

Jenő Heltai: Mothballs

First performed by the Vigszinház in 1908.

Most recent performance in May 1974, by the Szeged National Theatre, directed by János Sándor, sets by Lajos Sándor, costumes by Ágnes Gyarmathy.

Six male and six female parts

There is one set, a room with a cupboard that oozes with the eponymous "fragrance" which is the passive principal character of the play.

Jenő Heltai's /1871-957/ life as a poet, playwright and translator spans a number of periods in the history of Hungarian literature. He is best-known as the author of light-weight farces and facile rhymes. The Silent Knight, a historical play in verse following a German and Italian pattern, is known beyond the country's frontiers. He created the Hungarian adaptation of Nestroy's Lumpazivagabundus as well as of the tale Cinderella rechristened The Beauty Amongst Beauties which was performed this year by the Pécs National Theatre.

Mothballs is a skein of action around a single sparkling idea. Flighty wives and summer philanderers hide lovers and mistresses that keep a date in a cupboard that smells of mothballs.

Mrs. Bálint Szakolczay, née Terka Csapláros goes home to her Budapest flat from her summer-house in the environs, intending to give instructions to the concierge before leaving on a trip abroad. Her lover, Péter Laboda, appears unexpectedly, and she hides him in the wardrobe when her husband turns up. Szakolczay unsuspectingly calls on his wife to hurry to the station; two months careless relaxation is ahead of them. Laboda is in the wardrobe and Terka on the verge of passing out. Szakolczay is off to fetch a doctor and Laboda barely has time to take a stool into the wardrobe when there are new arrivals, Mrs. Kabócza and her two daughters, about whose occupation there cannot be much doubt. They want to rent the flat. Laboda gets some fresh air but only for a moment. Terka has to leave for the station but she manages to make a confession to her mother who got there meanwhile. Terka's father turn up as well. Szakolczay asks his father-in-law in private to send him a telegramme recalling him for a few days, since there is a woman he wants to see. Csapláros on the other hand wants a loan of the flat for amatory purposes. Father, mother, daughter and son-in-law all leave the flat. Laboda, in despair, bangs at the wardrobe. The end seems near.

But the concierge has let the flat to Mrs. Kabócza and her daughters without telling Szakolczay or his wife. They let Laboda out of the wardrobe reeking with mothballs. Csapláros returns with his mistress, Etus Patkány, the actress. She is on stage afternoons only, leaving her nights free for other pursuits. Mrs. Kabócza and her daughters hide in the other room. Laboda meets the philandering father-in-law, explains his position, and goes. The turmoil continues. Mrs. Csapláros comes to free her daughter's lover, leaving her husband just enough time to conceal Etus in the wardrobe. The elderly lady is most astonished when she finds she has released a woman and not a man. She believes that fright changed the sex of the young gent. Etus is offended and exits, and Mrs. Csapláros is chased into the streets by Mrs. Kabócza and her daughters wearing white sheets. Csapláros and Szakolczay get back and so does Terka, at the height of the confusion. Everyone is aware that someone, dead or alive, is in the wardrobe, only the sex is indeterminate. Csapláros, a doctor, thinks it is quite possible that

auto-suggestion might lead to a sex-change. Péter Laboda gets back and helps clear up things. First he hides and allows Mrs. Csapláros, in despair, and Terka, to release him, then Etus Patkány is recalled and released by Csapláros.

Everyone imagines they understood everything yet of course nobody understood a thing. Csapláros is happiest, he made a scientific discovery, he will become famous as the author of the first scientific work on sex-change by auto-suggestion.