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# Poetic Rituality in Theater and Literature

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POETIC RITUALITY  
IN THEATER AND LITERATURE



L'Harmattan Hongrie



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# POETIC RITUALITY IN THEATER AND LITERATURE



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## INTRODUCTION

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### POETIC RITUALITY, OR THE RITUAL ALWAYS AT WORK IN THE ARTS

An understanding of ritual is highly relevant for the analysis of theater and literature since ritual elements not only generally support but also substantially determine the aesthetics of such works as are created within these disciplines. Rituals are performative, symbolic, and, at the same time, highly aesthetic practices. In the same way, art works have dominant performative, symbolic, and ritualistic characteristics. However, arts and rituals are not equivalent cultural practices. What do they have in common and what is the difference between artistic practices and socio-cultural rituals? Why is it important to be aware of the aesthetics of rituals and the ritual aspects of art works?

In art as well as ritual studies toward the end of the twentieth century, cultural turns contributed to elaborating a broad definition of ritual and rituality. Rituality is now generally regarded as one of the master keys to understanding not only cultures in general but also arts in particular. We all agree that ritual is an important socio-cultural type of action but, at the same time, a midwife of aesthetic form that has great relevance for all the arts.

Ritual, like art, necessarily entails work not only on content but also on form. The inspiring concept of poetic rituality has been developed since the beginning of the 1990s in the works of Wolfgang Braungart (demonstrated through examples of German poetry) and recently in the writings of Saskia Fischer (illustrated through the works of German dramatists since 1945). Poetic rituality sheds light on the liminal characteristics of the art form and on references to ritual practices and ritual forms and structures set in motion in a way that allows special aesthetic characteristics and semantic aspects to arise. It manifests itself as an intrinsic aspect of not only dramas and performances but of all artistic production. Adaptation of elementary ritual patterns are constitutive of all artistic forms, thus crucially determining their aesthetics.

The literary and theater studies scholars who contributed to this volume had the opportunity to share their related works during several recent international academic events. Hosted by the Comparative Drama Conference (CDC)



in spring 2017 in Orlando, the main thesis of the related symposium touched upon transculturality of ritual forms. It declared that the revival of the ritual and thus the adaptation of transcultural ritual theatrical forms are expressions of modes of presentation which are cross-cultural and tackle fundamental existential questions of our globalized world. The adaptation of transcultural forms of ritual in theater addresses fundamental existential issues of globalized culture. The papers herein written by Saskia Fischer and Birte Giesler develop the above thesis in much more detail. The relation between ritual, the sacred, and the kenotic has been addressed by some of our team members also in their lectures at the 2018 meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association held at UCLA. The revised and expanded papers of Enikő Sepsi and Johanna Domokos are now included in this publication.

Funded and hosted by the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary, the two following two-day international workshops in Budapest (fall 2017, summer 2019) examined how the use of ritual elements in literary and theatrical works gains a special moment of subjective articulation. The conceptual paper of Wolfgang Braungart was extensively discussed at our roundtable in fall 2017. Because it is the most theoretical examination of poetic rituality among all of the studies included here, Braungart's contribution now forms the opening study of the book. Indeed, the systematic relevance of ritual to arts cannot be underlined strongly enough. And this has not changed through and after modernity, as the paper of Jennifer A. Herdt in this publication also demonstrates.

Both meetings in Budapest offered opportunities for PhD and MA students involved in related research to present their results. The works of Anikó Lukács, Karina Koppány, Dániel Hegyi, and Anna Lenz demonstrate that poetic rituality is a topic also fascinating young scholars.

Since our team included scholars active as dramatists, dramaturgs, and/or directors of theater, our workshops offered frames for sharing insights into artistic laboratories, especially in the barrack-dramaturgy of András Visky and the work led by Jarosław Fret at the Grotowski Theater. Despite the many different approaches to poetic rituality, all of the workshop presentations and studies published herein consistently demonstrate how fundamentally rituality can contribute to the formal, semantic, pragmatic, and structural unfolding of literary and theatrical art works. Besides continuous theoretical reflections, a vast array of examples is given, ranging from Greek, Japanese, English, and Hungarian to German, Russian, French, and Sámi drama, performance art, and theater productions, as the studies in the present volume also illustrate.

The final two-day workshop, planned for spring 2020 in the Center for Interdisciplinary Research (ZIF), University of Bielefeld, had to be cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, the closing presentations and discussions — on the extent to which ritual is constitutive of twenty-first-century theater

## INTRODUCTION

performance, on how poetic rituality manifests itself in recent performances, and what kind of ritual scripts are embodied and transformed — could not be held, meaning that the special inspiration that physical presence can bring to bear on the exchange of ideas will have to wait for another day (soon...). Nevertheless, the work of these scholars will continue beyond the closing of this manuscript.

For an easier overview of the publication, the contributions have been grouped under three chapters. However, *Theoretical Inputs* (Part 1), *Case Studies* (Part 2), and *Artistic Practices* (Part 3) in many respects intersect each other. The individual abstracts of all these studies can be found after the chapters, along with biographical sketches of the scholars.

Finally, the editors of the book wish to express their heartfelt thanks to all the research team members for their inspiring presentations and spontaneous inputs given as comments after the talks and during the socializing events around the workshops, as well as for their papers delivered on time. Many thanks to the secretary and student organization members, who supported the delivery of the workshops. Now it is time to let the results take wing, in the hope that they will bring fruitful hours for those who take this book in their hands.

Summer 2020, Bielefeld-Budapest

The Editors





PART 1:  
*THEORETICAL INPUTS*





# RITUAL AND AESTHETIC PRESENTIVITY

WOLFGANG BRAUNGART

*The ritual is a regulated and inherently structured act performed by or for a community. It is one of the fundamental forms of social activity and a universal cultural component that extends across all religions and societies. Ritual is performative; it allows an aesthetic experience and takes place as an event that carries sense and meaning, obviousness, and significance. Everything that people do or create as a cultural act or expression is connected to cultural semantics. It's the same with the ritual. One can differentiate between the various types of ritual on the basis of form, meaning, and social function. Literature can participate in all types of rituals in various ways: semantically, thematically, socio-functionally, and structurally. The dimension of understanding a ritual is decisively connected with aesthetic explicitness, clarity, the performativity of the aesthetic, and the convincing nature of its overall appearance, which inscribe "significance" to the ritual. Literature makes use of the entire spectrum of expression inherent to the ritual.*

## INTRODUCTION

Everything that is articulated culturally must show itself in a specific way: clothes, furniture, texts, buildings, music, everyday objects, goods, actions — everything. The way in which something appears and is articulated creates aesthetic meaning: aesthetic, not conceptual meaning. This can never be achieved by any concept (Kant); but it is no less important and significant. All aesthetic meaning is inscribed in cultural-historical order of meaning. The dimension of literature that relates to this aesthetic meaning or generates aesthetic meaning is usually referred to as "form." "Form," of course, is a category central to literature<sup>1</sup> — as it is to ritual.

<sup>1</sup> Dieter Burdorf: *Poetik der Form: Eine Begriffs- und Problemgeschichte*, Stuttgart/Weimar, Metzler, 2001.

THE RITUAL<sup>2</sup>

The ritual is a regulated, sequence-based (that is, inherently structured) act performed by a community or for a community. The following elements can be seen to represent the constituent parts of both sacred and secular rituals: (1) the ritual repeats a set act; (2) it is unequivocal and visible, staged and theatrical, possibly verging on having a certain celebratory, festive nature; (3) it is aesthetically elaborated and self-referential; (4) it can be understood symbolically; (5) it requires participants who must be specifically legitimised for it, and additional participants who acclaim the ritual or are included within it. These five aspects constitute the ritual as a whole and determine the overall form of the ritual. Within this whole, the ritual takes on specific social and cultural functions, and plays a communicative role.

