

# An American Investor in the Theatre Industry of Budapest

## Ben Blumenthal (1883–1967): A Personal and Professional Biography

Gyöngyi Heltai 

Vietnam National University, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, (VNU-USSH), 336 Nguyễn Trãi Str., Thanh Xuân Dist., Hanoi, Vietnam; [heltaigy@hotmail.com](mailto:heltaigy@hotmail.com)

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**Abstract.** In the interwar period, an American theatre and film entrepreneur had a determinant impact on the private theatre sector of Budapest. Ben Blumenthal (1883–1967) ran the *Vígszínház* (Comedy Theatre) in 1920–1926 and owned its building in 1920–1949. In addition, Blumenthal financed the operation of the *Fővárosi Operettszínház* (Budapest Operetta Theatre) in 1922–1926. Although from a global perspective, Blumenthal does not belong to the group of legendary US theatre or movie producers, in the context of Hungarian theatre culture, he was the most influential mediator in Hungarian–American cultural relations. The study aims to piece together the undiscovered elements of Blumenthal’s personal and professional biography and to discuss how his activities were evaluated from the American and the Hungarian perspectives.

Special emphasis will be given to the US and Hungarian entertainment press: Blumenthal’s interviews on his Hungarian theatres, articles on Blumenthal’s position in the transnational producers’ hierarchy, and representation of the *Vígszínház* in the US entertainment press. The aim is to assess the significance of Blumenthal’s Budapest business activities within his entire career.

**Keywords:** theatre managers’ biography, Hungarian–American cultural relations, *Vígszínház*–Paramount cooperation, transnational theatre history, US entertainment press

In the interwar period, several Hungarian playwrights and actors rose to important positions in the cosmopolitan theatre and film industry. While we know about the international careers of Ferenc Molnár, Menyhért Lengyel, and Marika Rökk, the managers, producers, and agents coordinating the cultural transfers of Hungarian creative artists are mainly forgotten. There were, however, several important aspects of Hungarian–American cultural relations where the study of the theatre managers’ transcultural activity can be justified, especially because the principal aim of Hungarian cultural diplomacy in the interwar period was to spread cultural propaganda, more

precisely, the promotion of Hungarian cultural supremacy abroad. The paper discusses the role of a US theatre and film entrepreneur who had a unique impact on the commercial theatre life of Budapest. Ben Blumenthal ran the *Vígszínház* (Comedy Theatre) in 1920–1926, the *Fővárosi Operettszínház* (Budapest Operetta Theatre) in 1922–1926, and owned the building of the *Vígszínház* in 1920–1950 (?). Blumenthal's closest Hungarian associate was Imre Roboz, who thanks to his US film and theatre connections, became a leading figure in the interwar commercial theatre sector. Roboz served as vice-president (1921–1931) and later as president of the Budapest Theatre Managers' Association (1932–1938). After 1926, he ran the *Vígszínház* himself but maintained a close professional relationship with the owner of the building. Both Blumenthal and Roboz were mediators who initiated active and mutually useful Hungarian–American theatre and film relations. When examining this transatlantic link by exploiting the *Vígszínház* archive, my previous research papers have mostly focused on the target Hungarian culture and examined Imre Roboz's activity and motives.<sup>1</sup> This paper, in turn, will concentrate on Ben Blumenthal's incomplete biography and his position within the global and local entertainment business hierarchy. Special emphasis will be given to the American and Hungarian entertainment press. I intend to sketch the cultural and political frameworks where Blumenthal played a role. By presenting and contextualizing the limited information available about the periods of his long career in transatlantic commercial entertainment, I hope to explain the different dynamics of his evaluation in the Hungarian and US public sphere.

## Research context

Following the anti-commercial bias in theatre history, the activity of theatre managers and producers has recently become a popular research topic.<sup>2</sup> These personalities are often examined from the perspective of transnational, connected, or global history. The theatre and film history books and papers I will refer to have all examined some aspects of my actual research. For determining the influences that appear to have formed Blumenthal's vision of a private theatre's operation, we have an abundance of studies, as American theatre history has often dealt with economic aspects of producing a show.<sup>3</sup> My review of the Broadway management techniques starts at the point

1 Heltai, "Az »idegen nyelvű beszélőfilm« szerepe a pesti magánszínházak válságában"; Heltai, "A világháború kitörésének hatása a pesti színházi ipar nemzetközi kapcsolatrendszerére"; Heltai, "Die Krisenlindernde Rolle des internationalen Beziehungssystems"; Heltai, "A politikai beavatkozás szintjei"; Heltai, "Színházi »átállítás«"; Heltai, "Roboz Imre és a Vígszínház nemzetközi kapcsolatrendszere az 1930-as években"; Heltai, "Transznacionális hatások a Fővárosi Operettszínház korai korszakában (1921–1926)"; Heltai, "Az épület hagyománya – a hagyomány épülete."

2 MacDonald, ed., *The Palgrave Handbook of Musical Theatre Producers*; Balme, *The globalization of theatre 1870–1930*.

3 Poggi, *Theatre in America: The Impact of Economic Forces*.

when “like the new industrial capitalists, these men [the managers] attempted, with varying degrees of success, to create networks of business entertainment that integrate all aspects of the industry into an expansive, unified system of production, distribution, exhibition, and reception.”<sup>4</sup> The development of different theatre business models in the US meant a transition from the “resident stock repertory company” to the “combination system.” This model-change was stimulated by the recognized profitability of the star system and of the combination shows, originating in New York and traveling along major railroad routes, “the Road.” Because of industrialization in the commercial theatre, the combination company developed into the standard producing unit and the “long-run” became the principal goal of a show. The Theatrical Syndicate, that monopolized theatre booking, represented structural centralization. This business environment created tough rivalry among producers and managers. We may suppose that this background influenced Blumenthal when in 1920 he entered the Budapest private theatre sector. However, the interpretation of the theatre in Hungary entailed different, not primarily economic concepts, such as regarding the theatre as a tool of nation-building and cultural self-expression.<sup>5</sup>

Another research direction pertinent for my topic is the phenomenon that Broadway producers and entrepreneurs who founded Hollywood often came from immigrant Jewish families. Stewart Lane discusses the background of the most important Jewish entrepreneurs who prepared the expansion of the Broadway theatre district in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Lane notes that Charles Frohman “ran six New York theatres and controlled numerous others around the country as well as some in London. [...] The Shubert Brothers, Sam, Jacob, and Lee, were also Jewish immigrants who came to the United States with their parents in the late nineteenth century.”<sup>6</sup> This cultural and ethnic background was typical of the founders of the Hollywood studio system, Adolph Zukor, Louis Mayer, Samuel Goldwyn, and the Warner Brothers. Adolph Zukor, the future president of Paramount emigrated from the territory of Hungary and played a non-negligible role in connecting the Jewish Ben Blumenthal to Budapest. Imre Roboz’s professional career and personal fate were also determined by his Jewish roots. Blumenthal’s closest collaborator was the president of the Budapest Theatre Directors’ Association in 1932–1938, but the anti-Jewish laws introduced in Hungary deprived him and several of his colleagues of their positions and gradually excluded them from the theatrical life.<sup>7</sup>

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4 Bigsby, *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*, 160.

