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A HUNGARIAN FAIRY TALE. Directed by Gyula Gazdag. Written by Gazdag and Miklós Gyórfy. Produced by Objektív Studio (Budapest). At Film Forum, through January 10.

"BREADLINES & CHAMPAGNE: Movies From the Depression Years." At Film Forum 2, December 30 through January 26.

A poet of absurd situations and a connoisseur of bureaucratic self-delusion, Gyula Gazdag is the most deftly ironic of contemporary East Bloc filmmakers—and the one most rooted in Central European rootlessness. Gazdag is the heir to the Czech new wave of the '60s as well as the spiritual son of 19th century novelist Kálmán Mikszáth, who playfully satirized the vacuous ceremonies and grotesque role-playing of the degenerate Hungarian gentry. In all of Gazdag's films, feature and documentary, the beautiful lie is a source of humor and pathos.

A *Hungarian Fairy Tale*, currently at Film Forum, is the first Gazdag to play New York since his remarkably insolent *Singing on the Treadmill* capped the Public's operetta series two summers ago. Like that long-shelved satire, Gazdag's latest feature is an audacious conflation of political and romantic fantasies—a deceptively gentle film that parodies the doublethink of the paternal state in light of the eternal yearning for utopian solutions. The original title translates as "it happened, it didn't happen"—not just the Hungarian equivalent of "once upon a time," but sort of an underground national motto.

As its English title suggests, *A Hungarian Fairy Tale* is filled with imaginary beings, many of them site-specific. The movie was inspired by an early '50s statute idealistically designed to make illegitimacy obsolete by providing each Hungarian child with a legal father—even if Dad, as is the case here, had to be fabricated out of thin air. Thus, the hero Andris is conceived by a couple that meet at a performance of *The Magic Flute*—

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which provides the film with much of its incidental music—and then separate forever. When the child turns three, his mother is legally required to provide him with a father—or at least the fiction of one. Half in jest, she fills the form in with the name of the bureaucrat who interviews her, using an invented address from the town where the clerk formerly worked.

The Hungarian critic György Barón has noted Gazdag's career-long preoccupation with the failure of official paternalism; *A Hungarian Fairy Tale* offers his most cosmic metaphor yet. The birth is a form of immaculate conception, with the state assuming the role of heavenly father. Andris is the new Hungarian man, whose entire life will be founded on a lie. After a brick falls on his mother's head, making him an orphan (and literalizing a local idiom), the fairy-tale hero goes out into the world in search of his nonexistent progenitor.

Armed only with an invented name and an imaginary address (Freedom Street), Andris leaves Budapest for the outlying town of Ujhely (literally, "new place"), a doubly fantastic setting—a rundown housing tract constructed at the height of '50s optimism. The Stalinist period is further evoked by the heroic statuary that populates Andris's dream of heaven. Meanwhile, the bureaucrat who unwittingly lent the boy's father his name suffers a breakdown precipitated by his inability to explain, one more time, why the state must insure each child a male parent. He returns to Ujhely—thus setting the stage for an unexpected reunion.

Populated by witches and magical birds, with childlike fantasies staged in unlikely locations, *A Hungarian Fairy Tale* achieves an impressively understated magic realism. Elemér Ragályi's luminous black-and-white cinematography is accentuated by snow, smoke, and theatri-



Hungarian Fairy Tale's Andris (David Vermes); Myth Temple, right

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cal lighting. The mode is visual, the dialogue minimal. Gazdag is a sensitive director of children; he gets a remarkably self-contained performance from the grave and vulnerable David Vermes—never more than when the boy has to play a scene with a girl his own age. The film is filled with witty observations on the Hungarian social comedy.

Though the final third of *A Hungarian Fairy Tale* is shaky, the movie takes a shocking turn toward the end, appropriating elements from American action movies and Vittorio De Sica's *Miracle in Milan*. Not the least fantastic aspect of the film is the unexpected and disturbing conclusion, in which revolt, escape, and freedom are each given the mythical status of a phoenix or griffin. Although Gazdag was not being ingenuous when he told a Hungarian interviewer that "there are no symbols in this film, there are only fairy-tale elements," by the end, those elements have become charged with subtext. In its images of a socialist-realist paradise and a failed rebellion seen from the perspective of a nine-year-old boy—Gazdag's own age in 1956—*A Hungarian Fairy Tale* can be read as a dreamlike evocation of the Hungarian Uprising, and its poignantly lonely hero as the nation's no less frustrated savior.