The ritual is one of the fundamental types of social action. As a generic concept, it covers sacred rites (religious cults, liturgies), secular rituals (celebrations that take place at various points during an individual's life and emphasise its particular stages or give structure to the life of the collective), traditional customs (rites of chastisement and reprehension, clubs' and societies' rituals), and highly regulated, institutionalised, often public/state-centred ceremonies (the opening of parliament, the assumption of office, coronations, state visits). However, a ritual does not need to solely be a formal, strict, serious activity. Any wedding or children's birthday party shows this. Indeed, laughter can have a place in a ritual (as in Mardi Gras carnivals) even within a sacred setting (*risus paschalis*).

## TYPES OF RITUAL

Rituals are (or can be) based on biological and anthropological drives — as shown by human courtship rituals. However, within the framework of cultural anthropology, the term “ritual” refers to a symbolic, repeated, sense-giving action, and must therefore be separated from the biological term “ritual,” or “ritualisation.” This biological term refers to a pattern of behavior occurring on the basis of necessity and as a result of consequential outcomes; a pattern of behavior that is the remnant of a different interaction between biological functions.

<sup>2</sup> Wolfgang Braungart: Ritual, in D. Weidner (ed.): *Handbuch Literatur und Religion*, Stuttgart, Metzler, 2016, 427–434. I am grateful to Jennifer Caisley for the translation from German into English of this chapter.

Further elaborated in Wolfgang Braungart: *Form und Subjektivität. Ritual und Liturgie als Praktiken literarischer Kommunikation*, in R. M. Erdbeer – F. Klaeger – K. Stierstorfer (eds.): *Grundthemen der Literaturwissenschaft: Form*, Berlin/Boston, De Gruyter, 2020.

It is possible to differentiate between the various types of ritual on the basis of form and meaning and on the basis of social function. These types include, for example, transitional rituals (*Les rites de passages* – Arnold van Gennep); hunting/sacrifice rituals (Walter Burkert); scapegoat rituals (René Girard); liminality rituals, i.e., particular rituals to give experience and strength to a community across social boundaries (Victor Turner); and cleansing and purity rituals (Mary Douglas). Literature can participate in all these types of rituals: semantically, thematically, socio-functionally, and structurally. The (dramatic) tragedy is the most conspicuous genre when demonstrating the links between literature and ritual. Indeed, it is possible to discuss tragedy as being a form of sacrificial ritual.<sup>3</sup>

#### RELIGION, CIVIL RELIGION, AND RITUALS

Rituals seem to be universal cultural components that extend across all religions and all societies. Namely, “religion” and “society” demand determined, repetitive social practices to encourage people to perform good deeds and live a good life, to depict and honour saints, and to mark the culmination of religious and secular communitisation.

Even traces left by prehistoric humans often contain an indication of ritual practices which demonstrate a need for sense and a focus on meaning. For societies founded on religion, the ritual system gives a shared ritual structure to life as a whole. This ritual system covers ritual practices over the course of the growing cycle, or the arrangement of the ecclesiastical year. However, the study of the sociology of religion has long shown the strength of social and cultural practices in modern societies. Such modern societies would certainly describe themselves as *secular*, but they are also characterised by pervasive “religioid” elements (with the word “religioid” being based on Georg Simmel and Robert Musil’s coinage, “ratioid”). It is worthwhile keeping an eye open for the “religioid” dimension of allegedly secular rituals, such as in politics. Totalitarian regimes (Nazism, Stalinism, youth initiation ceremonies in former East Germany) tend to make use of “religioid” rituals in order to give legitimacy to their politics in an aesthetic, performative, theatrical and dramaturgical way. Even in secular civil society there are inescapable, supreme values that provide a sense of community and unity. The upholding of these values can be described as a “civil religion.” They also call for performative acts and aesthetic experiences, in a manner akin to the ritual (national public holidays, international volunteering day, Labor Day). Nevertheless, rituals cannot be

<sup>3</sup> Anton Bierl – Wolfgang Braungart (eds.): *Gewalt und Opfer: Im Dialog mit Walter Burkert*, Berlin/New York, De Gruyter, 2010.



constrained within the field of religion either in the narrower sense of ritualistic form, or in the broader sense of “religioid” civil religion. This is particularly true for the individualistic modern age, which is skeptical of rituals. The “fatigued self” (Alain Ehrenberg) is always a menace to the individual in our times. It appears that this “fatigued self” even encourages the desire for sensory experience via sequences of ritual acts insofar as the subject finds that these acts are *pre-existing* within culture. The subject can confide in them; it does not have to invent them *anew* and give them meaning. Events such as the significant number of intellectual conversions to Catholicism, a strictly ritualised faith, from the Romantic period to the present, may even be explained by this. The age of Enlightenment placed its trust in the communicative rationality common to all people, which fundamentally enabled them to handle their tasks and conflicts themselves, and yet, despite this, it is the century of secret associations and societies with their own ritual practices of social integration (e.g., the rituals of the Freemasons). Even Protestantism, a religion which is skeptical of rituals, is currently discovering the liberating power that the ritual can offer. Freedom and self-determination, on the one hand, and the desire to belong, on the other: these are two sides of the same coin. Indeed, rituals can change and bring themselves into line with new historical expectations of their function. They are, nevertheless, conservatively persistent; they cannot subordinate themselves to the pressure to outdo one another within the “experience society” [Erlebnisgesellschaft] (cf. Gerhard Schulze) without also doing away with themselves. This is also highly relevant to the aesthetic of originality and one-upmanship that characterises the modern age. The *renouveau catholique* arose from modern French intellectual and aesthetic culture. This example, in particular, demonstrates that the conservatism of the ritual has its own place within a society’s dynamics, and that this conservatism can even contribute to cultural dynamisation.<sup>4</sup>

## RITUAL AND LITERATURE: THESIS

A ritual is performative; it is an experience and an event that carries sense and meaning, evidence and significance. This applies both to active involvement in a ritual and the observation of a ritual: each of which is participatory. The meaning of the occurrences within a *religious* ritual must be learnt, and must, therefore, be revealed. It is not a matter of discourse but of aesthetic experience. One can only ever experience *something*. Even those following the

<sup>4</sup> Burckhard Dücker: *Rituale: Formen – Funktionen – Geschichte*, Stuttgart/Weimar, Metzler, 2007, 182.

autosuggestion of pietistic inwardness looked for the social space created by a community of people who shared their opinions, enabling them to articulate their thoughts and thereby bring themselves to being.

Consequently, pietistic rituals were equally productive in the literary sphere. Religions are always discourses of aesthetic experience. This is why religion and art are so closely linked. Sacred and profane rituals alike both require and create aesthetics. In this regard, substantial evidence from ritual theory suggests that religion, on the one hand, and art, literature, music, and (sacred) theater, on the other, developed in parallel during the cultural evolution. They constantly referred to each other, and then continued to differentiate themselves from one another. They cannot simply be derived from one another (for example, ritual cannot be derived from myth, and myth cannot be derived from ritual, as the old dispute in ritual studies goes).

Even today, all dimensions of literature reveal “its numerous links to the ritual, whether in its production and reception, its aesthetic form, its structure, its content and thematic positioning, its social connection, its social placement, and its social organization.”<sup>5</sup> This list speaks of the potential held by *aesthetic* affirmation, which literature always has, too. This is particularly evident in literature which is “applied” to a ritual and directly included within it as functional literature. Literature must therefore be researched within this context, which shapes its aesthetics and poetics. This is especially true for ritual texts that play a role within a religious context (liturgical texts, psalms, litanies, Christmas and Easter texts). However, even when used in profane social ways, literary texts are made accessible for ritual practices and used under the auspices of such practices (writers’ unions, writers’ cults, the honouring of writers, readings, clubs and literary associations, book fairs, etc.). “Cult books” and “cult authors” are currently playing a key role in literary modernity (Salinger, Hesse).<sup>6</sup>

The matter appears to become much more complex when an *individual’s* reception of literature is considered. However, the reader still participates in the aesthetic of the ritual, which gives a sense of community. People who write and read form part of a symbolic community, even though the reader remains an independent individual. Establishing a community by remaining an individual is the ritual secret of literature. This secret is indebted to the force of form and expression, which gives both order and direction. A major new challenge arises when the systems of literature and art differentiate themselves from one another and change their focus, taking subjectivity as their specific

<sup>5</sup> Wolfgang Braungart: *Ritual und Literatur*, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 1996, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Christian Klein: *Kultbücher: Theoretische Zugänge und exemplarische Analysen*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2014.



mode of articulation, as was the case in the eighteenth century. Even Adorno states that the solitude of lyric articulation “allows the voice of humankind to be heard” (*On Lyric Poetry and Society*, 1958).