5 Heltai, “...ott tanult meg a pesti ember magyarul nevetni és magyarul sírni”; Heltai, “Népszínház a nemzetépítésben.”

6 Lane, *Jews on Broadway*, 22.

7 Heltai, “Színházi »átállítás«”, Heltai, “A politikai beavatkozás szintjei.”

Another aspect of Blumenthal's biography is related to Robert W. McLaughlin's book that discusses the economic interaction between Broadway and Hollywood, the theatre, and the film industry. McLaughlin examines the impact of the motion picture industry on theatre shows as a process that started as a rivalry, only to develop into a network of economic ties. The turning point was the recognition of mutual advantages. For example, owning the film rights of a play meant several extra financial possibilities for a theatre manager or producer. Hollywood was also "looking eagerly toward the theatre and expecting it to deliver future film properties and many companies have entered into extended financial arrangements with Broadway producers."<sup>8</sup> Both Blumenthal and Roboz employed these practices, as they owned the US film rights of the plays that had premiered in the *Vígszínház* and aspired to sell these theatrical goods to Hollywood companies. They knew the rules of the game as both had started their careers in the transnational export-import of silent films.<sup>9</sup>

During and after World War I, Blumenthal's companies (Export and Import Company, Hamilton Theatrical Corporation) were closely related to the Famous Players-Lasky (later Paramount). In the early 1920s, the Paramount Corporation became a global player, with studios in New York, Hollywood, London, and Bombay, and opening offices in several cities of the world, including Budapest. Desley Deacon's article *'Films as Foreign Offices': Transnationalism at Paramount in the Twenties and Early Thirties* reveals that some Hollywood producers were not exclusively motivated by generating profit. For example, Walter Wanger, Paramount's New York-based general manager of production in the 1920s and early 1930s had ideological goals, like promoting cosmopolitanism by films. Wanger, who came from the intellectual elite, had the ambition to reconcile making a profit "with the production of greater world knowledge, world acquaintanceship, and hence, world peace."<sup>10</sup> He supported films with a documentary component, setting them in foreign locales, and "by developing a cosmopolitan style that was not identifiable as American, French, German, or British, though it borrowed elements from each of these."<sup>11</sup> Deacon argues that Wanger saw the film as a potential tool for achieving universal peace after World War I. Did Ben Blumenthal have this intellectual ambition in his Budapest activities or was his motivation purely profit-oriented?

In any case, Blumenthal's reception in the Hungarian public sphere reacted—positively or negatively—to the growing transatlantic influence of US mass culture. Victoria de Grazia analyzes "The American Challenge to European Cinemas, 1920–1960" and emphasizes the influence of US production methods: "During the

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8 McLaughlin, *Broadway and Hollywood: A History of Economic Interaction*, 6.

9 Heltai, "Roboz Imre és a Vígszínház nemzetközi kapcsolattrendszere."

10 Deacon, "Films as foreign offices," 143.

11 Deacon, "Films as foreign offices," 143.

1920s and 1930s, America's movie industry offered an entirely new paradigm for organizing cultural production on industrial lines: what Fordism was to global car manufacturing, the Hollywood studio system was to promoting a mass-produced, internationally marketed cultural commodity.<sup>12</sup> The reactions to Blumenthal's appearance in the Hungarian private theatre sector demonstrated both the political and the cultural opposition to this cultural imperialism and the counter-arguments that interpreted US influence as a necessary precondition for modernization.

The book that directly inspired my research is Marlis Schweitzer's, *Transatlantic Broadway. The Infrastructural Politics of Global Performance*.<sup>13</sup> It examines the Broadway managers' activity as a representation of the globalization of popular entertainment in the first decades of the twentieth century. Schweitzer shows how the entertainment producers used the new technologies (ocean liners, telegrams, and wireless telegraphy) to operate their transnational export-import networks, and specialized in buying and selling theatrical and film goods. Ben Blumenthal was a typical representative of these business activities. The entertainment press interpreted his regular transatlantic business trips as an exemplary practice for spreading US influence and culture.

### **Budapest theatres under Ben Blumenthal's management**

Although the professionalization and specialization of theatres in Hungary happened only at the end of the nineteenth century, Budapest became an exporter of theatrical goods surprisingly quickly. Imre Kálmán and Ferenc Lehár raised the Austro-Hungarian operetta to international status. Between 1896 and 1907, five private theatres were built, among them the *Vígszínház*, whose modern building, designed by Ferdinand Fellner and Hermann Helmer, imitated Parisian models and demonstrated the newly acquired metropolitan character of the Hungarian capital. Operating as a resident stock repertory company, the *Vígszínház* soon gained a leading position. From its opening in 1896 to 1920, a Hungarian entrepreneur, Gábor Faludi, owned, operated, and managed the theatre. The repertoire consisted mainly of import comedies by Bisson, Duval, Hennequin, and Valabrégue. Young Hungarian writers and journalists who translated these French boulevard comedies soon mastered the Parisian dramaturgical techniques and started to produce successful local plays. The unexpected international careers of the so-called in-house playwrights of the *Vígszínház* (for example, Ferenc Molnár and Menyhért Lengyel) were mainly due to a theatre agent, Sándor Marton, who established his copyright firm in 1910 and continued as one of the closest business partners of the *Vígszínház*.

12 Grazia, "Mass Culture and Sovereignty," 56.

13 Schweitzer, *Transatlantic Broadway*.

In the wake of the political crises following the World War I (the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the Hungarian Soviet Republic, and the Trianon Treaty), the theatre and film industry in Hungary was in deep financial trouble, and Gábor Faludi decided to sell his theatre to an American entrepreneur. At the time, Ben Blumenthal worked for the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation as a sales representative and was one of the negotiators in the talks with former employees of UFA (*Universum Film-Aktien Gesellschaft*), which led to the founding of a German–American film company, the European Film Alliance, that “helped the expansion of the Paramount Publix Corporation in Central and Eastern Europe.”<sup>14</sup> By purchasing the *Vígszínház*, then financing the operation of an operetta theatre (*Fővárosi Operettszínház*) in the Hungarian capital, Blumenthal most probably wanted to put together a theatre trust, an organizational form typical of Broadway.

In 1922, Blumenthal opened a new operetta theatre (*Fővárosi Operettszínház*) in a city with a population of 930,000, where the number of regular theatregoers on weekdays was 8,000, and on weekends about 16,000. Among the thirteen theatres in operation in 1923, three were devoted to operetta: *Király Színház* (King’s Theatre), *Városi Színház* (Municipal Theatre), and *Blaha Lujza Színház* (Blaha Lujza Theatre), meaning that the genre was a vital element of the local mass culture. The first archival source about Blumenthal’s planned investment in operetta was a letter dated 22 August 1920, only two months after the Treaty of Trianon was signed on 4 June 1920.<sup>15</sup> This tragic background could explain that despite the almost unlimited financial resources provided by Blumenthal for rebuilding the former music hall to a modern operetta theatre, it took a year and a half to obtain all the necessary permits from the state and municipal authorities for the opening. Blumenthal’s leaseholder company (*Fővárosi Színház Ltd.*) was established by Imre Roboz on 29 September 1921. The owner of the music-hall building was a bank *Folyószámla Leszámítoló Bank Ltd.* (Current Account Calculation Bank Ltd.) that leased its property for ten years. The contract stipulated that the *Fővárosi Színház Ltd.* (Municipal Theatre Ltd.) should pay ten percent of its revenue as a leasing fee. Although Blumenthal’s name did not appear on the petitions submitted by the leaseholder company (*Fővárosi Színház Ltd.*) to the government and municipal authorities, the probable cause of the rejection was the foreign producer. The debates about the new operetta theatre reached the sessions of Parliament.<sup>16</sup>

The appearance of a US investor in the Budapest private theatre scene seemed useful for financial reasons, but frightening from the perspective of homogeneous national art production. As no other Budapest theatre was foreign-owned,

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14 Horak, “Rin-Tin-Tin in Berlin,” 53.

