molnár's play *A Fehér Felhő (The White Cloud)* wins the Hungarian Academy's Voinits Prize, the Academy's most distinguished award. Molnár's war diary and several volumes of essays are published, and Molnár is awarded the Franz Joseph Order.

1917 – The plays *Carnival* and *Fashions for Men* open.

1920 – *The Swan* opens.





1921 – *Liliom* opens in New York.

1922 – *Heavenly and Earthly Love* opens in Budapest, *Fashions for Men* opens in New York; Molnár marries the celebrated prima donna Sári Fedák.

1924 – *The Glass Slipper* opens; Molnár divorces Sári Fedák.

1926 – *The Play's The Thing* opens in Budapest and New York; Molnár marries the actress Lili Darvas.

1927 – Molnár is awarded the Legion of Honor following *The Swan's* Paris premiere. He takes his first trip to the United States on December 22nd, where he is received at the White House by President Coolidge.

1928 – Molnár's *Collected Works* is published in twenty volumes in Budapest; *Olympia* opens.

1929 – *The President* opens, and a collection of Molnár's plays is published in English under the title *The Plays of Ferenc Molnár*.

1932 – Molnár meets Wanda Bartha; they travel in Europe. *Harmony* and *Arthur* open in Budapest, and *Liliom* and *The Good Fairy* are revived in New York.

1934-1936 – Molnár continues to travel in Europe with Wanda Bartha, while four new plays of his open in Budapest.

1937 – *Delilah* opens and Molnár leaves Budapest for the last time.

1940 – Molnár arrives in New York on his birthday: January 12. He moves in to the Plaza Hotel, where he resides until his death. His play *Delicate Story* opens in New York.

1943 – Molnár suffers a massive heart attack.

1945 – He publishes *Farewell My Heart* and *The Captain of St. Margaret's*.

1947 – Molnár becomes an American citizen. Grieving the loss of her family to the Nazis, Wanda Bartha commits suicide.

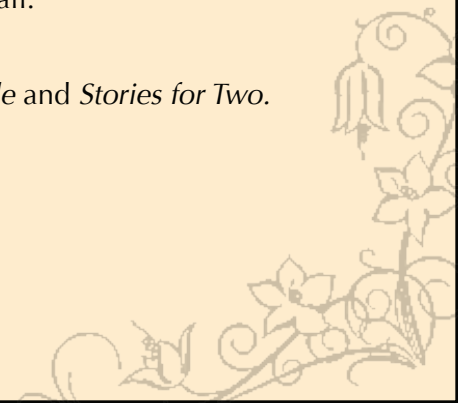
1948 – Molnár refuses to return to Hungary for the celebration of his seventieth birthday. His health begins to fail.

1950 – Molnár publishes *Companions in Exile* and *Stories for Two*.

1952 – Molnár dies of cancer in New York.

The Superstitious Writer:

Following the international success of *Az ördög (The Devil)* in 1907, Molnár gave many of his plays titles that contained seven letters: *A testőr (The Guardsman)*, *A farkas (The Wolf)*, *Farsang (Carnival)*, *A hattyú (The Swan)*, *Színház (Theatre)*. When challenged on this point by the reporter George Halasz in 1928, Molnár admitted: "I don't deny ...that I am superstitious." His superstitious belief extended to other areas of his life as well: he never wrote a will out of fear that doing so would shorten his life.





The Guardsman

An Introduction

Though Molnár's drama has been criticized in the past for its presumed frivolity, the original, unabridged version of the play proves to be a more complex examination of human nature and questions the role of performance in sustaining a marriage.



Please note: Below is a full summary of the play's events. If you prefer not to spoil to plot, consider skipping this section!

The first act takes place in the salon of a celebrated acting couple, late on a spring afternoon. At the start of the play, the Actress, Héléne, is playing Chopin on the piano, while the Actor and the Critic, Doctor Mezei, read newspapers. Mama, the Actress's former chaperone, and Bette, the maid, are packing costumes for the Actor, who is about to perform a limited engagement in the country.

The Actor and the Actress have been married six months, and the tension in their marriage is already beginning to show. The Actor is irritable, and so he quarrels with Mama, which strains the Actress's nerves. The Actor is threatening the Actress with divorce rather than prolong their suffering, when he is interrupted by the

Debt Collector. The Actor pays him in tickets to a show, and the Debt Collector leaves.

After the Debt Collector's departure, the Actor asks the Actress to not play Chopin anymore, as he hears the music as a sign of his wife's discontent in marriage and her desire for a new lover. The Actress, exasperated, obliges him, while lamenting the restrictions the Actor has placed on her life. A moment later, Bette enters with flowers from a "secret admirer" of Héléne's. Héléne's attempts to hide the card that accompany the flowers is futile; the Actor demands that Héléne give him the letter, but she refuses, arguing that it's natural for an actress to be admired by her public. She finds the Actor's jealousy intolerable, so she retreats to the bedroom.

