

Hol Volt, Hol Nem Volt

(lit: "It Was, It Was Not"; UK: "A Hungarian Fairy Tale")

US : 1986 : dir. Gyula Gazdag : Mafilm-Objektiv

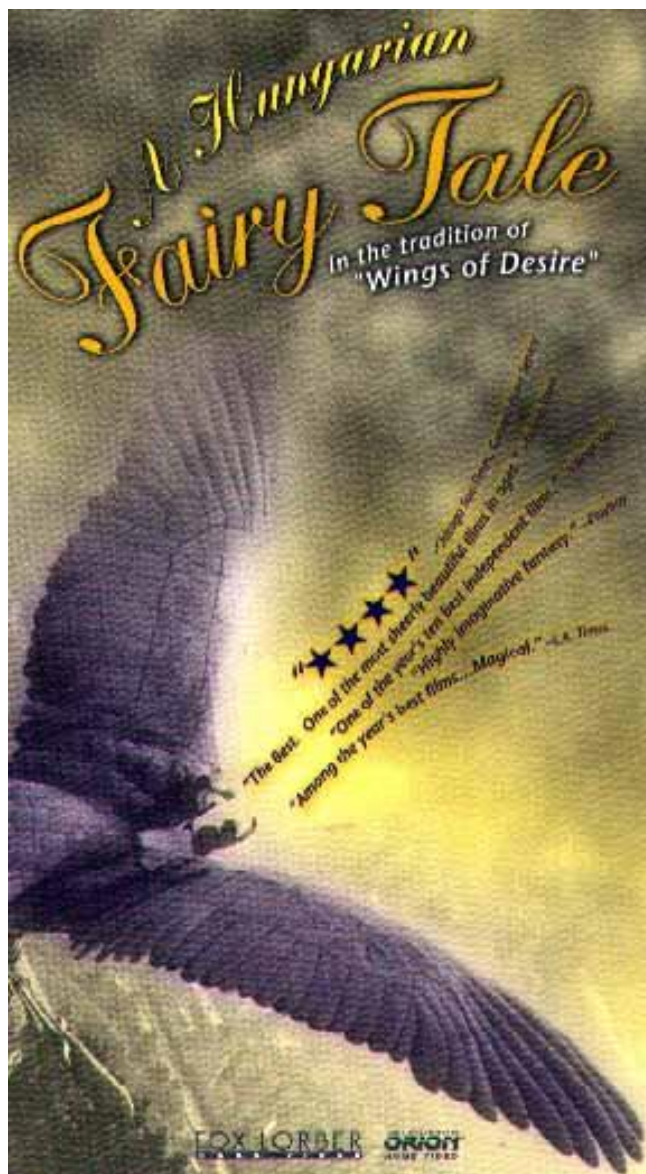
: 97 min

prod: : scr: Gyula Gazdag & Miklos Gyorffy : dir.ph.: Elemer Ragalyi

Árpád (David) Vermes; Szilvia Tóth

Mária Varga; Frantisek Husák; Eszter Csákányi; Peter Trokan; Judit Pogány; Geza Balkay;
Gabor Reviczky; Jolan Jaszai; Laszlo Polgar; Aron Vermes; Balint Tolmar

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω 8 € M ☼	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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The English title conveys nothing of the mood or themes of the film, but the original Hungarian title is the traditional opening line of a fairy tale, equivalent to "Once upon a time..."

Source for above stills: CVMC website



David Vermes gives a quiet but intense central performance as the son in search of a father who never existed
 Source: International Film Guide 1988

Bloomsbury Foreign Film Guide review:

"During a performance of *"The Magic Flute"* at the Budapest opera house, Maria (Varga), a beautiful young woman, catches the eye of a handsome stranger. The couple, mutually enraptured, meet for the first and last time after the performance, a liaison that results in the birth of Maria's son, Andris (a wooden performance from a young Arped Vermes)¹. When the boy is 10, his mother is killed in a freak accident, and he escaped from the state custodians to seek the father whose details are on his birth certificate but who, unbeknown to him, is a fictitious person.