15 OSZK SZT Irattár 374.

16 *Nemzetgyűlési Napló*. 11 January 1923, 190.

Blumenthal, a Jewish American who viewed theatre as commercial entertainment, had to face many attacks from Hungarian politicians and intellectuals who considered theatre as art or as a nation-building tool.

### Business relations between Imre Roboz and Ben Blumenthal

During the entire Blumenthal era, Imre Roboz was the managing director of the two theatres, as Blumenthal lived abroad and sent his instructions from New York or London. After examining the archive of the *Vígszínház*, it appears that in this relationship, Roboz was a loyal, well-paid but strictly controlled employee. Roboz received such peremptory telegrams from the owner: “Send Mrs. Blumenthal Paris balance monies immediately Blumenthal.”<sup>17</sup> or “How much have you transferred Paris – Blumenthal.”<sup>18</sup> Even so, Roboz proved indispensable for Blumenthal because of his well-established ties to the Hungarian elite. Blumenthal correctly assumed that Roboz would be able to organize a meeting for the Mayor of New York with the Hungarian Prime minister:

“My dear Roboz, His Honor, the Mayor of New York City, who is a close friend of mine, will be in Budapest shortly after taking his cure at Carlsbad. When he arrives, I wish you would get in touch with him, explaining who you are and arrange for an appointment for Count Bethlen to meet him.”<sup>19</sup>

Blumenthal would quite often ask Roboz to host his friends traveling through Budapest:

“My dear Roboz, I take pleasure in recommending to your courtesy Dr. Charles H. May, who is my dear friend and America’s leading eye specialist. He is taking a trip through Europe and is making a short stay in Budapest. Would appreciate very much anything you can do to make his stay agreeable.”<sup>20</sup>

Though in an interview Blumenthal described Roboz as his friend, the archive reveals a more formal relationship.<sup>21</sup> Blumenthal required quick and perfect service and in case he did not get it, his tone turned threatening, as it did in 1931, when Roboz was unable to obtain a loan for the *Vígszínház* in the context of a financial

17 OSZK SZT Irattár 374, *Ben Blumenthal to Imre Roboz*, 20 May 1930.

18 OSZK SZT Irattár 374, *Ben Blumenthal to Imre Roboz*, 2 August 1930.

19 OSZK SZT Irattár 374, *Ben Blumenthal to Imre Roboz*, 3 August 1931.

20 OSZK SZT Irattár 374, *Ben Blumenthal to Imre Roboz*, 20 June 1932.

21 *Magyarország*, 24 Feb 1924, 6. The translation of the Hungarian language articles is by the author.

and bank crisis in Hungary. Blumenthal reproached Roboz for the failure in a rather impolite letter:

“I have received a cable from Ike today stating that you were unable to do anything concerning a loan in Budapest. I do not think you tried very hard. I don’t know why not, but that is my impression. If you can’t give me any good answer why a bank should not loan any money on the *Vígszínház*, considering the fixed income there and that it has no indebtedness, then there must be something wrong.”<sup>22</sup>

Roboz’s situation was delicate because he had to be a mediator between very different operational practices and aesthetic tastes. The Hungarian managing director was grateful for the financial stability provided by the US investor who increased the international prestige of the two theatres by inviting renowned US entertainment professionals. Occasionally, Blumenthal would encourage cultural transfers, for example, the staging of a Broadway-style revue in 1924. Directed by the New York-based choreographer Jack Haskell, *Hello America!* was the first Hungarian–American theatrical co-production. Other theatres in Budapest could not afford such an expensive experiment: “The venture was financed by Ben Blumenthal and the production cost 40,000 Dollars—a fabulous amount in that country.”<sup>23</sup> However, despite its one hundred performances, *Hello America!* was not profitable. The huge financial loss convinced Blumenthal that the Broadway business model (huge investment followed by a long run) was not applicable in Budapest. Therefore, in 1926, he stopped financing the Budapest Operetta Theatre and handed over the leasing of the *Vígszínház* to Roboz, while retaining ownership of the theatre building.

When the talkies appeared around 1930, Ben Blumenthal already seemed less active at the Paramount Pictures, but the long-term American relations of the *Vígszínház* must have contributed to the fact that Imre Roboz was chosen as the manager of the planned Paramount studio in Budapest and the coordinator of the Hungarian language Paramount movies. Although Roboz was active and resourceful in this assignment, the Paramount studio in Budapest was not realized. After 1932, the main forms of the Hungarian–American theatre cooperation were organizing invitations for Hungarian actors and playwrights to work for Hollywood and marketing Hungarian plays for Hollywood studios.

Following the short presentation of Blumenthal’s active participation in the Budapest private theatre sector, I will piece together his biography from the information I have found. I aim to determine his position in the international

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22 OSZK SZT Irattár 374, *Ben Blumenthal to Imre Roboz*, 3 April 1931.

23 *Variety*, 11 March 1925, 3.



entertainment management hierarchy and assess the importance of his Hungarian connections within this context.

### Fragments of Blumenthal's biography

Ben Blumenthal does not feature in the Internet Broadway Database, and the Internet Movie Database mentions him only as the presenter of *Othello* (1922), directed by Dimitri Buchowetzki. However, other sources like the US entertainment press, the Hungarian press, and film history books can help to recreate some elements of his biography.

Ben Blumenthal was born in New York on 22 June 1883. He rarely spoke about himself. The most detailed interview about his family background and early years was published in a Hungarian newspaper in 1924. At the peak of his career at the time, he was managing the two most prestigious private theatres in Budapest. His position may explain the laudatory tone of the lead paragraph: "He has theatres in New York, Berlin, and Budapest. In Berlin, he has built up a whole film city. [...] Decides the fate of billions of dollars in a matter of minutes. A man of action, 40 years old, strong and sober."<sup>24</sup> Speaking about his childhood, Blumenthal emphasized the extreme poverty of his family, which was the reason why he started to work when he was twelve. He pictured himself as a self-made man who financed his high school education, wanted to become a lawyer, but then decided to "seek my fortune in foreign lands. [...] I travelled to China, India, and Australia. I also visited Europe. [...] I traded in diamonds, bought pearls from pearl fishermen, loaded Japanese silk in bales on ships, and in India traded spices and ivory for gold."<sup>25</sup> Returning to New York, he recognized the economic value of film and became involved with equal intensity in the film and theatre business. Blumenthal explained that although Americans felt a strong antipathy towards the Central Powers, he decided to look at the film professionals in these countries as potential business partners. "Immediately after the armistice, I came to Europe, where I concluded contracts with about seventy percent of the distinguished writers and composers of the Central Powers, which gave me the right to dispose of their works in America."<sup>26</sup>

Blumenthal was one of the first entrepreneurs to discover the capital deficit of the Central European film industry. "I founded the EFA [Europäische Film-Allianz] in Berlin, which I merged with United Play, my big company in New York. From the merger of EFA and United Play, I later formed the Hamilton Company in New York, to which I transferred some of EFA's finest directors and actors, and which has

24 *Magyarország*, 24 February 1924, 6.

25 *Magyarország*, 24 February 1924, 6.