Once the Actress is gone, Doctor Mezei counsels the Actor, telling him to simply go to the flower shop and inquire who sent the flowers, rather than force his wife into an admission she'd prefer not to make. The Actor reveals that he already knows who sent the flowers: he sent them himself. Knowing that his wife never kept a lover for more than six months, the Actor has launched an elaborate scheme for turning himself into the man he anticipates would supplant him in his wife's esteem. Through a subtle line of questioning, he has determined that his wife has a fantasy of courting an elegant soldier: a high-ranking Guardsman. The Actor, unwilling to lose his wife's love, has decided that he will preempt the Guardsman of his wife's fantasies by playing the role of a Guardsman himself. The Actor says that he already feels his wife's love ebbing, and so, desperate as he is, he would do anything



to feel her sincere love again – even if that involves deceiving her and discovering that she would betray him. He has already acquired a Guardsman costume and is keeping it in the apartment of his next-door neighbor. He admits to Doctor Mezei that he's already paraded under his own window as the Guardsman, saluted H  l  ne, and heard H  l  ne admit that she couldn't get the Guardsman out of her mind. The Actor has even begun to feel jealous of the Guardsman, especially since he, as the Guardsman, began sending flowers to H  l  ne's dressing room and realized that H  l  ne was keeping them a secret from him, her husband. The Actor finally reveals to Doctor Mezei that his planned engagement in the country is a ruse: he has sent his wife a note from the Guardsman expressing his desire to meet her while her husband is away. Instead of going on tour, the Actor plans on courting his wife as the Guardsman.

Once the Actor has finished explaining all of this to Doctor Mezei, H  l  ne returns. She is curious to know when he is leaving, which prompts the Actor to suspect that she doesn't care for him. She tries to make amends, and they share a passionate farewell.

As soon as the Actor leaves, however, H  l  ne immediately begins making preparations to meet the Guardsman. Doctor Mezei lets H  l  ne know that he suspects that she's meeting someone, and H  l  ne admits that she is. Mezei asks her if she's going to the Opera; she says she is, but only if she can get out of her planned meeting. Mezei announces that he will visit the Actress's box and leaves.

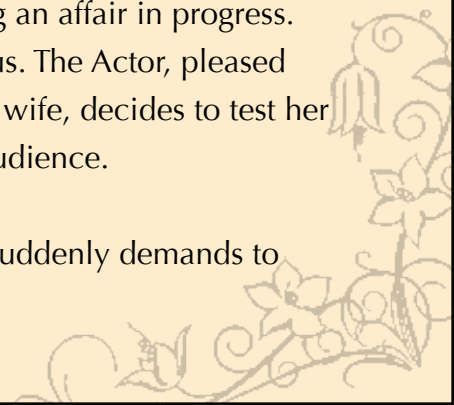
Mama has also noticed that H  l  ne is more excited than usual, and suspects that she is infatuated with a new suitor. H  l  ne admonishes her and tells her to go prepare for the Opera. Just as she is doing so, the Guardsman arrives.

The Guardsman and H  l  ne talk for a little while. It initially appears as though H  l  ne is yielding to the Guardsman's flirtation, then that she is not. She ultimately invites him to meet her at the Opera in her box during intermission.

Act Two begins later in the evening in the Actress's box at the Opera. H  l  ne and Mama scan the audience for a while before the usherette shows the Guardsman into the box. The Guardsman talks with H  l  ne and Mama briefly. The Guardsman nearly gives away his true identity a few times. The Guardsman asks her bluntly if she would ever betray her husband, and she rebukes him. The Actor is ecstatic; he's overjoyed to have tested and proven his wife's fidelity, and is about to reveal himself when Doctor Mezei arrives.

Doctor Mezei, knowing that the Guardsman is the Actor, makes a veiled allusion to the Guardsman having an affair in progress. The Actress hears this and becomes jealous. The Actor, pleased with what he thinks he's proven about his wife, decides to test her fidelity further and asks Mezei to be his audience.

Now that Mezei is watching, the Actress suddenly demands to





hear the Guardsman's declarations of love. The Actor is horrified that H  l  ne appears to be yielding to the Guardsman. H  l  ne is becoming more and more passionate, and it appears that she's being seduced by the Guardsman. With this dramatic change of events, the Actor asks Mezei to leave.

