

Zsigmond MÓRICZ: F O R T U N A T U S
A historical play in 3 acts

(Fortunátus)

Cast: 9 actors, 6 actresses, extras
Setting: 1
Premiered: Sándor Hevesi Theatre, Zalaegerszeg
March 6, 1987

It is curious to see among the Hungary premieres of a season, all of them plays by contemporary playwrights, an odd piece from 1912, a drama, to boot, that was authored, not by an obscure writer, but by a classic of modern Hungarian prose writing, Zsigmond Móricz /1879-1942/. Despite its belated discovery, this drama, regarded at the time it was written as too fierce, too raw and exuberant for contemporary tastes, has established a hold on the stage that promises to be a lasting one as it seems to strike a chord in today's audiences who display a sensitivity to both the theme and the tone of the piece.

The title lead, Imre Fortunátus, was a historical figure, the great self-made man of 16th century Hungary: a humble Jew, a social outcast, who rose - following conversion to Chatholicism, of course - to become a great lord, chief treasurer to Louis II of Hungary /1506-1526/. In 1526, Louis, then aged 20, was disastrously defeated on a battlefield in southern Hungary by Suleiman I of Turkey /and was killed - or murdered? - in flight/. Louis's defeat laid Hungary open to Turkish domination. Fortunatus's fabulous career followed its course against the backdrop of a country's headlong rush into national disaster. In his drama, Móricz presents the clash between a modern Renaissance man of ceaseless activity, of humanist thinking, and with a zest for life, and the sluggish and ruthless feudal attitude of the backward great nobles that dominated the Hungarian realities of the day. And he sought to demonstrate that no matter which way this conflict was going to be decided in 1525, one year before the catastrophe, it was belated and without significance.

The plot lays stress on one of the many traits of Fortunatus's complex character - his admiration for women, as being the most characteristic trait of Renaissance man. Three women are in love with the protagonist; they are the wife of Drághffy, a great lord, her niece Benigna, and Dinah, a Jewish girl, who sees a new Messiah in the powerful lord who came from her people. Strangely enough, Fortunatus, with a rapture that is at once sensual and sublimated, re-

fined, loves all three of them, and, contrary to the feudal lords, who despise women, sees in them the desirable body and the humiliated soul that longs for support and companionship.

Drághffy, a narrow-minded, violent baron, discovers the adultery. It is always an easy exercise to trump up charges against Jews: he and his bigoted and blood-thirsty mother want Fortunatus burnt at the stake. Crafty manoeuvring from Draghffy's amorous wife manages to get the execution put off, giving Fortunatus just enough time: he sends word to the Hungarian barons, promising to get back for them a sum of one million florins that the German merchant prince Fugger misappropriated - and promptly, the Primate himself, the Archbishop of Esztergom, arrives in person to set him free. The great barons, it is true, happen to be in a huddle trying to decide what should be done to save the nation from the approaching disaster, but that notwithstanding, they are eager to lay their hands on the money, which they are sure to squander away. Fortunatus is set free; what is more, he is glorified, and turns his back on his three women. But his glory will not last longer than that of the country which, in contrast to him, no one thinks of delivering from its sad plight.