26 *Magyarország*, 24 February 1924, 6.

recently been merged into the world's largest film corporation, Famous Players.<sup>27</sup> He emphasized that his theatre and film business were interconnected: "In addition to my American theatres and film companies, I have a theatre in Berlin, the Scala, and two in Budapest, the *Vígszínház* and the Budapest Operetta Theatre."<sup>28</sup> The profile of his Berlin *Scala Variety Theatre* was the closest to Blumenthal's taste and *Ars Poetica*:

"We must distract people from politics, from problems, from hopeless realities, and entertain them! I may be condemned for what I am about to say, but I will say it: film, and especially the theatre, is not meant to torment the spectator with thought and deep philosophical theories, but above all to amuse those who escape for a few hours from their worries and the uncertainties of the day."<sup>29</sup>

In interwar Hungary, this interpretation of theatre was not generally accepted.

### The Blumenthal family network

In the interview, Ben Blumenthal did not mention his "family network," although both his brothers and his nephew occupied important positions in the cosmopolitan entertainment trade. William Blumenthal directed the London Office of Ben's Export and Import Film Company Inc. His other brother Ike (Isaac) was more directly linked to Paramount than Ben. During his career, Ike was Famous Players' European manager, director of the Parufamet board (a distribution company owned by UFA, MGM, and Paramount), became Paramount's general manager for Germany and Central Europe, and finally head of the Joinville studio in France. Ike's son Richard/Dick Blumenthal also built an important Paramount career as assistant first to Robert T. Kane, general manager of European production, then assistant to Melville A. Shauer. Noticeably, the Blumenthal brothers all participated in the transatlantic entertainment trade and supposedly helped each other in their European and Central European business ventures. Both Ike and Dick were involved in *Vígszínház* projects and maintained correspondence with Imre Roboz during and after the period when Adolph Zukor came to Hungary in April 1930, and nominated Roboz general production executive of his planned new film studio in Budapest.<sup>30</sup>

27 *Magyarország*, 24 February 1924, 6.

28 *Magyarország*, 24 February 1924, 6.

29 *Magyarország*, 24 February 1924, 6.

30 "Robert T. Kane, general manager of our Paris studios, is now establishing subsidiary offices in the theatrically important European capitals for the purpose of securing acting, writing and directorial talent for Paramount's multi-lingual productions. Local agents have already been appointed for Budapest and Warsaw. In the former city E. Roboz is general production executive, and Tibor Hegedűs the casting director." *Paramount Around the World*, 10 October 1930, 24.

Imre Roboz's career was linked to his family network, whose members were also specialized in the movie and theatre business. Roboz's uncle, Mór Ungerleider, who was the owner of the *Projectograph filmgyártó és -forgalmazó, mozgófénykép-gépgyár* (Projectograph film producer and distributor, motion picture camera factory), provided his nephew with several opportunities to learn the procedures of transnational film trade. Ungerleider financed filmmaking and distribution and owned cinemas. Imre Roboz's brother, Aladár Roboz, was director of *Korona Film* (Corona Film), then representative of *Sacha Film*. In 1923, he became the leaseholder of the *Terézkörúti Színház* (Teréz Boulevard Theatre). Roboz's brother-in-law, Lajos Földes, directed the *Paramount Filmforgalmi Rt.* (Paramount Film Distributor Ltd).

Ben Blumenthal rarely mentioned his English wife, Mildred Hannah Chandler. We do not know about her contribution (if any) to her husband's business activity. Blumenthal's only daughter Barbara was born on 13 February 1907 in Shanghai, demonstrating that Blumenthal had a border-crossing lifestyle. By the 1920s Blumenthal's family achieved a high social status in the USA, as reflected by the fact that in 1931 the *New York Times* published an article on Barbara's engagement to an English aristocrat, Captain Hon. George Charles Spencer.<sup>31</sup>

### **Ben Blumenthal's professional activities represented in the press, 1914–1930**

For the pre-1914 period, I found only one interview where Imre Roboz specifies Blumenthal's transatlantic business activities: "Our friendship dates back to the pre-war days when we had intense business connections through his film industry relations. We brought the first American films to Budapest and that's where our acquaintance and later friendship started."<sup>32</sup> During the World War I, several articles in the mainstream US entertainment press already described Blumenthal as a notable businessman who introduced new export-import practices in the film industry. In 1917, the *Moving Picture World* informed its readers that Blumenthal was back on American soil after his fourth trip since the European war had started. The journalist added that Blumenthal had branch offices in large cities of Europe, and his firm was sending representatives to Mexico, Argentine, and Brazil. "Mr. Blumenthal is now negotiating for the complete outputs of several American manufacturers, and the Export and Import Film Company is ready to market individual productions in Europe as well."<sup>33</sup> The *Motion Picture News* reported in its 6 October 1917

31 *The New York Times*, 7 May 1931, 29.

32 *8 Órai Újság*, 15 October 1920, 5.

33 *The Moving Picture World*, 28 April 1917, 626.

issue that Blumenthal had spent several years studying foreign exchange conditions. In January 1918, the paper informed the readers about the deal that Blumenthal and president of J. Frank Brocjliss Inc. Sidney Garrett had completed about the marketing of the Selig-Polyscope production in all foreign countries, except for Great Britain.<sup>34</sup>

After the Russian revolution, Blumenthal's Export and Import Film Company acquired foreign rights to Russian art productions. In 1918, *The Moving Picture World* reported that Blumenthal was making active preparations for an aggressive campaign in European film centres, as he believed that "for the next few years America will be called upon to supply the greater part of the demand for films in Europe."<sup>35</sup> By then Blumenthal was working for US domination in the transnational export-import film market. He realized in time that after the World War I, the former silent film producing centres like Berlin, Vienna, and Budapest would be unable to continue their earlier high-quality production, so there were new business opportunities for US entrepreneurs with solid capital like himself and Zukor. The latter's Famous Players Film Company was formed in 1912, and in 1916, it merged with Jesse L. Lasky's Feature Play Company along with several subsidiary companies, becoming known as the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation. Blumenthal's firms were related to this company. In 1919, Blumenthal proudly advertised the results of his Export and Import Film Co. Inc.: "An American motion picture Exporting Organization that has won exceptional standing throughout the world because of a strict policy of »always delivering the goods«."<sup>36</sup> Film in this context was not understood as art, but rather as a commodity whose aim was to entertain.

Blumenthal's ambition at the time was to control the world exhibition rights of successful movies. His transatlantic sails, often reported in the press, illustrated the importance of modern traffic and communication tools in this type of business, where acquiring quick information and having transnational network connections is advantageous and valuable. As in the pre-war period, Blumenthal traded with Nordisk Film, a Danish entertainment company, it was reasonable that in 1919 "a great deal of Mr. Blumenthal's time during his stay abroad was spent in Copenhagen, and it was from that port that he sailed. Mr. Blumenthal brought back with him to the States a tremendous amount of data of almost incalculable value to the export trade."<sup>37</sup> A book that analyses the history of Nordisk Film reveals the financial dimensions of Blumenthal's activity:

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34 *Motion Picture News*, 12 January 1918, 228.

35 *The Moving Picture World*, 16 March 1918, 1499.

36 *Wid's Year Book*, 296.

37 *The Moving Picture World*, 26 July 1919, 564.