Once Mezei is out of the box, H  l  ne tells the Guardsman that she's noticed him becoming more perturbed as she responds to his advances. She says that she's not going to allow the Guardsman to lead her on without consequence, and so she kisses him.

Mezei returns and hears from the distraught Actor how the situation has reversed for the worse. The Actor asks Mezei to leave, but Mezei hides behind a velvet curtain and watches as the Actress demands to hear the Guardsman tell her that he loves her. She asks him to meet her at her home at five o'clock the next day.

The Actress goes back to her seat to watch the opera with Mama, and Doctor Mezei reveals himself. The Actor announces to Mezei that he, the Actor, is going to return from his trip at four o'clock the next day, one hour before H  l  ne's scheduled meeting with the Guardsman. The Actor confides to Mezei that he values his wife's love so much that even though it's directed towards the Guardsman and not him, he is powerless to reveal himself. The Usherette comes to the box and announces that the Guardsman's carriage has arrived. Before he leaves, the Actress comes forward

and kisses him passionately.

Act Three takes place the following afternoon, back in the salon of the Actor and Actress, right before the Actor's surprise arrival. Watch the play to find out what ensues!

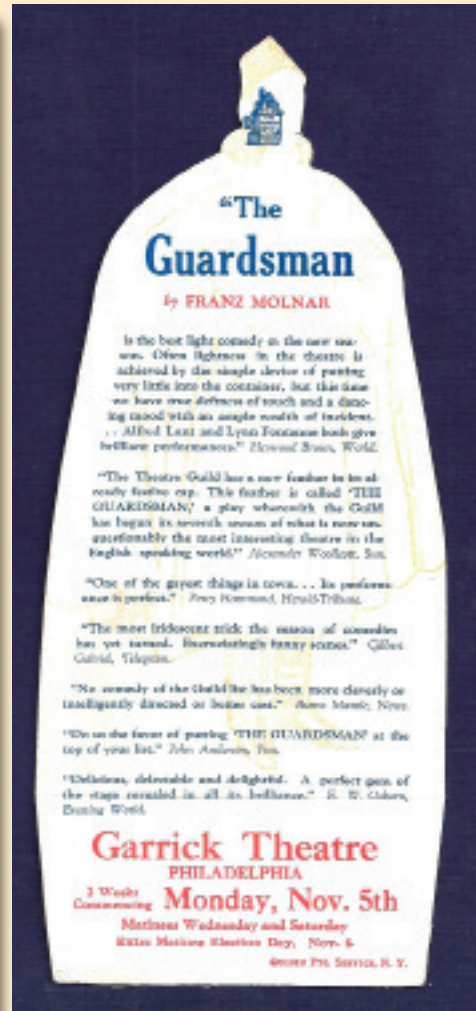




Who's Who *In the Play*



A paper doll used to advertise the Garrick Theatre's production of *The Guardsman*



THE ACTRESS (HÉLÈNE) – Budapest's foremost stage star, an actress at the height of her profession.

THE ACTOR – An actor equally as renowned as the Actress. He faced many competitors for the affection of the Actress, but in marrying her, he has triumphed over all of them.

THE CRITIC (DOCTOR MEZEI) – A drama critic and former suitor of the Actress's.

MAMA – Formerly the Actress's chaperone (an individual tasked with sitting in on meetings between the Actress and her suitors in order to prevent indecorous behavior and avoid scandal). In marrying the Actress, the Actor has rendered Mama professionally redundant, yet she remains in the Actress's household, carrying out various household tasks.

THE MAID (BETTE) – A maid in the household of the Actor and Actress.

THE DEBT COLLECTOR (MR. WEINGRUBER) – Tasked with collecting debts from actors.

THE USHERETTE (MRS. KÁDÁR) – An usher in a Budapest opera house.



Quotable:

“MOLNÁR ON THE GUARDSMAN: “[People] laughed at things of mine that weren’t made to be laughed at. I got money for it, and so I was a coward and kept quiet. The audience... laughed at a perfectly agonizing play of mine in which a lovelorn suffering actor in disguise seduces his own loose-living wife. Although, when writing it, in a hospital, I wanted to work off the most searing pain of my young life.”

–Ferenc Molnár, from *Companion in Exile*:
Notes for an Autobiography

S.N. BEHRMAN ON MOLNÁR: *“He had the poise of a man, who, in spite of wars, persecutions, and imperious personal drives, among them the almost searing dualism of the impulse to suffer and the impulse to impose suffering, had yet managed to make his life, on the whole, pretty much what he wanted it.”*

– S. N. Behrman, *The Suspended Drawing Room*

ON BUDAPEST AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY: *“In her social and architectural foundations she took after Vienna, in her cravings for wit and grace she imitated Paris, but in enterprise and sensationalism, she resembled New York.”*

– Ignotus, quoted in Ferenc Molnár by Clara Györgyey



Setting by Jo Mielziner

Photo by Francis Bruguiere

THE OPENING AND CLOSING SCENES OF THE THEATER GUILD PRODUCTION.



