

GYULA ILLYÉS: THE FAVOURITE

A play in two parts and five scenes

First produced at the Madách Theatre Budapest on April 26th 1968

Directed by László Vámos, sets designed by Emil Siki,
costumes designed by Márta Jánoskúti
9 male and 2 female parts

The same subject, using the same title, was made into a play by László Teleki the outstanding 19th century Hungarian statesman. Gyula Illyés wrote a new play based on the same ancient material, he made Teleki's message his own, saying in contemporary language, to a contemporary public, all that Teleki wished to say about tyranny to his own contemporaries.

We are in fifth century Rome, at the corrupt court of the Emperor Valentinian III. The Emperor, made mad by power, had just arranged for Aetius to be killed, Aetius, the victor of Chalons, who had saved the Empire. Senator Petronius Maximus, Valentinian's unconditional supporter, tries to excuse this deed to the rebellious Fulgentius. In spite of his faults, he sees the Emperor as the person who embodies the United Empire. Maximus is the only person who still believes in the Roman Empire, whose every action is in the interests of the dynasty.

The Emperor however has looked with lust on Julia, the beautiful wife of Maximus. With the help of a false game of dice worked out by the eunuch Heradius he wins Maximus' money, and also the ring with which Maximus calls his wife at night. The ring is used to entice the unsuspecting woman to the palace. When Julia returns home next morning Maximus attacks her in jealous anger, and accuses her of infidelity. She however says that Maximus is responsible, and leaves her husband's house.

The Senate and the people become more and more rebellious because of the Emperor's mindless killings. Fulgentius would like Maximus to lead the revolt against the Emperor, but Maximus will have none of that. Valentinianus calls Maximus to the palace and demands that he voluntarily and finally renounce Julia, and marry Eudoxia, the Empress, instead.

Maximus realizes that there is no compromising with the tyrant. The rebellious people and the Senate defeat the Imperial Bodyguard, and the Emperor is left alone with Maximus, who confronts the Emperor with all the evil he has done. He is about to stab him, but a bodyguard does the bloody deed in his place. Julia who fled to the palace before the mob attacking the women's quarters, takes poison, knowing she could never regain Maximus. She says dying: "One cannot even serve gods by mocking men." Maximus is proclaimed Emperor by the victorious rebels, he however is not prepared to accept and commits suicide instead.