“At the end of 1919 DAFCO had bought: 305 Triangle feature films, 126 Triangle one-act films, 168 Keystone films, 12 Chaplin films, 100 long Metro films, 7 feature films from Sweden, 156 Famous Players film, 52 Kardinal films, 35 comedies, 1 Joan of Arc film. [...] The films were purchased by Ben Blumenthal who, together with his partner Samuel Rachman, ran Hamilton Theatrical Corporation, a company owned by the American company Famous Players. The price of the 962 films was 3,705.689, 75 kroner of which Nordisk and UFA would each pay half.”<sup>38</sup>

The intensity of Blumenthal’s transatlantic trade activity is shown by the fact that in 1919 he spent fifty weeks traveling in Europe to import European super-productions to the US.

At the end of 1920, Blumenthal widened his business profile by employing talents from Central Europe and offering them to Famous Players. In a letter addressed to Adolph Zukor, he explained the advantages of engaging the Polish actress Pola Negri and the German filmmaker Ernst Lubitsch: “We think this will be a great benefit both to the Hamilton Company and Famous by him [Ernst Lubitsch] working with American stars in American picture.”<sup>39</sup> To develop further his Central European links, Blumenthal was active in forming EFA, a partnership between several leading German filmmakers and the Hamilton Theatrical Corporation on a fifty-fifty basis with the American company Famous Players-Lasky. The geographic expansion of Blumenthal’s business activities can be followed from the press: “The Export and Import Film Company, Inc., announces it has opened an office in London for the transaction of business for the United Kingdom and Continent in charge of William Blumenthal, brother of Ben Blumenthal, president of the concern.”<sup>40</sup> Blumenthal defended the freedom of the transatlantic film trade in both directions when the Motion Picture Directors Association and the Actors Equity demanded an embargo on German-made motion picture productions and protested against “foreign invasion.” Blumenthal explained the financial advantages of the cooperation with European professionals: “American capital is being enlisted in the productions of features to be manufactured in Germany because of the known fact that on account of a smaller labour and material cost, pictures can be produced for about one-half of the amount spent in this country.”<sup>41</sup> Some articles attest that by the mid-1920s Blumenthal had acquired a high social position in the US cosmopolitan entertainment elite. For example, one critic said,

38 Thorsen, *Nordisk Film Kompagni 1906–1924*, 13.

39 Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. *Ben Blumenthal to Adolph Zukor*, 30 June 1922.

40 *Exhibitor’s Trade Review*, 10 February 1923, 553.

41 *Exhibitors Herald*, 7 May 1921, 39.

“Ben Blumenthal, who, in conjunction with David P. Howells will present the Shakespearean screen classic, *Othello*, at the Criterion Theatre beginning February 25, gave a preview of this continental spectacle to a selected company of friends. Word famous stage and screen artists attended as did the leading dramatic and motion picture critics of the metropolitan papers.”<sup>42</sup>

However, after 1925 there seem to be fewer articles on Blumenthal’s film business accomplishments. In connection with the manager’s Hungarian business interests, the *Variety* reported on a conflict with the *Vígszínház*. “The controversy between Ben Blumenthal and the actors here has assumed serious proportions since neither side has acceded to the demands of the other. The actors claim Blumenthal plans to keep many of them out of work by reducing the size of the companies which play his theatres, while Blumenthal counters with the statement the economic condition makes a reduction of expenses imperative.”<sup>43</sup> The main cause of this disagreement was the different theatre operation models in the US (combination system) and in Hungary (stock repertory company). In the latter, the contracts ensured actors’ salaries for a whole theatrical season, while in the combination system, the manager guaranteed the income of the cast only for the run of a show. The US press did not consider it important to announce that in 1926 Blumenthal stopped running his theatres in Hungary.

Following a long interruption, the next piece of information on Blumenthal that I found was from 1933. *The Film Daily* reported that “Ben Blumenthal resumes activity.”<sup>44</sup> His return to the US film export-import market could be the consequence of the unstable political situation in Germany, where Blumenthal had business interests. As Fabian Riedel notes in his doctoral thesis, Blumenthal was one of the Jewish businessmen who in 1919 had funded the *Scala*, a modern variety theatre.<sup>45</sup> The others who participated in the operation of this successful venue were the cinema professional Karl Wolffsohn, the banker Jules Marx, the aircraft industrialist Anton Fokker, and the fashion entrepreneur Ernst Strelitz. Riedel remarks that the second variety theatre of the same business circle, the 3,000 seat *Plaza*, that opened in 1929, was less successful because of the world economic crisis. These venues pursued a transnational business strategy. “From 1930 the *Scala* and *Plaza* group operated further theatres in Hamburg, Leipzig, Mannheim, Dortmund, and Rotterdam. The high point of the company’s success came in the summer of 1931 with the founding

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42 *Moving Picture World*, 3 March 1923, 41.

43 *Variety*, 12 August 1925, 3.

44 *The Film Daily*, 4 Nov 1933, 1.

45 Riedel, *Karl Wolffsohn*.

of an international booking association for world-famous artists in partnership with the UFA and leading variety theatres in Paris and London.”<sup>46</sup> Blumenthal’s precise role in the operation of the Berlin variety theatres cannot be identified.

### **Ben Blumenthal’s professional and personal activities represented in the press, 1930–1955**

For the 1930s, the info related to Blumenthal’s biography comes predominantly from the Hungarian press. We can read about Blumenthal’s family life, his hobbies, his frequent visits to Budapest. This press interest is somewhat surprising as after 1926 Blumenthal no longer financed the operation of any theatre in Budapest, and did not actively participate in the local theatre industry. However, thanks to the public image built around him earlier, by the 1930s he had become “our American,” a celebrity. In the 1920s, the tone of the Hungarian press toward him was less flattering, and journalists often questioned Blumenthal’s business actions. It was Imre Roboz’s task to deny in the press the recurring reports about Blumenthal’s plans to extend or to sell his interests in Hungary. In 1921, Roboz had to deny the rumour that Blumenthal had planned to establish a theatre trust in Budapest, declaring “we have no intention of buying the theatres listed, either collectively or individually.”<sup>47</sup> Another frequent allegation was Blumenthal’s suspected intention to get rid of his Hungarian business interests. The *8 Órai Újság* (The Eight-Hour Newspaper) reported in 1924 that Blumenthal came to Budapest to place the *Vígszínház* in the hands of Hungarian entrepreneurs. Roboz denied again: “Not a word of this is true.”<sup>48</sup> The constant public attention indicates Blumenthal’s rising celebrity status. Contrary to the USA, in Hungary not only the entertainment press but also the daily papers covered his life events, like his accident in Marienbad: “A car traveling at 120 kilometres an hour hit a tree in a U-turn, overturning and seriously injuring all its occupants. Blumenthal, his wife, and daughter were immediately taken to a hospital in Marienbad.”<sup>49</sup>

Blumenthal’s visits to Budapest in 1924 were related to an American-style revue production in his Budapest Operetta Theatre. The story can be followed through the press; on 14 August 1924, Blumenthal arrived in Budapest from Carlsbad and on 23 November he came again with a Broadway choreographer and sixteen English girls contracted for the *Halló, Amerika!* revue. When the run of the show proved shorter than expected, the *8 Órai Újság* wrote on 26 April 1925: “Ben Blumenthal

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46 Riedel, *Karl Wolffsohn*.

47 *8 Órai Újság*, 8 September 1921, 5.

48 *8 Órai Újság*, 8 February 1924, 7.