DIFFERENTIATION DURING THE HISTORY OF LITERATURE,  
AND PROBLEMS RELATING TO THIS

Even in ancient times there was an awareness of literature in the sense that literature was separate from other cultural discourses. In his *Poetics* Aristotle makes a statement that remains influential in the modern age. He says that poetry, which works with possibilities (fictions), is different from the writing of history, which has to stick to the facts. But is it possible to distinguish the social from literary practices this distinctly, as the separation of *historia* and *fabula* implies? An argument that espoused this would suggest — particularly in the modern era — that art is the clear opposite of ritual: free, self-determined, individual. This demand to separate rite from literature led to tensions with other discourses and social practices that, on the whole, have a productive influence on the system of literature. However, this conception of viewing literature and art as fundamentally opposed to the historical-social world is too simplistic. The ritual is not simply a forced social event or “purely reactive imitation” (Max Weber) holding within it the potential to lead to wholly conventionalised, formalised ritualism. (The student movement quickly developed their own rituals to provide themselves with stability; it was often students themselves who demanded the reintroduction of graduation ceremonies a few years back.) In turn, literature is not autonomous and self-determined, in a simplistic sense. Even in the modern age, ritual and literature or art, can profoundly relate to one another.

The arts can be used in ritual contexts even in the modern era. A particular kind of aesthetic is required for this, however. This also applies to the field of occasional poetry in its entirety, which, like rhetoric in antiquity, still lives on in the present.<sup>7</sup> It is not only “princes’ henchmen” who look for this social release. Mörike was the post-*Goethezeit* nineteenth-century poet most aware of art and sensitivity, after Heine, and he wrote many joyful and “usable” occasional poems that were indeed intended to be used for all possible social occasions (to mark a birth, a wedding, or a birthday; as a thank-you for a gift; to cement human companionship). Some of these were highly poetic in parts. They avoid any sense of gravitas and yet are able to be included within a ritual. No matter how modest these poems may seem, they were highly symbolic acts

<sup>7</sup> Wulf Segebrecht: *Das Gelegenheitsgedicht: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte und Poetik der deutschen Lyrik*, Stuttgart, Metzler, 1977.

for Mörrike. It is highly productive to view literature as a symbolic act, both from the perspective of the study of literature and the study of rituals.<sup>8</sup> *Vom Kult zur Kunst (From Cult to Art)*, as Bruno Quast puts it: the matter is clearly not quite so simple.<sup>9</sup>

Important genres of lyric poetry, such as hymns, odes, and psalms, have still not fully lost their ritual/religious elements. Even in post-1945 literature, drama offers adaptations of religious genres (cult games and initiations, requiems, oratorios, songs).<sup>10</sup> As with the relationship between religion and literature in general, the relationship between ritual and literature in particular is not to be viewed as a competitive relationship (which can, of course, be the case in an individual situation) which has been secularised over the course of history. Simple, linear, and constant, or compensational, processes of secularisation (e.g., from myth to *logos*) are highly questionable. The religion of art around the turn of the nineteenth century did not simply replace the apparent decline in religion, or compensate for it. Rather, it expanded the space within which aesthetic, religious gestures could be made.

Despite these statements of relativity, it is particularly challenging to relate ritual to literature in the modern age. Regardless of all the talk of the death of the author and the disappearance of the subject, Schiller's statement does still apply: "All a poet can give us is his *individuality*" (*On Bürger's Poems*, 1791). It seems difficult to reconcile this standpoint with ritual. Ritual is always associated with the community: ritual is created by or designed for the community. Of course, Schiller says immediately after this that individuality's aesthetic expression must be "purified up to the level of humankind." He speaks here of form's ability to create communities [Vergemeinschaftung]. This is not only an expression of his Classicism. On its own, this would not explain very much. The subjectivity of the artist must challenge us, and aesthetic judgment must, in line with Kant, be justified to such an extent that it can be required of others. This issue also raises its head in discussions about the need for a new mythology, led by the early Romantics, during which they reflect upon the key role played by poetry. Romantic poetry strives to be identical to the new mythology. As modern, ironic, procedural poetry that challenges us individually, it is both a practice and a medium of bringing people together (cf. *Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus* [unknown authorship, 1796/97] and

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Burke: *Dichtung als symbolische Handlung: Eine Theorie der Literatur*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 1966. [*The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1941.]

<sup>9</sup> Bruno Quast: *Vom Kult zur Kunst: Öffnungen des rituellen Textes in Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, Tübingen/Basel, Francke, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Saskia Fischer: *Ritual und Ritualität im Drama nach 1945: Brecht, Frisch, Dürrenmatt, Sachs, Weiss, Hochhuth, Handke*, Paderborn, Fink, 2019.



Friedrich Schlegel's *Gespräch über die Poesie* with its *Rede über die Mythologie*). Whether this is successful is another matter. In any case, this is the aspiration. In turn, this aspiration goes hand-in-hand with the recognition of a problem.

#### FURTHER DETERMINATIONS AND DIFFERENCES

This demonstrates that a ritual is not pure performance for its own sake, devoid of meaning,<sup>11</sup> even if the concrete attribution of sense takes a back seat for individual participants in the ritual. Ever since the performative turn in cultural studies over the last third of the twentieth century, cultural performance can no longer be sensibly discussed as performance that is free of meaning. If the ritual were to be understood as such, it would be easier to construct a bridge between this and literature and art. However, something cannot truly be autotelic: everything that we do as humans happens within a socio-cultural context, and every human expression or action draws meaning from the culture in which it occurs. It is arguably the case that the cultural participants in an action or form can assign autotelism in an ethical/aesthetic sense, or intentionally make use of it themselves: this is how it *should* be; there *should* be discourse that is good for “nothing,” and not justified by its practical functionality.

Precisely this was suggested in the eighteenth century, when the idea of autonomous art was developed and came into being. However, this establishment of the aesthetics of autonomy must, in turn, be viewed within the context of history and culture: it is *the* discourse that symbolises the autonomous value of humankind (Moritz, Kant, Schiller). Depending on one's theological standpoint, it is even possible to claim that a religious performance is an end in itself. This applies, for example, to doctrines on grace and justification: how can the weak man use his religious actions to demand something from almighty God via an autotelic strategy? From this angle, the liturgy can be viewed as a large-scale sacred “game” for theology in the twentieth century, according to Romani Guardini. The liturgy can be seen as the greatest Western work of art; a work of art that can only be autotelic when before God, and is only worthy of His grace precisely because it does not intend to achieve anything. Alongside other representatives of a more conservative aesthetic, Guardini attempted to view art as an autonomous, ceremonial game. However, this conservative solution to the problem, merely indicated here, is not at all sufficient to describe the relationship between ritual and literature/art in an appropriate way. This is particularly the case for literature, which contains closer social, structural, and semantic links to the ritual. Art is not just a celebration; art is not just a game.

<sup>11</sup> Frits Staal: The Meaninglessness of Ritual, *Numen* 26 (1979), 2–22; Axel Michaels: 'Le rituel pour le rituel' oder wie sinnlos sind Rituale, in C. Caduff – J. Pfaff-Czarnecka (eds.): *Rituale heute: Theorien, Kontroversen, Entwürfe*, Berlin, Reimer, 1999, 23–48.