Historical Background: *Molnár's Budapest*

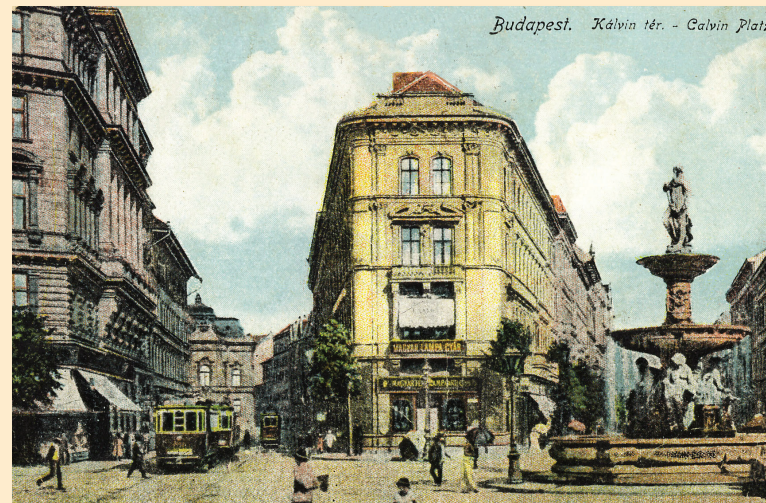
Born in Budapest just five years after Old Buda formally merged with Pest, Molnár “grew up with his city.” With the population of the city tripling over the course of forty years, and the capital itself eventually covering over eighty square miles, Budapest quickly became the largest municipality in Europe.

The union of Old Buda and Pest in 1873 reflected on a microcosmic scale the major changes that were happening throughout Hungary at that time. Old Buda housed the Royal Castle, which sat atop a hill overlooking the Danube. Pest, just on the other side of the river, was built on flat land and urbanized at a frenetic pace. In 1872, an avenue was designed with the intention of becoming one of the most beautiful boulevards in Europe, underneath which was constructed an underground railway, which would later be studied by the designers of the New York subway. Budapest had introduced electric streetcars as early as 1889, at which time a network of suburban railways was

also constructed to connect the metropolis to the towns just beyond the city's borders. The part of the city that had formerly been Pest housed boulevards, modern apartment buildings, ministries, the stock exchange, museums and universities, as well as the Houses of Parliament. Clara Györgyey writes: “Buda, the bulwark of tradition, and Pest, the vanguard of the revolution, combined the national characteristics of the country, a synthesis of aristocratic and democratic aspirations.” The glittering new city was formally recognized as a modern European metropolis during the Millennial

Exhibition in 1896 – a celebration of Hungary's thousandth year of existence which was commemorated with inaugurations, fanfares, fireworks and pageantry throughout the capital. This was the year when Molnár turned eighteen, abandoned his law studies in Geneva and returned to Budapest to become a journalist.

The modernization of the city also allowed for upward social mobility and the formation of a new urban class structure that included merchants, artisans, urbanized Hungarian gentry, industrial workers and officials of German origin. As the capital began developing, the primary language in Budapest had been German, but the newly formed bourgeoisie that lived in Budapest and grew over the course of the final few decades of the 19th century were ardent Hungarian



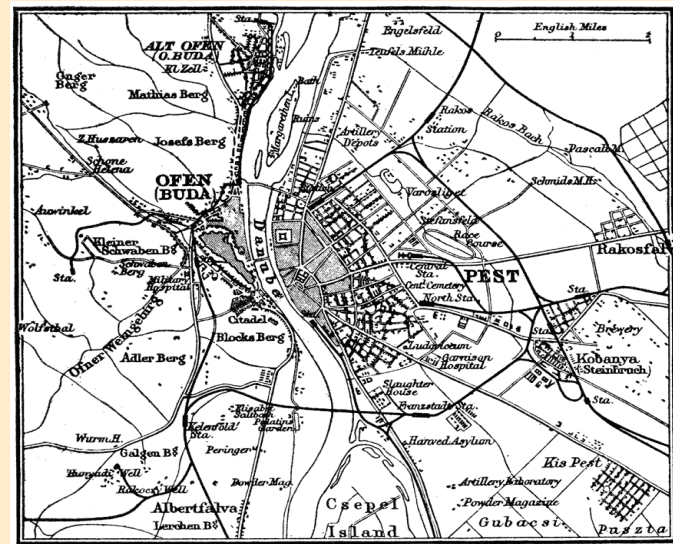
A postcard depicting a street in Budapest, circa 1910 (Wikimedia Commons)

patriots and demanded a national literature that was written in Hungarian.