49 *8 Órai Újság*, 21 July 1924, 8.

arrives in Budapest on Monday and it depends on his decision whether a new play will be performed this year and whether an operetta or revue will be performed.”<sup>50</sup> When because of the financial loss, Blumenthal decided to cut down the personnel of his theatres, the public mood turned against him. The newspaper reported that “the plan not only caused unrest in the actors’ world but has also provoked criticism from all who see theatres not just as businesses but as cultural institutions.”<sup>51</sup> News about Blumenthal seemed interesting even for Hungarians living in the USA. The *Amerikai Magyar Népszava* (American Hungarian People’s Voice) wrote about a deal in 1936 when Blumenthal almost sold the *Vígszínház* building to Nova Industrial and Transport Ltd.<sup>52</sup> The price should have been 700,000 pengős, but the Hungarian National Bank did not give its consent to the transaction, so the building remained Blumenthal’s property until nationalization in 1949 or 1950. Concerning the reason for selling the *Vígszínház*, the social column (*Intim Pista*) of the *Színházi Élet* (Theatre Life) stated that Blumenthal wanted to liquidate his European interests. The motivation of the planned transaction must have been the uncertain European political situation, but the journalist preferred a fairy-tale story.

“The dollars he received in Paris and Berlin, the pengős he collected in Budapest, he gives to his daughter, Barbara Blumenthal, who as you remember, married a few years ago an English nobleman. [...] The estate is being extended, a new wing is being added to the castle and a magnificent golf course is being built in a section of the ancient park.”<sup>53</sup>

The Blumenthal family’s connection to the English aristocracy was an attractive topic for readers.<sup>54</sup>

In 1937 news about the selling of the *Vígszínház* building reappeared again, but then the artistic director of the *Vígszínház*, Dániel Jób gave an atypical, sobering answer to the journalist’s question: “Blumenthal—it is common knowledge—would like to sell it, but there are no serious offers.”<sup>55</sup> Another concern about Blumenthal could be his legal conflict with Paramount Pictures, Inc, that filed a suit in 1939 in

50 8 *Órai Újság*, 26 April 1925, 11.

51 8 *Órai Újság*, 26 June 1925, 7.

52 *Amerikai Magyar Népszava*, 9 October 1936, 2.

53 *Színházi Élet*, 27 September 1936, 20.

54 The *Magyarország* (Hungary), in 1936 gave a detailed description of Barbara Blumenthal’s affection for Hungary. ‘Lady George Spencer, daughter of Ben Blumenthal, is hosting a 300-person Hungarian ball in England. [...] Lady Spencer knows the Hungarian capital well and speaks Hungarian fluently, a language she acquired as a girl. The English lady is the daughter of Ben Blumenthal, owner of the *Vígszínház*. She married a few years ago. Her husband is also related to the English court.’ *Magyarország*, 13 November 1936, 8.

55 *Az Est*, 10 March 1937, 10.



the N.Y. Supreme Court “seeking to restrain Ben Blumenthal from prosecuting an action for an undisclosed amount against it in England for alleged breach of a contract in connection with the sale of Paramount-controlled theatres there.”<sup>56</sup> It was probably a brave rather than a wise gesture to start a legal fight with the globally powerful film company. In 1939, the Hungarian theatre context was similarly alarming, full of forced administrative changes: the anti-Jewish laws gradually excluded Imre Roboz from theatrical life.<sup>57</sup> The owner of the *Vígszínház* building tried to help his long-time renter and associate. According to a periodical, “Blumenthal [...] has repeatedly stated that he will not rent the building to anyone but Imre Roboz.”<sup>58</sup> We do not know about Blumenthal’s whereabouts during the war, but *The Film Daily Year Book* of 1942 listed him and his Export and Import Company among the importers and exporters in New York. As during the World War II, the film trade was reduced to products of the ally countries, Blumenthal surely could not work on a global scale. The *Vígszínház* was heavily damaged during the war. As the building was still Blumenthal’s property, he came to Hungary at least three times in the interim period leading to the communist rule. (Despite the threatening political climate, Roboz did not leave Budapest during the war and was killed in 1945 in mysterious circumstances.) Although the political elite had changed, the new authorities were ready to negotiate with Blumenthal about the rebuilding of the theatre. The *Demokrácia* (Democracy) periodical informed its readers that the Hungarian Prime Minister, Lajos Dinnyés, held talks with Blumenthal, who also met with several government officials.<sup>59</sup> In an interview, the Prime Minister said: “The peace treaty prescribes to us how the damage of foreign citizens should be repaired and the competent ministry will do its best to find a solution.”<sup>60</sup> Blumenthal proposed obtaining a US loan for the reconstruction, whose cost was estimated at ten million forints, but this cooperation failed.

One of Blumenthal’s post-war Budapest visits was documented in Valerie Pascal’s memoir *The Disciple and His Devil: Gabriel Pascal George Bernard Shaw*. The text below shows that Blumenthal continued his earlier border crossing lifestyle and still considered himself a mediator between Hungarian and US mass culture. Pascal, whose original name was Valéria Hoecker, and in her Hungarian films in the 1940s used the name Valéria Hídvéghy, was a beautiful actress. She describes her meeting with Blumenthal in the Bristol bar at the end of 1946 as follows.

“And there was Ben Blumenthal, a thin, smallish, elderly man, smoking a big cigar. He had throat trouble and spoke only in a whisper, which

56 *The Motion Picture Daily*, 16 January 1939, 9.

57 Heltai, „Színházi „átállítás.”

58 *Pécsi Napló*, 1 August 1939, 6.

59 *Színház*, 7 October 1947, 15.

60 *Színház*, 7 October 1947, 15.

didn't seem strange, for in those days everyone whispered in Budapest. [...] Blumenthal looked at me with interest, and we talked about his theatre. He said he was leaving for London the next morning. »Then back to New York«, he added. [...] I was aware of Ben's eyes studying my face. »You are very interesting«, he said. »I am sure you could make a success in Hollywood«. He asked me to get some of my photographs to him so that he could take them when he left the next morning. Three days later, an airmail letter arrived from London. Ben wrote that it was his honest opinion that I could have a career and that he had already spoken about me to Alexander Korda and Gabriel Pascal, both famous producers in England and both of Hungarian origin.”<sup>61</sup>

Blumenthal's export idea was partially successful. Valéria left Hungary and married Gabriel Pascal.

Blumenthal's post-war Budapest visits were covered in a more politicized tone in the USA. In May 1947, the *Variety* informed its readers about the fate of the *Vígszínház*.

“Ben Blumenthal, New Yorker known in European theatre operating and management fields flies home May 5 after inspection trip covering his continental properties. He started this trip in March. While there, Blumenthal talked with Hungarian government ministries about his 1,400-seat legit house, the *Vígszínház*. Once the city's playhouse, it was severely damaged in the fight for liberation of Budapest. Blumenthal estimates damages at \$800,000 of which Hungarian government is obligated to pay him two-thirds as a United Nations national under terms of peace treaty if and when pact goes into effect. [...] Blumenthal's two 3,000-seaters in Berlin, Plaza, and Scala, are still in operation. He would like to sell out, but there's no present way of changing foreign payments back into dollars for export.”<sup>62</sup>

The next *Variety* article lamented the consequences of the regime change in Hungary, and its tone already anticipated the Cold War rhetoric:

“Budapest's most renowned legit theatre, the *Vígszínház* (Gaiety Theatre), where Ferenc Molnar's plays started on their world tours of success, will be reopened this month as the Theatre of the Hungarian People's Army, it was officially announced here. Announcement thus put to an end one of the highest traditions of the Hungarian legit world, transforming into a Communist house of propaganda the theatre which once was a synonym

61 Pascal, *The Disciple and His Devil*, 13.

62 *Variety*, 7 May 1947, 23.

to Budapest cosmopolitanism from the early 1900s through the end of the '30s. [...] It was the theatre of the liberal intelligentsia and middle class, its opening nights were always events of the season, and its actors and actresses were always the most beloved stars of Budapest. [...] Blumenthal visited Budapest several times during the early post-war years to make a deal with the government for compensation and the rebuilding of the theatre. Each time he left empty-handed.”<sup>63</sup>

It was probably difficult for Blumenthal to understand that his commercial theatre philosophy would no longer be accepted in the new state-owned and controlled theatre structure.