However, from a conservative position, it is also not possible to develop an argument against the existence of relationships between ritual and literature (or art). The tension between *aesthetic* conservatism, on the one hand, and *aesthetic* subversion, on the other, is absolutely fundamental to the cultural process and cultural evolution. It can be seen in the tension between the confirmation of form and its dissolution, between consolidation, regulation, and dynamism, between aesthetic affirmation and aesthetic transgression. This can be expressed in the form of an old, problematic opposition, so to speak: the opposition between Classicism and Mannerism, between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. These oppositions apply both to art and religion (ritual completion — ecstasy; ritual control — excitement). Transgressiveness, through to the shattering of taboos, is a cultural and aesthetic principle which is absolutely fundamental, and often productive. However, without its counterpart, without the practices of continual order and stabilisation (which include rituals), transgressiveness merely slips away into cultural self-destruction. In this regard it does not seem illogical to view art's historical process within a culture as being a cyclic movement.

#### THE AESTHETIC PERSPECTIVE ON RITUAL

The Ritual can be viewed as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.<sup>12</sup> As with all cultural expressions and actions, a ritual's meaning and impact are also connected to the degree of its aesthetic (in the sense of visible or perceivable) elaborateness in its overall structure. In this regard, it is not logical to draw a firm line between ritual and simple convention or routine. It would be more appropriate, as in the arts themselves, to talk of a ritual's stronger or weaker aesthetic intensity: a continuum of greater or lesser aesthetic elaborateness. The aesthetic perspective on ritual and the socially functional, communicative and institutional perspective cannot be allowed to be pitted against each other, especially not when the matter at stake is the importance of ritual for literature and art. This becomes vividly clear with regard to Attic tragedy. Attic tragedy was intended to be understood both as an aesthetic production *and* as a cultural production displayed in front of the polis and for the polis, within the framework of the powerful Dionysian force. The polis is depicted in the Dionysian and the performance of tragedies associated with it; the polis experiences, celebrates and performs itself both through the Dionysian and tragedies. The polis represents itself in this great ceremony and comprehends itself as the ceremony is performed, as the topics and problems that affect the polis (that is, the whole) are represented, shown, and discussed.

<sup>12</sup> Braungart: *Ritual und Literatur*, 41; Dücker: *Rituale*, 185.



Even in the present day, art, music, and theater are still associated with ritual. Nobody would seriously counter this, bearing in mind the close connections of these arts, in particular, to religion. Even modern music intensely fosters these connections (sacred music, as well as gospel and soul); the visual arts of the modern age are committed to using religious and ritual means of expression (such as in Viennese Actionism, or in the case of Joseph Beuys, in the performances of Marina Abramović, or in the work of Christoph Schlingensiefel). Even in modern-day painting, the triptych is still an important formula for pathos.

The matter appears much more complex for literature. Nevertheless, the same applies: literature's history cannot be described as the process of emancipation from a cult. Nor does it follow a linear process of secularisation. Literature can deal with anything which applies to cultural history. Of course, literature does take up rituals as a topic, since rituals are so important for political, social, and communal life — just as literature can pick up on everything and use representation to interpret what is important for us as humans. Researchers within the field of literature studies have frequently drawn on this material and thematic approach to ritual. Although existing within a fictional framework, literature can approach the concept of comprehension, particularly in a philosophical manner (for example, during Romanticism, or in the work of Thomas Mann or Hermann Broch). As a linguistic work of art it has an innately reflexive relationship with itself (provided that the intention is to state that the medium of conceptual understanding is language, in line with Gadamer's hermeneutics). To this extent, its linguistic nature appears to remove it from the realm of ritual: "There are many monsters, but none of them are as monstrous as Man," states the choir in Sophocles' *Antigone*. This provides a perspective from which the entire tragedy can be interpreted, a perspective through which it moves away from its ritual context. But it does not completely dissociate itself. Time and again, literature tries to release itself from the inevitability of partaking in language as the general medium of understanding and communication, thereby subverting understanding and comprehension (language criticism, Dadaism, concrete poetry). Despite this, literature's linguistic nature is always saying something, and always commenting on something.

Since the eighteenth century, the more that art and literature have viewed themselves as autonomous, differentiated discourses, the more likely it is that they will in turn claim to strive to exert influence and impact, or to safeguard their impact, by becoming fully explicit. This can be seen with Schiller and Goethe, as well as with George and Rilke. Another way to safeguard impact can be found in the ritualisation of literature, which can also be expressed as the systematic, *aesthetic* production of *meaning*. Symbolism shows this very

clearly. Stefan George heavily populates his life and work with religious semantics, on the one hand, and, on the other, uses religious and ritual principles in terms of form.<sup>13</sup>

But how can it be possible to discuss ritual as an *aesthetic* term which is of *systematic* relevance? We have already seen that the general structuring characteristics of the ritual (see above) are used to construct aesthetic meaning, both in ritual and artistic practice. The ritual can be understood as a term for aesthetic organization. The aesthetic experience of the binding, valid, important aspect is made possible by the bleakest poem by Trakl or the most unwieldy poem by Celan. This experience can be illuminated by the participation of literature in the aesthetics of ritual. Even where literature “only” appears to be playing with form (for example, in Jandl’s poetry) it does not appear to be random and coincidental. This is the meaning of form,<sup>14</sup> and gives justification for aesthetic affirmation where it does not seem possible to reach an agreement on a semantic level. Paul Gerhardt’s “Abendlied” and/or Matthias Claudius’ song of the same title, are there to comfort those who have moved far away from any form of Christian or Protestant religion. It is hardly possible to avoid being drawn in by the start of Rilke’s “Ersten Duineser Elegie,” even if the reader does not set much store by angels themselves. Particularly for artistic articulation, a more open conception of meaning, namely one which is not reduced to a semiotic concept, is helpful: one which includes “aesthetic significance.”

#### MEANING, SIGNIFICANCE, AND PRESENTIVITY

When talking of a symbol, or, more generally, a cultural philosophy, if a person says that something means this or that, this person is referring to fixed, nameable content, possibly in addition to many other aspects (validity, appearance). Thus, for example, a white sign made of sheet metal in the shape of an upended triangle and edged in red, placed at the edge of the road, would be understood as a symbol for “Warning, give way.” Talking of a graduation ceremony, one could say that its purpose is to close off one phase of life in an explicit, definitive manner, and to act as a bridge to the next. It is a “transition ritual,” designed to control, and thereby reduce, the uncertainty that this change of status brings. However, if the traffic sign is bent on one corner, has indentations from night-time air rifle “exercises,” is greatly faded, or is swaying in the wind, we “understand” even more. But what do we understand? If, at the ceremony, the graduates are rapidly assembled together, their certificates

<sup>13</sup> Wolfgang Braungart: *Ästhetischer Katholizismus: Stefan Georges Rituale der Literatur*, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Burdorf: *Poetik der Form*.



pressed into their hands and then they quickly head off for beer and sausages; or, if, one after the other, clad in little black dresses or suits (which doesn't happen very often in their life) they are called on stage and the cameras click, we "understand" even more. But what do we understand? (This example shows how various rituals — of graduation, of celebration — can be across cultures: American and British graduation ceremonies are traditionally much more elaborate than those at German universities.)

Wilhelm Dilthey views understanding as integration into a life context, and therefore considers it from the perspective of the subject. This is an emphatic way of looking at understanding, and one that cannot really be used for the "Warning, give way" traffic sign. It is, nevertheless, understandable: think, for example, of the small child who sees this sign on his or her first trip out on a bicycle, and receives an answer to the question: "What's the importance of that triangle over there?" Even semiotically understood signs are embedded in cultural practices [Lebenswelt]. Clearly, understanding requires running the entire gamut: from high historical/cultural generality and commitment, on the one hand, to lofty subjectivity of understanding on the other, which is hardly more divisible on a communicative level.