Another significant factor in the restructuring of Hungarian society came following the Compromise of 1867, when the Dual Monarchy of Austro-Hungary replaced the Austrian Empire. Following the Compromise of 1867 and Jewish emancipation, a large number of Jewish people emigrated to Hungary, fleeing from anti-Semitic outbreaks in Poland and Russia. In 1840, the Jewish population in Hungary was between 150 and 200 thousand; by 1910, it had exceeded a million, and the population of the capital was one quarter Jewish. Molnár's family was part of this significant Jewish community in Budapest.

Growth and advancement were restricted primarily to the capital. Outside the city, the rest of the country still lived in "semifeudal" conditions. The expansion of capitalism situated wealth in the cities and contributed to a rapidly widening gap in both income and taste between the countryside and the city. Poverty, which was easier to bear in the country, was thrown into relief in the city, where industrial workers were destitute. In the glittering coffee houses, people could forget the squalor that they lived in. "In a word, Budapest was a classic case of sudden industrial overgrowth," writes historian Lóránt Czigány.

The rapid modernization of the capital called for an equally swift "cultural rejuvenation." Within the capital, there was a demand for literature and journals that were the equal to those in the other great capitals of Europe. Budapest demanded sophistication



Map of Budapest, circa 1914

and had high standards for its literature. New talent emerged as editors tried to satisfy the taste of the urban middle class without alienating either the aristocracy or the gentry. Molnár emerged as a leading member of the intelligentsia and a central figure in this Hungarian literary renaissance. A major struggle for many Hungarian writers leading up to this period of history was the difficulty they faced in assimilating new literary trends, such as Naturalism, Impressionism, Symbolism and Expressionism. By the time these ideas emerged organically in Hungarian literature, they were typically no longer "new" in Western Europe. For this reason, it was difficult for many Hungarian writers to achieve fame outside of their country. Molnár, writing in a style and with a tone that was at once amenable to the ear of a person in both the city and the country, and employing techniques that were new within the context of European drama at large, was the first Hungarian writer to overcome this obstacle. The atmosphere within the city treated playgoing as a mark of cultural sophistication, and Molnár's ascent to prominence, on both a local and an international scale, was spectacularly swift.

Production History

A *testőr*, (*The Guardsman*), when it first opened in 1910 at Budapest's Comedy Theater, was an instant hit. It was reported that there were twenty five curtain calls at the Budapest premiere.

The play was not initially received with the same enthusiasm on Broadway, however. The first New York production, which opened in 1913 in an English version by Philip Littell and retitled *Where Ignorance Is Bliss*, closed after only eight performances. The review in *The New York Times* lauded the text, but said that the production was "slow paced," and noted that the actor William Courtleigh, who played The Actor, "had been recruited only about a week" before opening. Though Courtleigh "did very well under the circumstances," he was "uncertain of his lines" and the performance dragged.

Eleven years after the Broadway failure, the Theatre Guild slated *The Guardsman* to open its seventh season in October 1924. The new production was adapted and directed by Philip Moeller and, in addition to utilizing the original title (*The Guardsman*), it featured Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne as the Actor and the Actress. According to Brooks Atkinson, Lunt and Fontanne played the acting couple "in a tandem performance that had the lightness of a dance and the virtuosity of a serenade." Neither one aiming to outdo the other, the performances were well balanced and the production was a tremendous popular success, playing 271

performances. The Theatre Guild production of *The Guardsman* also marked the start of Lunt and Fontanne's joint career.

The Lunt-Fontanne version was so successful that MGM bought the film rights and, in 1931, Lunt and Fontanne appeared in the film adaptation of *The Guardsman*, which also served as the only motion picture in which Lunt and Fontanne co-starred. The play was adapted for film by Ernest Vajda. Mordaunt Hall reviewed the film in the *New York Times* and lamented that "there [were] not more Fontannes, Lunts and Molnárs to help out the screen, for then this medium of entertainment would be on a far higher plane."