Residing in New York, Blumenthal maintained connections with some Hungarian professionals who had business interests in the pre-war Budapest entertainment sector. Immediately before the communist takeover, a satirical article appeared in a Budapest paper on Blumenthal's alleged death: “On Sunday evening the theatre circles were surprised to learn that Ben Blumenthal, the well-known American entrepreneur, and owner of the *Vígszínház* building, had died suddenly. [...] Blumenthal's legal adviser in Budapest and old friend, Dr. Sándor Kovács, found it inconceivable that he had not been notified of the death and sent a telegram to the theatrical publisher Aladár Roboz in New York, asking for information about the case.

“[...] At dawn on Wednesday, Dr. Sándor Kovács received the following telegram from Aladár Roboz: »I have just spoken to Ben Blumenthal. He is surprised at the news of his death.« [...] This morning, another telegram was delivered by the Post Office to a friend in Budapest. The telegram was sent by the American entrepreneur himself, who had been declared dead by the radio news. »I have received a telegram of condolence. Thank you very much until I can thank you in person in Budapest in early May. Ben.«”<sup>64</sup>

However, it seems most likely that Blumenthal never came to Hungary again. Paradoxically, this fake news somewhat predicted Blumenthal's death for the Hungarian theatre as in the early Cold War period there were no active channels for Hungarian–American theatre relations.<sup>65</sup> However, in the Hungarian emigrants' circles, Blumenthal maintained his Hungarian connections as Menyhért Lengyel's 1955 diary entry shows:

“While having lunch with Krémer at the Lambs Club, I see a familiar man (he hasn't changed much) come up to me: Ben Blumenthal. In 1920,

63 *Variety*, 18 December 1951, 12.

64 *Világ*, 31 March 1949, 5.

65 Heltai, “A politikai beavatkozás szintjei.”

he had met Ica Lenkeffy on the train, and as a result bought the *Vígszínház* in Budapest, making Ica's husband, Imre Roboz, the director. During the siege of Budapest, Roboz was shot dead in the street by the Arrow Cross as he was emerging from hiding. The *Vígszínház* was bombed and then restored. Now it is called the *Katona Theatre*.<sup>66</sup>

Further archival research in the US could reveal more about Blumenthal's later activity before his death on 5 April 1967, in New York.

### Ben Blumenthal's representation in the US entertainment press

How were Blumenthal's transnational activities evaluated from the perspective of US mass culture? When he appeared for the first time in the public sphere during WW1, the tone was laudatory, although he was new to the US film business. An article published in the *Moving Picture World* served as an introduction:

“When the list of big men who make and have made film history is finally written, there will be one man near the top who up to this minute is very little or not at all known. That man who first showed Europe how to exploit pictures on a big scale, who first conceived the chain idea of a theatre for the film.”<sup>67</sup>

In the long run, Blumenthal did not become part of film history, like Zukor, but during and after the World War I, his ambition to trade with film rights globally was generally acknowledged. Blumenthal was portrayed as an ambassador of the US film industry “He is known in every motion picture center from England to Russia as »The Film Yankee«”.<sup>68</sup> Blumenthal's cautious marketing and import techniques, his focus on the audience's taste were also represented as exemplary:

“He never undertakes to import a picture until its statistical foreign popularity is established, and he has made a thorough investigation of its American possibilities. By an exhaustive study of the American public, he has evolved a system of accurately judging the foreign producers, and gauging the financial future for them here. The business is run precisely like a great commercial importing house, and there is consequently practically no waste.”<sup>69</sup>

66 Lengyel, *Életem könyve*, 427.

67 *Moving Picture World*, 30 June 1917, 2131.

68 *Moving Picture World*, 28 April 1917, 626.

69 *Motion Picture News*, September–October 1917, 2018.

The industrialization of entertainment was the objective on Broadway and in Hollywood, and in the early 1920s, Blumenthal was presented as a pioneer of this trend in the US entertainment press.

Blumenthal's theatre investments in Europe were introduced as successful examples of the transatlantic expansion. The *Exhibitor's Trade Review* depicted him as someone who virtually owns a city. "Boss of Buda Pest. And if you think that means nothing. You come over. To Buda Pest. And see the liveliest city in Europe. Not barring Paris."<sup>70</sup> The *Vígszínház* was described as a valuable property on the global level: "Buda Pest Blumenthal does not own—but is the owner of the most beautiful theatres in Europe. With possibly one exception. *The Vígszínház*. Which in English means *The Comedy*. It seats 1800. And is a magnificent place. If it was located on Broadway, near 42nd street—and golly that place seems far away from here—it would be worth about five million. For the ground alone."<sup>71</sup> In 1925, *The Film Daily* praises Blumenthal for breaking down the isolation of foreign products in America. In reality, he worked for a two-way cultural transfer, and as a result, some of the German filmmakers he engaged, like Ernst Lubitsch became influential creative artists in Hollywood. To a certain degree, Blumenthal upheld Wanger's objective for promoting cosmopolitanism by movies. *The Film Daily* cited his opinion coincidentally when Blumenthal expressed his hope that the affiliation between UFA and Universal "will be able to produce pictures to the taste of the American market and still have something different in them which will appeal to the American public."<sup>72</sup>

In sum, the 1917–1925 period was the golden age of Blumenthal's positive reception in the US entertainment press. He was complimented as an innovator in transatlantic film export-import techniques, and his investments in the private theatre sector of Budapest and Berlin were also honored. However, concerning the subsequent stages of Blumenthal's career, we can only find scattered information and even fewer evaluations. As sound technology changed the film industry, Ben's brother Ike, and his nephew Dick became more renowned managers in the USA.

### Ben Blumenthal's reception in Hungary

In Hungary, Blumenthal's reception had changing dynamics. When he arrived in 1920, in the public sphere many saw him as a threat to the local culture. The daily *Szózat* (Appeal) warned the government that Blumenthal's "Jewish trust company

70 *The Film Daily*, 10 July 1922, 1–3.

71 *The Film Daily*, 10 July 1922, 1–3.

