

A Shadowy Kinship:

Ferenc Molnár and Arthur Schnitzler

By Barry Singer

A shadowy kinship has haunted Ferenc Molnár and Arthur Schnitzler for almost a century now, predating their shared spiritual occupancy of Lincoln Center Theater (Schnitzler, through his play *Reigen*, or *La Ronde*, adapted as the musical *Hello Again*, at the Mizzi E. Newhouse Theater this past winter; Molnár through his work *Liliom* currently at the Vivian Beaumont Theater in the guise of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel*). As Central Europe's most admired dramatists before World War II, Molnár and Schnitzler certainly knew of one another. Since their work was produced by the same distinguished theatrical companies across Europe, they probably even met—though no specific anecdote of any encounter has survived. The two also shared similar Hungarian-Jewish lineage. Schnitzler, the son of a prominent Jewish physician, was born in Vienna on May 15, 1862; Molnár, the son of a prosperous Jewish merchant, was born "Ferenc Neumann" on January 12, 1878 in Budapest (he changed his name when he was eighteen).

To comprehend Ferenc Molnár, the creator of such light entertainment as *The Play's the Thing* and *The Guardsman*, it is necessary to know how, in 1909, he came to write *Liliom*. Just out of his twenties, a rake and a boulevardier of immodest renown, Molnár was already Hungary's pre-eminent newspaperman, the author of two successful novels, numerous short stories, and a handful of gracefully witty comedic plays. One evening in late summer, monogled and impeccable, he strode into his favorite Budapest cafe, improbably named the "New York Cafe" (for the New York Life Insurance Company, whose five story "skyscraper" headquarters housed this street-level outpost), took his usual seat at his usual table and ordered, as usual, a lavish dinner.

The meal ended, Molnár's writing day began. He would compose at least twenty plays seated at a marble-topped table in this otherwise unfashionable corner of the New York Cafe ("Siberia," as it was known,

for the penniless Hungarian dancers, newly returned from exhausting tours of Russia, who gathered there to cadge a meal). An inveterate student of unfortunates and a sedentary fancier of far-off places, Molnár was utterly at home in "Siberia."

On this particular summer evening, it was Molnár's own widely-read newspaper column that furnished him with after-dinner inspiration. The column, often composed of reconstructed conversations—overheard by Molnár—between colorful Budapest locals, regularly supplied the playwright with dialogue for his plays. Tonight, a recent exchange from the column between two servant girls discussing their respective men, ignited Molnár's dramatic imagination. He wrote till dawn. Three weeks later, *Liliom* was finished: a stark tragicomedy of star-crossed lovers and marital abuse unblinkingly focused on a roughneck carnival carousel barker named Liliom and his silent suffering wife, Julie. The play opened in Budapest at the Gaiety Theatre on September 5, 1909 and closed ignominiously twenty-six nights later. The familiar Molnár diversion audiences had expected to see, proved itself a vexing, even distressing, evening of drama. For the moment, Budapest theatergoers could not bring themselves to embrace it.

Arthur Schnitzler did not write plays in cafes, though early in his career he apparently frequented them, particularly his native Vienna's literary Caffe Griensteidl. A practicing physician of widely acknowledged brilliance and an editor and writer for medical journals, Schnitzler was a confidant of Freud's and, increasingly, an author of critically acclaimed plays, short stories and novelettes, under the pen name "Anatol." Like Molnár, he was a brilliant conversationalist, a man of the world, whose theatrical characters revealed themselves, often inadvertently, in conversation. While Molnár's dialogue sparkled with surface wit, Schnitzler's characters illuminated the bitter realities underlying everyday discourse. Both men considered their respective metropolitan cultures amoral and frivolous, yet both found fascination in the play-acting, the

games, that propelled them. Molnár pointedly celebrated the vacuity beneath the gloss as something dizzying, lighter than air. For Schnitzler this falseness always was tinged with wistful melancholy, purchased at certain cost.

How the author of such luridly elegant exercises as *Intermezzo* and *Undiscovered Country* came to write *Reigen*—a terse cycle of ten dramatic dialogues, each between a man and woman, each culminating in the sexual act—is not known. The question was of little initial consequence since the play's explicit, vigorously dishonorable sexuality virtually assured *Reigen*'s suppression. No public performance of the piece in its entirety was presented until 1912, twelve years after *Reigen*'s completion. A Vienna premiere in 1921 was accompanied by riots that closed the production down, riots led by the Christian Socialist Party protesting, not the play's subject matter, but its author's adamant Judaism.