Andris' odyssey lands him in a series of bizarre adventures at the same time as the official in charge of faking fathers grows disgusted with his job and runs amok. The premise of Gazdag's film, part surreal fairy tale, part anti-bureaucratic satire, derives from a Hungarian ploy to stamp out the stigma of illegitimacy by the simple expedient of according a fictitious father to children born out of wedlock. The idea is rich in possibilities but, from about the halfway mark, the focus disintegrates as Gazdag presents a rag-bag of ideas and styles, reality and fantasy, and a deal of tedious padding muddled together in what the director has declared "a central European's version of Buñuelian cinema" in which "Kafka meets Grimm".

¹ Having used the epithets "beautiful" and "handsome" for the first two adults he describes, "wooden" is the best he can supply for Vermes, who is equally both of the above.

This ambitious attempt to mix the vision of several other people is probably what sinks the enterprise, and its moments of charm and inventiveness are insufficient to rescue it. Nonetheless, the movie was well received at several European and Canadian festivals during 1987."

International Film Guide 1988 review:

"Gazdag's career has always oscillated between two extremes – tough documentaries such as **"THE BANQUET"** and **"THE PACKAGE TOUR"**, and highly accessible features with a surreal edge like **"SINGING ON THE TREADMILL"** and **"LOST ILLUSIONS"**. It comes as no surprise, therefore, after the grim study of concentration camp survivors (**"THE PACKAGE TOUR"**) to find him striking out again with this semi-fantasy. The Hungarian title translates as *"Once Upon a Time There Was..."*, and the spirit of fairytale is never far away – even if its sold social grounding makes it a highly contemporary Hungarian one.

Much of the action, especially at the end, parallels Mozart's *"Magic Flute"*, excerpts from which accompany the exploits of the boy Andris in his search for his father. The premise of the film is based on a curious blip in Hungarian law: that if a child's father is unknown, an imaginary name has to be invented to go on the birth certificate. Gazdag's balancing act between fantasy and social reality is beautifully managed, much

aided by Elemér Ragályi's glistening black-and-white photography. If the ending is something of an evasion, a cop-out from confronting less palatable realities, it is nevertheless consistent with the film as a whole – a genuine original, often as elusive as it is magical." – Derek Elley

The Time Out Film Guide review:

"The fairytale in question is the legend of a giant bird that flies down to save Hungary, but Gazdag's film is less a reinvention of national myth than an attempt to get to the bottom of a typically communist paradox: the way that human impulses turn into inhuman practices under the dead hand of bureaucracy. The bird turns up at the start in a TV cartoon, and reappears at the end to carry a little boy and his surrogate parents away from their troubles². In between, the film uses Mozart's *"Magic Flute"* to waft its way through the story of a young orphan searching for a father who was only ever a fictitious name on a birth certificate. Gazdag's approach has something in common with the "magic realism" of Latin American novelists; he shoots in silvery black and white, and feels free to jump from social observation into areas of fantasy and absurdist humour. The result is undeniably distinctive, and the shifts in tone sometimes have a genuinely disconcerting punch; but basically, Gazdag is looking back nostalgically to earlier social fables like De Sica's **"MIRACLE IN MILAN"** than forward to the Hungary of the 90s."

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"An imaginative and affecting tale from Hungary, blending myth, social satire, and a Dickensian story of a Budapest orphan. Filmed in stunning black and white, and employing little dialogue. In Hungarian with English subtitles. ****1/2 "

The Virgin Film Guide review:

"To be political without seeming to be political has been the Eastern European filmmaker's primary task – at least prior to the recent wave of reform there. With this allegorical children's story for adults, director Gyula Gazdag again faces this challenge. **"A**

² He's far from being "a little boy", and his two companions are scarcely surrogate parents

HUNGARIAN FAIRY TALE" centres around a quest.

While attending a performance of Mozart's *"The Magic Flute"* (a fantasy analogue of what's to come), a young woman (Maria Varga) is smitten by a handsome stranger, leading to sudden and fleeting romance³. Andris (David Vermes), the child born of this quicksilver affair, is orphaned by his mother's subsequent death, and spends most of the film searching for the father he has never known; meanwhile, Antal Orban (Frantisak Husak), the kindly bureaucrat who has seen that Andris at least has a name, searches for the boy. In the course of his travels, Andris meets an assortment of characters, all of whom have symbolic meaning.