72 *The Film Daily*, 25 November 1925.

would hinder the development of Hungarian Christian art.<sup>73</sup> This was a typical argumentation in the post-Trianon era, indicating that even theatre shows were regarded as tools in the cultural struggle. However, Ferenc Herczeg, the famous novelist stressed a different perspective:

“Mr. Blumenthal is a leading figure of a global theatre firm. He came to Budapest and has started a business here because Budapest is considered one of the world’s art centres. Since he has a theatre in Budapest, the Hungarian stage-production is constantly reviewed [in the USA] and the royalties of Hungarian playwrights are paid in US dollars, and when these royalties are exchanged into Hungarian koronas that comes to a considerable sum.”<sup>74</sup>

These examples indicate the two conflicting discourses about Blumenthal’s role in the period of his arrival in Hungary: an openly hostile one that rejected him as a foreigner and a Jew, who would make a harmful cultural impact. The more permissive voice in the public sphere was articulated by the cosmopolitan elite. Some of its members tried to convince the public about the advantages of the transatlantic entertainment business relations that Blumenthal would be able to build for the exportation of Hungarian theatrical goods. As soon as Blumenthal bought the *Vígszínház*, reporters immediately realized the export potential in this business deal. “It is certain that this venture will attract attention from across the ocean to Budapest.”<sup>75</sup> This prediction came true. Due to mediators like Blumenthal, between 1930 and 1943, twenty Hollywood movies were adaptations of Hungarian plays.<sup>76</sup> The export potential was especially important when after the Treaty of Trianon, Hungarian cultural politics started to promote Hungarian cultural supremacy. Meanwhile, the counter-arguments emphasized that in transatlantic cooperation the Hungarian side would always play a subordinate role, because of the financial inequality of the partners.

“Dollars, Swiss francs, sterling, lire are pouring into the country, and however welcome it is that foreign capital will bear fruit here, we must beware of becoming an exploited colony of foreign currency.”<sup>77</sup>

Surprisingly, the Hungarian press offered character sketches of Blumenthal. Jenő Faludi depicted the American manager as “a perfect gentleman, who is also a great businessman.”<sup>78</sup> His qualities that are considered typically American are idealized:

73 *Szózat*, 28 February 1922, 5.

74 *Új Idők*, 9 July 1922, 28.

75 *8 Órai Újság*, 12 October 1920, 5.

76 Pór, *De Budapest à Hollywood*, 13–14.

77 *8 Órai Újság*, 13 October 1920, 4.

78 *8 Órai Újság*, 14 October 1920, 4.

“Totally American. His perception is unbelievably quick; he understands everything at once and processes everything in no time. His opinions are sudden, and yet they are not superficial, but of the most vivid judgment. His theatrical sense is such that when he sees a performance, although he does not know a single letter in Hungarian, he understands the play and can judge its qualities as well as the actor.”<sup>79</sup>

In the circles of the cosmopolitan artists’ elite, Blumenthal was popular, and for the press he embodied the “polite other” who constantly helped the Hungarian cause abroad.

“If there are unpleasant strangers, there are very pleasant ones, and Ben Blumenthal is one of them. He is a likable, kind, gentle, and clever gentleman: a man who knows his trade and is not a businessman but a real enthusiast, who does not want to collect our orphan koronas here, but wants to work for Hungarian culture, because he loves Budapest and is impressed by the talent and knowledge that is manifested on and around the Hungarian stage.”<sup>80</sup>

In the 1930s, Blumenthal was depicted as a social celebrity, whose simple appearance in the Hungarian capital deserved a column in a paper: “Blumenthal visits us at least twice a year, not for business but simply to spend a few pleasant days with friends. Young and splendidly dressed, he walked along the Dunakorzó on his first evening, where everyone greeted him warmly.”<sup>81</sup> In this period, he was most often portrayed as a family man. “Ben Blumenthal is devoted to his only daughter, adores his two little grandchildren, and does his utmost to make them feel at home in their splendid home.”<sup>82</sup> Despite his withdrawal as an investor from the Budapest theatre industry, the papers showed an interest in the details of his cosmopolitan lifestyle. For example, he reported in an interview: “From Budapest, I’m leaving in a week to return to Paris where my wife is waiting for me. From Paris, I’m going to London to meet my daughter and son-in-law, and I’ll be back in America in about six weeks for a longer stay.”<sup>83</sup> Budapest was his only base in Central Europe.

Following the news that Blumenthal had sold the *Vígszínház* (after all, the Hungarian National Bank did not approve the deal), in 1936, the *Színházi Élet* (Theatre Life) published a kind of “farewell article,” describing the manager’s attraction to Budapest and the position he obtained in the local cosmopolitan elite. “He did indeed

79 8 Órai Újság, 14 October 1920, 4.

80 8 Órai Újság, 8 July 1923, 9.

81 *Színházi Élet*, 4 August 1935, 28.

82 *Színházi Élet*, 27 September 1936, 20.

83 *Pesti Napló*, 22 February 1935, 14.

have ten minutes to spend discussing the situation with his tenant and his legal adviser. Then he stayed here for three weeks—as a private person. He met his friends, played golf on the Svábhegy, played bridge with his friends.”<sup>84</sup> He was even given the nickname “Blem” by Andor Miklós and Ferenc Molnár. The greatest service attributed to him was his role in developing the Hungarian–American cultural transfers. “In fifteen years, he has attracted hundreds and hundreds of distinguished foreigners to Budapest. [...] He was the one to persuade Gilbert Miller to visit the Danube city, about which very little was known in the American »top four hundred« after the Great War.”<sup>85</sup>

The above-mentioned Gilbert Miller (1884–1969) was another important mediator between the Budapest and the Broadway stages whose name was often mentioned in the entertainment press of the interwar period.<sup>86</sup> However, Miller did not own or finance any theatres in Hungary. Instead, he regularly bought the stage rights of Hungarian plays for New York performances. Overall, for the private theatre sector of Budapest, Blumenthal’s long-term influence as an investor was more decisive.

Although the political climate changed considerably after 1945, the press welcomed Blumenthal as an old acquaintance: “He has arrived and he is excited to be here. He visited all his favourite places and was happy to see that since he was last visiting, we have been developing and rebuilding in all areas.”<sup>87</sup> In the interim 1945–1949 period, despite the anticapitalistic rhetoric of the era, Blumenthal was called “a keen friend of the capital.” However, following the communist takeover and the nationalization of theatres all that Blumenthal represented was fiercely attacked as bourgeois and reactionary. Blumenthal’s name and his role in the interwar private theatre life of Budapest vanished from Hungarian cultural memory and theatre history for decades. The *Vígyszínház*, Blumenthal’s main field of activity in Budapest, became such a strong brand on the cosmopolitan entertainment market that the communist authorities felt obliged to change the name of the theatre to the Theatre of the People’s Army.

## Conclusion

Although Ben Blumenthal had temporary fame in the USA as an inventor of new practices in the transatlantic film trade, he could not join the group of legendary

84 *Színházi Élet*, 27 September 1936, 20.

85 *Színházi Élet*, 27 September 1936, 20.

86 Sári Fedák, the famous Hungarian star, who frequently toured the USA, emphasized Miller’s positive impact on Hungarian–American theatre relations: “I think Miller is the first director in New York. It is a big deal because there are several good ones. He is courageous, entrepreneurial, looking for the new, the strange, and the interesting, and what is most wonderful about him is that he loves Budapest.” *Színházi Élet*, 16 December 1923, 16.

87 *Demokrácia*, 28 September 1947, 4.



cosmopolitan entertainment businessmen who created and maintained the global influence of US mass culture. In contrast, on the local level, in the Hungarian for-profit theatre field his influence was unprecedented, as he was the only foreign investor to own an elegant theatre building and operate two prestigious theatres in Budapest. Blumenthal's other specialty was his atypical business socialization: as he started his activities in Europe, he understood both the European and the US cultural contexts. Even after returning to the USA in 1917, Berlin, Paris, London, and Budapest remained his bases. His frequent transatlantic sails to Europe substantiate that he valued the long visits in these cities. Blumenthal's perspective was transatlantic viewed from both sides of the ocean.

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