Time and again, Dilthey now brings into play a term which is much trickier to define precisely than the term "meaning," and which is therefore hardly used in the aesthetic debate: *significance*. Dilthey summarizes this as a "universal value for human affectivity."<sup>15</sup> "*Universal*": this opens up a whole new can of worms. There is also a subjective universality of aesthetics, a claim to aesthetic validity which the work of art itself posits. Nobody would say that the celebratory and stately setting of a ceremony was amusing and entertaining. However, you could say: *I* don't know what to think of it. By saying this, the speaker knows, and articulates, that he or she is basing this statement on pure subjectivity, that he or she cannot "require" or "demand" this from others, in contrast to aesthetic judgment.

Thus, the term "significance" interacts with a dimension of understanding that really is fundamental. This dimension is decisively connected with aesthetic explicitness, clarity, the performativity of the aesthetic, and the convincing nature of its overall appearance. It can even appear in opposition to meaning. Drawing on Hans Blumenberg, it can be said that we also create and experience significance in contrast to the "absolutism of reality" (and precisely in opposition to it), where all the possibilities of a deeper, metaphysical meaning are constructed for us. The ritual of a funeral is "significant" for us if the "senselessness" of death threatens to cut off speech. Even if a person has only read ten of Trakl's poems, he or she would be able to sense the significance of

<sup>15</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. VI.: *Die Geistige Welt: Einleitung in die Philosophie des Lebens: Zweite Hälfte. Abhandlungen zur Poetik, Ethik und Pädagogik*, Leipzig/Berlin, Teubner, 1924, 216.

Trakl's tone, even though it is so difficult to describe how this tone is created. The situation is no different with Thomas Mann, with Ingeborg Bachmann, or Martin Walser. "Tone" also constitutes a work, even in prose. "Significance" is a fundamental dimension of aesthetic experience and arises from the aesthetic impression and aesthetic presentivity of cultural expression. Its "significance" becomes greater the more regulated and processed it is. In literature, "tone" can be understood as literature's specific, non-discursive "presentative symbolism."<sup>16</sup>

Everything that people do or create as a cultural act or expression is connected to cultural semantics. This means that this act or expression is symbolic by its very nature and can therefore be interpreted, whether this is intentional or not. *Creatio ex nihilo* does not exist. Everything, even an individual "articulation", is always collective, too.<sup>17</sup> One must always relate oneself to culture in one way or another, and draw the material used for the articulation from a cultural context. This is also valid for the applied and liberal arts. There are no pure colors, free of cultural meanings; there are no chords that are empty of meaning; in a social and cultural context, stone and wood cannot be released from meaning as construction materials. However, it has to be stated that it can be very difficult to offer an appropriately precise, verifiable description of these dimensions of meaning. Every cultural "articulation" contains an "objectifiable component" which can be clearly explained with reference to cultural contexts.<sup>18</sup> No experience can be completely direct and "un-derivative"; neither the experience of the producer nor that of the recipient of cultural expression. This potentially aggrieves the modern subject's need to be unique. It is happy to be skeptical of rituals, and is yet so in need of them. The modern subject yearns for nothing more than directness and authentic validity: precisely that which the ritual is *not*. And the modern subject wants nothing more than a sense of belonging: precisely that which the ritual makes possible.<sup>19</sup>

The ritual is a type of action, and the meaning of this action is substantially drawn from its aesthetic presentivity. This does not apply any less to literature: and this is the key aesthetic bridge between the two. Literature makes use of the entire spectrum of expression that the ritual has at its disposal, and continues to do so through to the present day.

<sup>16</sup> Susanne K. Langer: *Philosophie auf neuem Wege: Das Symbol im Denken, im Ritus und in der Kunst*, Frankfurt a. M., S. Fischer, 1965. [*Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1942.]

<sup>17</sup> Matthias Jung: *Der bewusste Ausdruck: Anthropologie der Artikulation*, Berlin/Boston, De Gruyter, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Jung: *Ausdruck*.

<sup>19</sup> Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka: *Zugehörigkeit in der mobilen Welt: Politiken der Verortung*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2012.



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POETIC RITUALITY AND TRANSCULTURALITY  
BERTOLT BRECHT'S DIDACTIC PLAY  
*DIE MASSNAHME (THE MEASURES TAKEN)*

SASKIA FISCHER

*Brecht's use of Noh theater, Greek tragedy, Christian genres, and forms of ritual demonstrates how he developed his idea of epic theater by also incorporating a transcultural perspective. This concept of theater is characterized by a dynamic relationship between dramatic texts and traditions as well as between different culture-specific theater forms and ritual performances. The revival of ritual in modern theater, as can be witnessed in his didactic play 'Die Maßnahme' (The Measures Taken), can also be understood as a search for universal and transcultural forms of expression that take up and deal with fundamental existential as well as cultural questions and issues. While his play, premiered in 1930, is usually dismissed in research as political agitprop, a precise look at Brecht's adaptation of ritual forms opens up a different interpretation, as I will show in this paper. Brecht's play creates an aesthetic of "poetic rituality" by using but also distancing his theater from a non-reflective use of ritual forms and genres, and thus also from the highly problematic ritual self-sacrifice of the young comrade for the sake of communist revolution.*

Brecht's controversial didactic play *Die Maßnahme (The Measures Taken)*, premiered in 1930, demonstrates the central importance of sacralization as well as ritual for art and culture, even in the presumably secularized modern age. Moreover, *Die Maßnahme* shows the impact of ritual and sacralization, and their constitution of meaning, where it has in fact been denied: in the midst of materialist ideology and politics. In this article, I will explore the question as to whether Brecht's theater, which he so categorically separates from the ritual in his theoretical texts, is actually fundamentally engaged with a ritualistic aesthetic. His didactic play *Die Maßnahme* is a particularly impressive but also politically highly problematic play, which I, however, in contrast to common interpretations, will read as much more subversive — also due to its ritualistic form. I will first situate Brecht's ritualistic aesthetic in the historical context of the time the play was first performed, followed secondly by some systematic reflections on the relationship between ritual and theater in general. On this basis, I will thirdly interpret the play and its poetic rituality in more detail.



## 1. RITUAL AND RITUALITY IN 'SECULARIZED' TIMES

Theater, as a cultural practice, which takes place in front of an occasional public, can have an intense effect on its audience. It is *the* presentative and performative art form *par excellence* and therefore shows a great affinity to rituals. This analogy is evident in complex ritual sequences such as the Christian liturgy, which is, like a drama, divided into different acts, is carefully staged, and has its own dramaturgy. Performance theories in recent years, in particular, have emphasized the comparability of ritual and theater. However, not only has academic discourse shown a great interest in rituals, but the theater practice of the twentieth century from around 1900 until now demonstrates an increasing use of rituals, as can be witnessed in the theater of the European avant-gardes (e.g. Antonin Artaud, Max Reinhardt, Vaslav Nijinsky and his company, the "Ballets Russes," Vsevolod Emilyevich Meyerhold, etc.)<sup>1</sup> as well as in the theater and drama after 1945 (Bertolt Brecht, Max Frisch, Nelly Sachs, etc.)<sup>2</sup> and in the work of contemporary artists (such as Christoph Schlingensief, Robert Wilson).<sup>3</sup> Theater and drama have always been embedded in ritual contexts, and theater directors and playwrights have deliberately pushed this proximity even in modernity. This is also true of the relationship between theater, drama, and ritual in various cultures up to the present day. Particularly in the European theater of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the adaption of rituals from different cultures reveals the dynamic processes of a fruitful transcultural exchange that influenced the European theater in a decisive way. Bertolt Brecht, for example, intensively studied Japanese Noh theater and Chinese performing arts, from which he derived essential aspects for his own idea of an "epic theater," within which he, at the same time, referred to religious genres and rituals from the Christian context. Likewise, the Sámi author Nils-Aslak Valkeapää recently created his play *Ridn'oaivi ja nieguid oaidni* [*The Frost-haired and the Dream-seer*] in close engagement with Noh theater, by which means he also tries to promote and foster Sámi culture and art in modern theater (see Johanna Domokos' contribution in this volume). These attempts highlight whether the interest of the performing arts in rituals has opened up theater and drama to a transcultural perspective.