Two years after the 1931 film version was released, stricter film censorship laws were passed, prohibiting MGM from reissuing the film. It was impossible to re-cut the film in a way that would



please censors, as doing so would require eliminating the central ambiguity of the plot. So, in 1941, when MGM, who had the rights to Oscar Strauss's operetta *The Chocolate Soldier*, was trying to adapt the operetta for film and ran into production problems, they turned to Molnár's script. Strauss's operetta was based off of George Bernard Shaw's play *Arms and the Man*. By the time MGM was trying to adapt the operetta for film, Shaw had already decided that he did not want to see any more musical adaptations of his plays. (*My Fair Lady*, based on *Pygmalion*, was adapted after his death.) MGM already had the film rights to Molnár's play, so they used the plot of *The Guardsman* to create the film *The Chocolate Soldier*, changing the milieu to the world of musical theatre and retaining six songs from Strauss's operetta. Jeanette MacDonald had been initially been cast in the original film adaptation of *The Chocolate Soldier*, but by the time the film was being made, MacDonald had taken other roles. Instead, in the 1950s she toured a production of *The Guardsman* in which she and her husband Gene Raymond played the acting couple. MacDonald even persuaded Molnár to re-write the script of the play so that the Actress sang. Reviews of this version were mixed, though, so MacDonald and Raymond's production never got a Broadway run.

In 1997, Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey company members Scott Wentworth and Marion Adler, in conjunction with Craig Bohmler, premiered their musical adaptation of the play, *Enter the Guardsman*, at the Donmar Warehouse in London's West End. The musical made its American debut a year later at the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey and featured Robert Cuccioli and Dana

Reeve in the leading roles.

The Guardsman has been revived and performed regularly throughout the century, but never again on Broadway following Lunt and Fontanne's production. It was even adapted as a radio play in 1947 by Arthur Miller. Yet although the play has been revived regularly in both America and Europe, most productions employ texts by Philip Moeller or Frank Marcus, both of which are abridged and deviate significantly from Molnár's original text. Ms. Monte's new adaptation is the first American version created directly from a literal translation of Molnár's original Hungarian text.

The Guardsman was not the only play of Molnár's to receive a musical adaptation - In 1945, Rogers and Hammerstein adapted Molnár's play *Liliom* as the musical *Carousel*



Playwriting: *Molnár's Contemporaries*

Literary critics have traditionally dismissed Molnár for his bourgeois middle class settings and the presumed frivolity of his works. Writing in 1946, the literary critic Joseph Reményi wrote in an article for the Modern Language Association that “deeper roots are missing in Molnár. Even his affections seem to emanate from sun-baked pavements or from the inexpensive sentimentalism of expensive households...Molnár is neither unusually complex nor unduly involved...In his sense of values he reveals the luxury of spirit that sparkles like a diamond but does not have the weight of an intellectual jewel.” Despite these criticisms, Reményi acknowledges the scope of Molnár’s talent, as he was capable of producing “well-made” plays in the tradition initiated by Victorien Sardou as well as experimental plays. Indeed, by 1909, Molnár had already produced *Liliom*, an experimental play that blends realism with the supernatural and features a hero who exemplifies the paradoxes of human nature and encounters a series of setbacks that could be read as a critique of social injustice. The play, which is regarded by literary critics today to be one of his best, was a failure when it premiered in 1909. Many of his experimental works were received similarly.

Indeed, much criticism of Molnár stems from readings of his work that do not see him as critical enough of society; Reményi faulted him for “seldom tr[ying] the patience of the reader or of the audience.” The

middle-class settings of his plays, combined with the verbal wit that they exhibit and Molnár’s public personality and self-styling invited comparisons to Oscar Wilde, even during Molnár’s lifetime.

The opinion of the literary critics was not shared by Molnár’s contemporaries and other artists, however. Molnár’s preoccupation with psychology, specifically the psychological advantage that a woman may yield over a man, as exhibited in *The Guardsman*, anticipated the themes and tensions that would characterize modern drama over the course of the 20th century. Molnár repeatedly proved himself to be a master of manipulating illusion and reality in his plays - in *The Guardsman* as well as in *The Play's The Thing*, in which “an amorous encounter with an actress is overheard by her fiancé” (a famous playwright) “who then writes a play that incorporates the offending scene, thus turning the betrayal into an innocent ‘rehearsal.’” Molnár’s consistent fascination with actors, acting, and the theatre, as well as his recognition of the actor’s ability to dissemble and carry a fictitious self over into their “real life” are central to concepts of metatheatre. Bertolt Brecht, credited with creating “epic theatre” (an innovative dramatic style which allows for broad social critique by deliberately minimizing the audience’s instinctive identification with the events and characters onstage) read Molnár’s plays with interest, and George Bernard Shaw predicted that *The Guardsman* would endure with the finest works of modern playwriting. The 1934 Nobel Laureate Luigi Pirandello was also “known to have been a great admirer of Molnár’s style.” Pirandello’s 1922 play *Enrico IV*, which investigates sanity and madness, as well as concepts of performance of one’s identity, appears to reflect some of Molnár’s own artistic preoccupations.