Although state paternalism is Gazdag's enemy here, **"A HUNGARIAN FAIRY TALE"** is lighter in tone and more direct in its emotional appeal than most of the director's previous work – **"THE RESOLUTION"**, **"SINGING ON THE TREADMILL"**. A deft combination of old Hollywood texture and luminosity (Elemér Ragályi's black and white cinematography is superb), 60s New Wave freedom, and surreal fantasy atmospherics, the film may have already lost its topical bite, but the structure underlying it – the simple myth at the complex heart of things – is made to last. ***1/2 "

31st London Film Festival programme notes:

"One of the more distinguished members of Hungary's younger generation of film-makers, Gyula Gazdag's new picture is an allegorical fairy tale whose references are planted solidly on home ground, but its meaning is valid for the rest of the world as well. It seems a local law, still in existence, provides that if the name of a child's father hasn't been registered with the authorities by the time he is three, a fictitious one has to be entered in his documents, whether of an existing person or an imaginary one. A boy born out of one night of magic love⁴, inspired by Mozart's *"Magic Flute"* which is heard throughout the film, is being raised by his mother. Once the three years are up, she is asked by an officious clerk to invent a name for the boy's father, and she uses the clerk's own family name. Some years later she dies in an accident and, left all alone, the boy sets out to find his father, not knowing

³ Or "sex" as we call it in English

⁴ Or "casual sex", as it's known in the real world

that the name on the birth certificate is fictitious.

The clerk goes berserk and throws all the paternity files he has compiled so carefully through the years into the fire⁵. Later there is also a nurse who has given up on the system which doesn't allow her to do her job properly, who joins these two, and the trio escape, in the last sequence, from the grim, unsympathetic realities of life, its moronic bureaucracy and its silly conformism, to an unspecified land. The scene itself is intended by Gazdag as a kind of tribute to Vittorio De Sica's "**MIRACLE IN MILAN**". Shot in luminous black-and-white, the presentation and the montage have the brisk pace of a short film, in its brief sequences, telescoped events, economy of dialogue and quick characterisations. It was one of the few entries in the Hungarian Week attempting to establish a personal and original film language and bravely tackling challenges all along the way. Characters from a dream sequence all suddenly reappear in real life, and the final shot, showing the three protagonists being borne away on the wings of a stone eagle, is entirely divorced from reality."

– Variety 29/4/87

The Moving Picture Boy entry on David Vermes:

"In "**HOL VOLT..**" David (or Arpad – the film and publicity credits differ) plays a boy called Andris who is on the run, searching for his father – with difficulty, since his mother is dead and his birth certificate carries not his own name but the registrar's. What's more, the registrar has had a nervous breakdown, destroyed all his files and gone missing too. The two of them, plus a disillusioned nurse, meet up and form an anti-bureaucratic cadre. Eventually, cornered, they escape on the creaking wings of a vast iron eagle.

Gyula Gazdag's film is a delightfully subversive story in the spirit of Jean Vigo. Its hero, Andris, a runner almost equal to Majid Nirumand, is splendidly taken by master Vermes, a burly, resolute boy with the jaw and eyebrows of (unmistakably) Marlon Brando."

CVMC video retail/rental website review:

⁵ *Misleading. There's no connection between the boy's search for his father and the clerk's sudden realisation of the futility of his function. Nor is it true to say he "goes berserk"*

"In Hungary, all children must have a man's name placed on their birth certificate regardless if the identity of their father is known or not. This fact rather complicates the life of "**A HUNGARIAN FAIRY TALE**"'s hero (David Vermes), approximately twelve, for when his mother dies in a freak accident, the lad sets out in search of his dad, relying on the pseudo-name and address given on the document. Can the boy find himself some form of surrogate, or at least contentment by the film's end? A nicely photographed piece which slips into some heavy surrealism towards the end. An "art lovers" flick!

Also Known As: "Un Conte de Fee Hongrois"
Rated NR: brief violence; mild adult themes
Language: Hungarian (with English subtitles)
Categories: Avant Garde, Boy Films, Little to Preteen, Adolescent, Drama."