This fascination for ritualistic forms and genres is all the more surprising in modern times as rituals seem to have lost their self-evidence in general.

<sup>1</sup> Gabriele Brandstetter: Pina Bauschs 'Das Frühlingsopfer.' Signatur – Übertragung – Kontext, in G. Brandstetter – G. Klein (eds.): *Methoden der Tanzwissenschaft: Modellanalysen zu Pina Bauschs, Le Sacre du Printemps / Das Frühlingsopfer*, Bielefeld, transcript Verlag, 2015, 93–122.

<sup>2</sup> Saskia Fischer: *Ritual und Ritualität im Drama nach 1945: Brecht, Frisch, Dürrenmatt, Sachs, Weiss, Hochhuth, Handke*, Paderborn, Fink, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Lore Knapp: *Formen des Kunstreligiösen: Peter Handke – Christoph Schlingensief, Paderborn, Fink, 2015.*

They are mostly regarded as practices of pre-modern, “primitive” cultures, which, at best, still have legitimacy in religious or traditional contexts. As primarily collective social practices that affirm community, rituals seem hardly compatible with a modern pluralistic and democratic society, which focuses on the autonomy of the individual. But is this really so? Did the questions of cultural identity and belonging, and the need for collective cultural practices to assure community, simply disappear? Based on a broad concept of ritual and an ambivalent understanding of modernity, recent research on rituals has fundamentally differentiated our prejudices toward those community-building cultural practices. Hans-Georg Soeffner even ascribed a “ritualistic anti-ritualism” to the protest movements of the 1960s and 1980s.<sup>4</sup> Modern industrial societies also have their rituals, one could say, according to Soeffner, but they do not necessarily admit their rituality to themselves. Thus, in public discourse, mass performances and political performances are labeled as “events,” “festivals,” or “happenings.” The terms emphasize the supposed freedom, voluntariness, and informality of these performances. But neither are rituals exclusively formal and rigid; nor are modern cultural performances always open and arbitrary. Rather, it is questionable whether symbolic cultural practices are properly described by this new language and whether their social commitment is not somewhat concealed by it.

However, it must be remembered that criticism of rituals is as old as rituals themselves. As public, symbolic, cultural performances, with which a social group or society stages its self-image and its central, ‘most sacred’ values, rituals have always been and still are viewed and questioned critically. Yet, a culture seemingly cannot abandon its ritual forms entirely but rather creates new ones. In the course of the Enlightenment’s critique of religion, for example, religious rituals came under particular scrutiny, while the theatricality and rituality of political performances during the French Revolution cannot be denied (as Georg Büchner already demonstrated impressively in his play *Dantons Tod*). Such a discrepancy is also evident, albeit in a different way, in Brecht’s play — and this is precisely what this paper will argue.

Therefore, a general negative understanding of rituals as being merely formal and instrumental is all too narrow. This pejorative notion also takes into account that rituals have a suggestive effect due to their emotional, captivating character and are, therefore, above all, manipulative. But this is not necessarily the case. Rituals are manifold. Not all of them are heteronomous, authoritarian practices, and they do not only occur in pre-modern times or totalitarian systems. Rituals can be both strictly regulated and structured, as well as being

<sup>4</sup> Hans-Georg Soeffner: *Rituale des Antiritualismus – Materialien für Außeralltägliches*, in H. U. Gumbrecht – K. L. Pfeiffer (eds.): *Materialität der Kommunikation*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 1988, 519–546; Hans-Georg Soeffner: *Gesellschaft ohne Baldachin. Über die Labilität von Ordnungskonstruktionen*, Weilerswist, Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2000.



ecstatic and excessive. They even sometimes possess a certain reflexivity and openness. The diversity of ritual practice and its ongoing importance for cultural representation, even today, calls for a more differentiated approach. The still widespread and common belief that rituals have lost their validity in a secularized and rationalized modernity turns out to be an oversimplification after closer examination — especially for the arts. In fact, ritual and rituality seem to be a general artistic option in the process of secularization. This even applies to artworks that emphatically present themselves as “modern”<sup>5</sup> — such as the theater of Bertolt Brecht, that he deliberately called “epic theater” of the scientific age.

By using Bertolt Brecht’s controversial play *Die Maßnahme* (*The Measures Taken*) as an example, I would like to discuss this ambivalence over rituals, and also show why they are “risky” cultural practices that were successfully taken up by a totalitarian ideology such as the National Socialists and utilized in its propaganda, but, on the other hand, led to tremendous artistic innovation. Brecht’s didactic plays [Lehrstücke], all written in the early 1930s, establish an aesthetic that is strongly derived from the use of ritual forms and highly influenced his concept of “epic theater.” *Die Maßnahme* is both ritual criticism and a reflected play with rituals which integrate, at the same time, the dramatic tradition of Noh theater and the intensive use of new media. Brecht’s adaptation of rituals, the references to Noh theater, Christian genres and form show how he developed his idea of epic theater by also incorporating a transcultural perspective. This concept of theater is characterized by a dynamic relationship between dramatic texts and traditions as well as between different culture-specific theater forms, ritual performances, and the opportunities offered by the aforementioned new media of that time.<sup>6</sup> By doing so, Brecht’s adaptation

<sup>5</sup> Saskia Fischer – Birgit Mayer (eds.): *Kunst-Rituale – Ritual-Kunst. Zur Ritualität von Theater, Literatur und Musik in der Moderne*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Transcultural theater, as it is understood here, is more than a “cultural collage” of different cultural traditions. The intertwining of different theatrical genres and cultural practices, which fundamentally determine Brecht’s play *Die Maßnahme*, leads to a new perspective on one’s own culture and to a recognition of the self in a foreign culture. The experience of alienation is the central motif of Brecht’s work. The aim of the so-called “V-effect” (i.e. “Verfremdungseffekt” [alienation effect]) is to examine the common and well known from a foreign perspective. This refers to a general understanding of being in the world. Brecht is always concerned with making the customs and habits of his own culture appear in a foreign light. He abandons the idea of closed cultures that can be separated from one another. The symbolic context of a single culture is lost, according to Brecht. The transcultural theater, however, is a promising opportunity to cope with this loss. It enables the connection between one’s own culture and an allegedly completely different one as well as the emergence of new innovative aesthetics through the combination of very different cultural influences. Condensed in existential key experiences, ritual gestures, and practices that can be understood across cultures, the ritualistic aesthetic of his play expresses in reduced form the experience of the self and the other in theater. Therefore the revival of ritual in modern theater can be understood as a search for universal and transcultural forms of expression that take up

of rituals leads to an aesthetic distancing of his theater and plays from a non-reflective use of ritual forms and genres. Moreover, it is precisely through this reference to rituals that Brecht gains an anti-illusionist, sequential aesthetic interspersed with choral songs, commentaries, and lyrical elements, which he used successfully for his idea of epic theater with its “*Verfremdungseffekt*” [alienation effect]. But how exactly does a theater that is bound to self-reflexivity fit in with a concept of theater based on rituals? Isn't Brecht's use of rituals rather only serving the idea of deconstructing and criticizing rituals? And, how do ritual criticism and the productivity of rituals for his art intertwine? I will begin to answer these questions by briefly theoretically defining the relationship of ritual, theater, and drama.

#### FOUR THEORETICAL REMARKS TO DEFINE THE RELATIONSHIP OF RITUAL, THEATER, AND DRAMA

First: What Exactly is a Ritual?