Explore Online

Petőfi Literary Museum on Google Art Project

Browse images, manuscript pages, and other artifacts regarding major figures of Hungarian literature

<https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/collection/museum-of-literature-petofi?projectId=art-project>

The New York Public Library Digital Collection

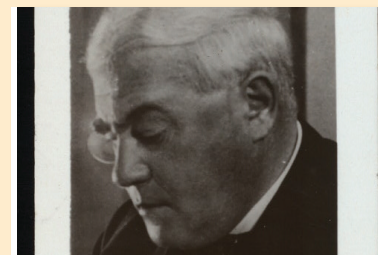
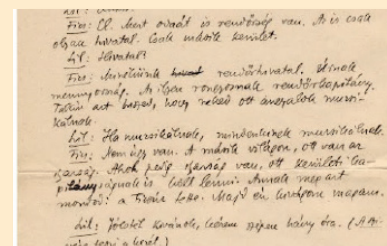
Explore a digital collection of materials relating to Molnar's work

<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/search/index?utf8=%E2%9C%93&keywords=ferenc+molnar#>

Lunt and Fontanne as the Actor and the Actress:

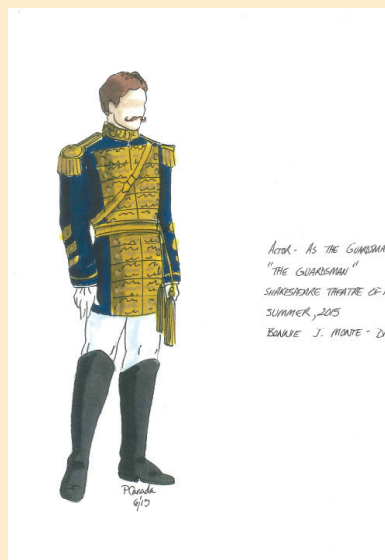
Clips from the 1931 film version of *The Guardsman*, featuring Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne

<http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/2564/The-Guardsman/videos.html>





In This Production



Above: Costume designs for The Actress and The Guardsman by Paul Canada

Right: Set model by Brittany Vasta





Notes from the Director

The Tale of a Persistent Playwright:

Given my job, odd imaginings have taken shape in my mind over the years. I have become so familiar with the work of certain playwrights that I have to come to feel like I know them as people. I count a few as some of my dearest friends. Clearly, these are the writers whose work speaks so profoundly to me that I have invited them into my heart and mind on a constant and deep level – both as an artist and as the happy recipient of their musings on humanity, all of which have helped me in my own ponderings about existence and the throng of humankind that surrounds us from the past, present and future.

The core gang of playwright-friends who live invisibly inside me include Shakespeare (obviously), Molière (who I've decided I also have a crush on!), Chekhov, Ostrovsky, Williams and Pinter. They have all entered the realm of my heart in special ways and I have tales of how each entered my life. In the case of Ferenc Molnár, I feel like he has been tugging at my sleeve for years, saying, "Let me in! I want to wiggle my way into your heart too. I want to be part of that gang." And though the tugs started many years ago, I have not let him into the "club" until now. By working on this play, I have discovered another

kindred spirit and I am glad that my internal divining rod finally led me to him.

I have a vague memory of hearing his name in theatre history class in college in regard to *The Play's the Thing* and *Lilliom* — his two most well-known plays. I didn't give him another thought until I cast a production of his play *Tale of the Wolf* at Williamstown many years ago. The late, wonderful Edward Herrmann played opposite Blythe Danner in that show and I loved it, but still I did not investigate his work any further. Many years later, I dated a Hungarian man who claimed to be a distant relative of Molnár. I remember thinking I should read some of his plays. I didn't. Then two of my living, real friends asked me if The Shakespeare Theatre would be interested in producing the American premiere of *Enter the Guardsman*, their new musical based on Molnár's original *The Guardsman*. We were interested and we did produce it. It was a delightful piece of fun fluff, and it introduced Bob Cuccioli to our theatre. We paired him up with the luminous and deeply-missed Dana Reeve, and audiences loved it. I read the play that the musical was based on at the time, and I remember thinking that it was not a good translation. I suspected that the original was probably far better, but I investigated no further. Then I dated another guy who claimed to be a distant relative of Molnár, and I thought, "Well, that's weird. How many distant relatives does this Hungarian have?" Then we produced *The Play's the Thing* on our Main Stage in 2007. In reading the various translations/adaptations of that show, I once again suspected they were not doing the



original text justice. This was, I admit, just a gut feeling, and I still did nothing. Lots of nudging from Molnár, but I didn't really pay attention until this year, when for a multitude of reasons we decided to produce *The Guardsman*.