While the majority of Molnár's plays, like many of Schnitzler's, are set in upper class drawing rooms, *Liliom*, a play mined in the lives of the working class, is thematically and stylistically perhaps Molnár's most Schnitzler-like creation. Where Molnár, the dramatist, was generally loquacious, *Liliom*, like *Reigen*, is curt, even cruelly stated. Where Molnár, the moralist, was often forgiving, *Liliom* is unrelenting.

Yet *Liliom* and *Reigen*, in their similarities, also embody Molnár's and Schnitzler's diverse philosophical perspectives:

"A lonely place in the park half-hidden by trees and shrubbery," wrote Molnár, in introducing *Acacia*'s first scene... "Under a flowering acacia tree stands a painted wooden bench... From the distance, faintly, comes the tumult of the amusement park. The calliope plays. It is sunset."

"A path leading from the amusement park out into dark avenues of trees," wrote Schnitzler, in his stage directions for *Reigen*'s second scene. "...Sunday evening... The din of the amusement park is audible. So is the sound of a banal polka played by a brass band."

For Molnár, this vaguely disquieting setting is a place where true love will blossom, however ominously, however ill-

fated. For Schnitzler, in his similarly imagined setting (Molnár's later inspiration?), this disquiet is all—the scene for a seduction in which the suggestive promise of evil will find inexorable consummation in near rape. The crux of both plays? The essence of romantic love—for Molnár, potentially violent but also potentially transcendent, for Schnitzler, inevitably violent and brutally short-lived.

On the evening of January 12, 1940, his sixty-second birthday, Ferenc Molnár arrived in New York City on board an Italian steamship. Exiled from his beloved Budapest since September 1937 by the oncoming Nazis, Molnár's desperate flight had carried him from the hopeful and familiar haven of his regular room at the Hotel Danieli in Venice, to the fleeting safety of a strange hotel room in Geneva, to resignation, and America, as a refuge of last resort.

Dockside in New York, Molnár was met by his amicably estranged third wife, the Hungarian actress Lili Darvas, along with four old cronies from the New York Cafe in Budapest. They escorted him directly to the Plaza Hotel, where a suite had been reserved, a suite Molnár would inhabit with a bon vivant's conviviality and an exile's nostalgic rue, until his death on April 1, 1952.

By the time Molnár took up residence in New York, *Liliom* had been revived to extraordinary international approbation, receiving at least two thousand performances in Budapest, almost a thousand performances in the United States, where it debuted on Broadway, in April, 1921, and countless productions in nearly every other country in the world. Four years after Molnár's arrival, *Liliom* was brought to the attention of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein by the play's original American producer, the Theatre Guild. Their musical adaptation, *Carousel*, after opening on Broadway in 1945, would in time eclipse both *Liliom* itself and its originator, Ferenc Molnár, almost completely.

Arthur Schnitzler's latter years were spent, like Molnár's, in luxurious semi-seclusion; for Schnitzler, a resplendent mountaintop villa overlooking Vienna. A frequent target of anti-semitism, Schnitzler finally retreated from Vienna society to write, in his own words, "as a



Photo by Weisberg

THE POLICERAID

by Ferenc Molnár

German writer of Jewish origin," also shifting away from playwriting to fiction after World War I shattered the world that had provided Schnitzler with most of the settings and characters for his drama. He died on October 21, 1931, fatally traumatized by the suicide of his married daughter one year before. In the year following his death, Schnitzler's writings were outlawed by the Nazi party in Germany and, shortly thereafter, in Austria.

In the United States, *Reigen* remained on the New York State Censorship Board's forbidden list, banned from this country for obscenity. The ruling was ironically redundant. Determined that his perverse creation should not posthumously obscure perception of his work, Schnitzler, just prior to his death, banned all further performances of *Reigen* worldwide. Since then, the play has only rarely been produced, with the playwright's heirs laboring dutifully—in the name of Schnitzler's self-imposed censorship—to keep it off the stage. ♦

Barry Singer is the proprietor of Chartwell Booksellers, an independent bookstore in New York City. He is the author of *Black and Blue: The Life and Lyrics of Andy Razaf* (Schirmer Books).

If what follows had been told by the woman whom this story is about, it would belong among those mysterious stories which have no rational explanation. The way I am telling it—the way it really happened—is just an ordinary "episode" in a journalist's life. As a story, it ends, not with a moral lesson but with a puppet's stiff and gloomy grin.

We, the young journalists, had a reserved table in a small restaurant where we regularly met for lunch. One day, at this table restricted for bachelors, an older colleague appeared with his wife. They seemed to be nervous and in a bad mood. Not wasting any time, they explained why they joined us for lunch. Simply stated, a minor tragedy had occurred in their household: without further notice they dismissed their cook this morning.

—She cooked magnificently, said the wife, but I could not tolerate her bad manners. This morning I had an argument with her in the kitchen; in her rage, in front of my eyes, she