There is not just one kind of ritual. Furthermore, my understanding of rituals is not limited to a religious context. Instead, rituals can occur in many and diverse types and forms. Rituals can have a rigid structure, or they can also be open and self-reflexive and may even become ecstatic, excessive, or can symbolically break taboos. Rituals can range from practices of healing, helping, and giving, to rituals of power, punishment, hunting, sacrifice, and aggression, or they can even be performed as practices of protest and rebellion.

Rituals are cultural actions that are *repeated regularly*, for example at a certain occasion or time, and are characterized by a more or less strong standardization and formality. But a ritual does not necessarily have to be rigid and stereotypical. A certain standardization and formality, however, is necessary for an action to be repeatable at all. Rituals are usually performed *collectively* and are related to the community, society, or social group by and for which they are performed. Thus, rituals are practiced with the knowledge of being perceived and interpreted. Therefore, they are always *communicative practices* of self-representation, self-interpretation, and self-understanding of a community, society, or social group. Rituals articulate and embody the values and the social order of a community. Even if they are practiced by a single individual alone and without being seen (like praying the rosary), they refer to an external context that is *aesthetically* and *symbolically* represented in and by them. Rituals are explicit and self-referential, as they always emphasize their very own aesthetic form and theatricality. In the Christian liturgy, for instance, all

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and deal with fundamental existential and cultural questions and issues, and hence, can be described as a new interpretation of the idea of “world-theater.” See further Günther Heeg: *Das transkulturelle Theater*, Berlin, Theater der Zeit, 2017, 14–22.



actions have a symbolic meaning and are performed as significant gestures. Likewise, the Bible is held up high for all to see in the Roman Catholic Mass. It is not just a book; it is a sacred text that deserves special awe and attention. The outstanding status of the Bible is indicated by the theatrical way in which it is staged (you have to literally look up to it, and it is addressed as a “holy text,” “the word of God”). As a result, rituals mark themselves out as striking and important actions that differ from everyday life while also gaining a special kind of seriousness and solemnness. This way, both religious and profane rituals emphasize what is of particular importance to the social group or community (such as a person, a value, an event, a myth, etc.) and should possess great significance and authority.<sup>7</sup>

Rituals are, furthermore, practices that open up symbolic dimensions of meaning, which are not only represented in the ritual but are created in the process of its performance. It is the arts — the choir singing, the artistic decoration (e.g., images, clothing, and props), the choreography of movements — incorporated in a ritual causing an intense effect of “transcendence,” meaning, or community. One can describe rituals themselves as great works of art, which develop their effect on their participants through an artistically elaborated, and thus an emotional and sensual experience.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the meaning of rituals cannot be understood simply by a “subtext” or cognitive interpretation. Rather, rituals are performative practices in a very fundamental sense.<sup>9</sup> It is particularly interesting for the question of the relationship between ritual and art, in which rituals unfold their social function as symbolic and aesthetic practices. This is one of the central arguments of Wolfgang Braungart’s work on ritual and literature.<sup>10</sup> Since rituals address their participants emotionally with their elaborative form and even involve them physically, they can lead to an intensive, integrative, and community-building effect.

#### Second: In what Way are Theater and Drama Strongly Related to Rituals?

The main attributes of rituals outlined above — such as repetition, a formally structured and standardized process, performativity, significance, self-referentiality, an elaborated aesthetical and symbolic presentation, a deliberated staging, as well as the social impact of rituals as symbolic and communicative actions — are also constitutive for drama and theater. This highlights that theater and drama are fundamentally related to ritual practice.

<sup>7</sup> See my definition in Fischer: *Ritual und Ritualität*, 28–32; Wolfgang Braungart: *Ritual und Literatur*, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 1996; Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger: *Rituale*, Frankfurt a. M./New York, Campus, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Mosebach: *Häresie der Formlosigkeit: Die römische Liturgie und ihr Feind*, München, Rowohlt Taschenbuch, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> On the wide-ranging significance of the performative in a ritual see Fischer: *Ibid.*, 28–32.

<sup>10</sup> Braungart: *Ritual und Literatur*.

Rituals can also be described as scenic forms of representation. Similar to theater performances, rituals often possess performative elements and are based on a script that precisely defines the ritual process. Thus, for example, the liturgy is described as a ritual practice, which relies on a text such as the *Rituale Romanum* in the Catholic Church, which, similarly to the staging of a dramatic text in theater, is realized through the performance of the ritual. Likewise, myths, but also the protocol of state ceremonies, have been described as such “texts” on which the ritual is centered. Both in the theater and in rituals, props are used, and stylized gestures and actions — as well as recitations, songs, dance, and music — are performed. The costumes of the actors in the theater correspond to the festive clothing of ritual specialists: both theater and ritual can distinguish themselves as important and significant actions and draw attention to what is being performed through these garments. Both theatrical performances and rituals reflect the culture in which and for which they are performed.<sup>11</sup> Rituals interrupt the flow of social life, as Victor Turner emphasized, and enable the group of agents who perform them to “take cognizance of its own behavior in relation to its own values, even to question at times the value of those values.”<sup>12</sup> In doing so, they set reflexive processes in motion and incorporate them at the same time. Hence, theater and ritual create “cultural frames in which reflexivity can find a legitimate place.”<sup>13</sup> Comparable to rituals, the performance of a drama can also be interpreted as a form of a culture’s meta-comment — so to speak.<sup>14</sup> In research, rituals are, therefore, generally regarded as “the master keys to understanding cultures.”<sup>15</sup> Whereas on the one hand, the affinity between theater, drama, and ritual is more than obvious, on the other hand, one should not forget that despite their many similarities, theater and ritual are not equivalent cultural practices.

### Third: The Different use of Rituality and Theatricality in Ritual and Theater / Drama

Especially complex ritual performances are undoubtedly theatrical. However, they are not theater in a narrow sense since they follow other communicative rules. Rituals, as Walter Burkert pointed out, depend on a “theatricality

<sup>11</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte: Theater als kulturelles Modell, in L. Jäger (ed.): *Germanistik: Disziplinäre Identität und kulturelle Leistung. Vorträge des deutschen Germanistentages 1994*, Weinheim, Beltz, 1995, 164–184; Erika Fischer-Lichte: Theater und Ritual, in C. Wulf – J. Zirfas (eds.): *Die Kultur des Rituals. Inszenierungen. Praktiken. Symbole*, München, Fink, 2004, 279–292.

<sup>12</sup> Victor Turner: *From Ritual to Theatre. The Human Seriousness of Play*, New York, Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982, 92.

<sup>13</sup> Turner: *From Ritual to Theatre*.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Douglas: *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London, Routledge, 1966.

<sup>15</sup> Catherine Bell: *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1992, 7.



of compelling seriousness,” and they must avoid irony and criticism.<sup>16</sup> When performing a ritual, due to its stylized performance, the participants are always aware that, in the broadest sense, they are taking part in a theatrical performance and playing a certain “role.” But rituals move within a frame of concrete function and pragmatism, which is non-negotiable and which fundamentally determines their performance. According to Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, a ritual is not only a descriptive model of social order but must also be seen as a prescriptive model for reality.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, theater and drama have much greater freedom to cope with reality and can use theatricality for criticism of what is brought to the stage and how it is presented. Brecht’s epic theater, which constantly points out that it *is* theater, aims to create a distance for the audience, and in doing so, makes subversive use of theatricality. Such a way of staging, where the performance itself is put into question, would make the ritual fail.<sup>18</sup> In summary, it can be said that theater and ritual are determined by the different contexts in which they take place and by the different communicative rules they follow. I, therefore, understand the concepts of “rituality” and “theatricality” as flexible, dynamic categories that can exceed and intertwine “ritual” and “theater,” and that can be applied to various cultural actions and practices. Rituality and theatricality measure the similarity of a cultural practice toward a ritual or a theater performance. Rituals can be highly theatrical and still remain a ritual in the first place, as the staging of a play can be very ritualistic in its style of performance *without* transforming into a ritual. But rituality and theatricality can unfold much more openly and self-critically in theater than would ever be possible in a ritual. At the same time, however, theater can intentionally make us forget the difference between theater and ritual through an aesthetic form strongly influenced by a ritualistic style of performance.