When I made the decision to produce the play, I did so with the intention of finding someone who could provide a literal English translation from the original Hungarian because I was so unhappy with all of the existing English versions that I had read. I planned to then write a new adaptation for the stage based on that literal translation. And then, a most fortuitous thing happened. Molnár must have been doing a lot of cosmic networking, because one day in February, I came across an obscure, random reference to the theory that Harold Pinter had been inspired to write his play *The Lover* after reading Molnár's *The Guardsman*. Well, that blew my mind, and I suddenly felt like a detective, hot on the trail of something huge, with an incredible lead that needed to be investigated. I read *The Lover* (one of the few Pinter plays I hadn't yet read) and realized that if Molnár's play had indeed been the inspiration for it, then I definitely needed to get hold of a translations from the original Hungarian. I needed to see for myself if the more profound play that I suspected was there, was indeed a reality. That's when my secret band of brothers must have conspired to help Molnár. Out of the blue, I received an email from Los Angeles, from a man introducing himself as Molnár's great grand-son, telling me that he had read that I was directing the play, and he offered up the use of a piece of music that Molnár had written for his mother when he was very young.

He also mentioned that he had created literal translations of four of Molnár's plays, including *The Guardsman*! It was at this point that I consciously felt that Molnár was actually reaching out to me. Yes, my imagination does run riot!

To make a very long story short, Gábor Lukin, a musician, and indeed Molnár's great grand-son, graciously granted me permission, along with the Molnár Trust, to use his literal version as the basis from which to create my adaptation. I worked on the script all spring and have gathered round me a superlative cast to give the play a life that I hope will make Molnár very happy. He was known to say that he was unhappy that people were constantly reducing it to mere romantic farce and ignoring its deeper implications. And it is true; historically, the play has mostly been diminished over the years by those wanting only to deal with the play's outer shell, and its extraordinary provocative, ground-breaking, heart-breaking, and disturbing inner core have been ignored as far as I can tell – except perhaps, by Mr. Pinter.

A Comedy of Agony:

Albert Bermel wrote an excellent essay called "The Comic Agony in Pirandello." It is very specific to Pirandello, but it essentially applies to a whole genre and whole group of diverse playwrights, and it certainly applies to Molnár. As I mention above, I sensed there was far more to *The Guardsman* than met the eye in the many terrible translations that are kicking about, and indeed, there is an inner-core of agony at the center of this play that is palpable.



And yet, it is very funny. Both the plot conceit and the dialogue are funny – it is essentially comedic throughout, whether one is dealing with the “outer play” or the “inner one” but it is a special brand of comedy and one that can turn your blood cold on a dime.

Samuel Johnson said of Shakespeare, “[he] has united the powers of exciting laughter and sorrow not only in one mind but in one composition. Almost all of his plays are divided between serious and ludicrous characters, and, in the successive evolution of the design, sometimes produce seriousness and sorrow, and sometimes levity and laughter.” Bermel in his essay goes on to quote Shaw, “In King Lear we find the alternation of tragic and funny dropped for an actual interweaving of the two; so that we have the tragic and the comic simultaneously, each heightening the other with a poignancy otherwise unattainable.” Bermel then says, “In separating “alternation” from “interweaving” Shaw catches an essential distinction between tragicomedy and what I would call “the comic agony” in plays, between what Johnson means by “successive evolutions in the design” and what Shaw calls simultaneous interweaving of comic and tragic threads in a fabric that is iridescent, indebted to both their colorings yet unlike one another. In this essay, ‘Tragi-Comedy,’ Eric Bentley adverts to more or less the same mix when he refers to “that comedy which is infused with gloom and ends badly, that tragedy which is shot through with a comedy that only makes the outlook still bleaker.”

Whether *The Guardsman* is more an agonized comedy or a very funny tragedy is up to each viewer. But it is indeed an iridescent and glorious melding of both — as is life. This is a play that poses terribly disturbing questions at the same time that it provokes gales of laughter, and it is meta-theatrical in the purest sense. I hope I will someday have the time and space to write more about this amazing play that questions identity, reality, perception and what it takes to validate our existence. It is a play that deals with physical and emotional masks, our addiction to drama and high emotion, our penchant for voyeurism and vicarious experience, the agony of love, the elusive nature of it, the beauty and cruelty of it, and the emptiness of those who cannot feel it or find it. It is interesting to know that the play was written in response to a relationship that the young Molnár was having with Hungary’s leading actress at the time. It resulted in his attempting suicide. It is about all this and more. It has no answers; it is an enigma that keeps getting more and more complex. I adore this play. And I am most happy to welcome Mr. Molnár into my heart, where he will now reside with the other esteemed men and women who take up residence there. I’m so sorry it took me so long to open that door for him!





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