[no listing in "Halliwell's Film Guide", "Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001", "The Critics' Film Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995" or "Variety Movie Guide 1993"]

Radio Times review:

"Irresistibly recalling the sentimental neo-realism of Vittorio De Sica and the absurdist satire of the sixties' Czech new wave, this World Cinema film is an imaginative allegory. Beautifully shot in glowing monochrome, the film balances its precise socio-political commentary with moments of charming fantasy and black humour. Director Gyula Gazdag is not always in control of the material, but it is a compelling watch. ***"

"Surreal drama continuing the World Cinema season. Andris, born as a result of his mother Maria's fling with a stranger, is given a fictitious surname to suggest his birth was legitimate. Unaware of this fact ten years later, Andris determines to find his father when Maria is killed in an accident. In Hungarian with English subtitles. ***"



The film's final image, of three social misfits wafted aloft on the wings of a Fascist emblem, is a confused metaphor to say the least. What's more, like Bastian's Falkor in "THE NEVERENDING STORY" series, it symbolises not so much the surmounting of obstacles as whimsically evading them. Source: 31st London Film Festival programme

David / Arpad Vermes won the Bronze Leopard for Best Acting Performance at the 1987 Locarno Film Festival. *The Moving Picture Boy* judges him to be about 13. He followed up this film in 1988 with "**PIROSKA E FARKAS**" ("Red Riding Hood and the Wolf"). I would take issue with the "unmistakable" comparison to Brando. Vermes hasn't Brando's nose or profile at all. His short flaxen hair makes a strange contrast with his dark eyes, and his aspect throughout is not so much broody as resolute and purposeful. What emotional responses we see – to visiting his mother's corpse at the morgue, to his betrayal by a family who give him shelter, to his shooting dead a pioneer leader on a train – are too muted for Brando, but when he breaks into a smile with the young daughter of that family (Tunde) his face becomes radiant and quite beautiful.

After a pre-titles prologue in which Andris' mother meets a stranger one night at the opera and tries out his magic flute, the film acquaints us with the pretext for the story – a clause in Hungarian law which states that, on registering a birth (at the age of three, oddly enough) where no legitimate father's name may be entered, a fictitious name, address and occupation must be given, and a confidential record to that effect kept at the registry office, to be viewed only by the mother, registrar, and the child on attaining majority. Andris' mother arbitrarily nominates the registrar's own name, and he invents a bogus address at a small town where he once worked.

Some nine or ten years on, the boy now approaching 13, his mother is struck (literally) stone dead by a housebrick dislodged by a pigeon as she passes on the street below. The incident is so absurd and unexpected as to raise a laugh from the audience. Andris is informed by his headmaster that he will have to be sent to a children's home, but he runs off and sends a telegram to the address given for his father on the birth certificate. When his father fails to appear to collect him, Andris takes a train to the town and tries in vain to locate the address. He meets a woman and her young daughter (Szilvia Toth) who offer him a meal and bed for the night, but the girl's stepfather decides to hand Andris over to the authorities next morning, and so he takes off again.

Growing increasingly paranoid of the police, he falls in with a group of pioneers marching along for rifle practice, where he steals one of their rifles. He then heads for a ramshackle cottage he believes must be his father's, but there meets a nurse who (at gunpoint) agrees to help in his search. Interspersed with these events, we see the original registrar who made out the birth certificate become – at the very moment of Andris' mother's death – struck by the absurdity of what he is doing. He withdraws all the certificates that testify to bogus entries he has made down the years and systematically destroys them; closes up his home, discards his familiar clothes, and wanders back to the same town where Andris is searching for a nonexistent father.

The contrived manner in which these three modest social rebels are drawn together, until their fanciful escape into the skies on the back of a statue which, surely with unintended irony, symbolises precisely the form of patriarchal authority they all wish to elude, is at odds with the social realist style of Andris' single-minded pursuit of his non-existent father. Like the dislodged stone which assists the sudden exit of his mother, the whimsicality of the closing shot is not so much liberating as trivialising, as though Gazdag had no idea how to wind up his story. It lends itself to the unfortunate interpretation that all individualists are fanciful dreamers. Non-conformity has its head in the clouds. Also, by leaving the boy thus in the hands of a random man and woman (any parents better than none?) the ending undermines the fierce independence and self-determination he has shown throughout. Gazdag, in short, compromises the human dilemmas he has created in a vain quest for the symbolic. The three renegades fleeing from a train, pursued by a horde of young pioneers shooting after them, is, let's say, *reminiscent* of the ending of "if..." (which was equally contrived, although more in keeping with the tone of the whole film).

Despite these reservations, the film has many fine qualities, not least the photography, and in as much as it permits the boy to be prime mover in his own destiny, ***recommended***.

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