#### Fourth: The Category of Poetic Rituality

As I have pointed out, theater and drama are deeply related to ritual practice. But to speak of *poetic* rituality — a category I have developed in former studies<sup>19</sup> — the great proximity of a piece of art to a ritual practice has to be emphasized by the work of art itself. That means: poetic rituality describes

<sup>16</sup> Walter Burkert: *Opferritual bei Sophokles. Pragmatik – Symbolik – Theater, AU. Der Alt-sprachliche Unterricht. Antike Religion* 2 (1985), 5–20, 20.

<sup>17</sup> Stollberg-Rilinger: *Rituale*.

<sup>18</sup> Turner’s difference between ritual and theater being mostly neglected, especially in theater studies. Erika Fischer-Lichte for instance develops on the basis of Victor Turner’s studies a very broad concept of ritual that makes ritual and theater indistinguishable. (See Fischer-Lichte: *Theater und Ritual*.) But it is crucial to acknowledge that the self-reference of the aesthetic of ritual is not the same as the self-critical approach to the use of ritual and rituality that is possible in a theater play.

<sup>19</sup> Fischer: *Ibid*.

a specific literary and dramatic adaptation of ritual patterns, types, genres, symbols, ways of speaking, and phrases. Poetic rituality can be recognized if the relation to a ritual determines the aesthetic construction and concept of a drama or theater performance in an essential way. Just because a funeral is being depicted on stage, does not mean that we can speak of poetic rituality right away. But if the play, for instance, follows the structure of the Catholic requiem, this reference opens up connotations that enrich the significance of what is happening on stage as well as the effect on the audience that the play is trying to achieve. Max Frisch's drama *Nun singen sie wieder – Versuch eines Requiems* [*Now they're singing again: Attempt at a Requiem*],<sup>20</sup> first staged in 1945, for example, is profoundly related to the Catholic requiem, which determines the dramaturgy and structure of this play. At first glance, it seems plausible that Frisch, after the Second World War and in the face of violence and death, adapts the genre of the requiem, which is dedicated to symbolically dealing with death for those left behind. Yet Frisch's drama reflects on the problematic continuity of the ritual in view of National Socialist propaganda, which made excessive use of genres such as the oratorio and the requiem. For Frisch, a non-reflective use of such religious genres is just as impossible as is a meaningful or even reconciling interpretation of the suffering experienced during the war. Therefore, the drama is related to the requiem in a fundamental way, and at the same time questions if the requiem is the right genre to deal with the experiences of the war.

Similarly to rituals, poetic rituality also unfolds in a broad range of ritual forms. At one end of the spectrum, poetic rituality can evolve as the attempt of a drama or performance to present itself as being as close to a ritual as possible, aiming to eliminate the differences between art and ritual. At the other extreme, poetic rituality can be shaped as a distant, self-reflective, even self-critical form of rituality. Due to the wide scope in which poetic rituality can occur, poetic rituality should not be seen as a restraint but as an expansion of the artistic and theatrical modes of expression. The category of poetic rituality emphasizes the productivity of an artistic adaptation of ritual. Building on Victor Turner, the adaptation of ritual in drama and theater can be described as an artistic and innovative liminal process.<sup>21</sup> Turner sees rituals as actions "betwixt and between the positions as signed and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial."<sup>22</sup> He also stresses: "In liminality, new ways of acting,

<sup>20</sup> Max Frisch: *Three Plays. Santa Cruz – Now They're Singing Again – Rip van Winkle*, trans. Michael Bullock, Vancouver, Ronsdale Press, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Victor Turner: Variations on a Theme on Liminality, in S. F. Moore – B. G. Myerhoff (eds.): *Secular Ritual. A Working Definition of Ritual*, Assen/Amsterdam, Van Gorcum, 1977, 36–52, 40.

<sup>22</sup> Victor Turner: *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*, London, Routledge 1969, 95; Arnold van Gennep: *Les Rites de Passage. Étude systématique des Rites*, Paris, Editions A&J Picard, 1981.



new combinations of symbols, are tried out, to be discarded or accepted.”<sup>23</sup> Poetic rituality, in my understanding, describes the liminality of a dramatic and theatrical performance in which the references to ritual practices and ritual forms and structures are set in motion and through which new characteristics as well as aspects of rituality arise. Poetic rituality, therefore, can be seen as a dynamic process that is constantly in progress. In this sense, poetic rituality produces a new aesthetic that adopts characteristics of ritual practices and allows them to become explicit or emphasizes the similarity of ritual to drama or theater itself. That is why I speak of *poetic* rituality, which refers to the Greek term *poiēsis* (Greek: ποιησις, English: “to do” or “to make”). Poetic rituality leads to a fundamentally performative aesthetic, which, although in a very artistic and poetic manner, is still deeply related to rituals and their way to derive their meaningfulness through the performance itself.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, in Brecht’s play *Die Maßnahme*, ritual and rituality are not only a rigid and fixed pattern but, in the aesthetic performance of the dramatic text, gain an openness and self-reflexivity that would not be possible with a ritual performed in a religious context. The aesthetic form of the play is deeply connected to ritual practices and, at the same time, differs from them. Creating a poetic or dynamic rituality, this play is essentially connected to performativity, which is so fundamental for rituals, as Victor Turner said; but *Die Maßnahme* adapts this quality of the ritual in a self-reflexive way. The play implements characteristics of ritual practice, exposes the similarity to a ritual of the dramatic genre itself, and makes rituality visible in its ambivalence and in its problematic potential but also emphasizes the aesthetic innovation that can arise by referring to rituals. Thus, poetic rituality in Brecht’s didactic play is constituted as an art form that is constantly in process, and produces a new dramatic form.<sup>25</sup>

BERTOLT BRECHT’S *DIE MASSNAHME* –  
POLITICAL AGITPROP?

*Die Maßnahme* follows the tradition of representations of sacrifices as they were widely used on European stages at the beginning of the twentieth century.

<sup>23</sup> Turner: *Variations*, 40.

<sup>24</sup> Fischer: *Ibid.*, 95–99.

<sup>25</sup> Wolfgang Braungart also uses the term ‘poetic rituality’ to describe the poems of Stefan George. He mainly uses the term to describe the ritual elements occurring in George’s poems. (Wolfgang Braungart: *Ästhetischer Katholizismus. Stefan Georges Rituale der Literatur*, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 1997.) The concept of ‘poetic rituality’ developed here tries to make a further contribution, as poetic rituality not only demands one or more ritual elements but claims that an extensive use of ritual forms and elements generates the form of the entire artwork and, through this, creates a new understanding of what art is, how it deals with reality and incorporates but also appropriates cultural practices such as rituals.



One might think of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's opera *Elektra* (1909), composed by Richard Strauss, or Vaslav Nijinski's production of *Le Sacre du Printemps* that caused a scandal in 1913 when performed in Paris because of its ritualistic aesthetics that deliberately violated the boundaries of classical ballet. These forms of ritual self-sacrifice refer to both the Russian (*Le Sacre du Printemps*)<sup>26</sup> and the ancient Greek (*Elektra*) context, drawing on sacrifices as gestures of reconciliation that ultimately aim to restore harmony, for which the ritual unfolds the tension motivating the sacrifice, gradually bringing them closer together and initiating reconciliation.<sup>27</sup> Through a scapegoat, the banishment of the scapegoat from the community, and his sacrifice, the social group can reunite around a higher meaning. This way, the social group gains a ritualistic center that represents the highest sacred value and demands devotion to it. Especially in modern times and under social conditions where the suffering of the individual cannot simply be subordinated to a higher meaning, such ritual practices are highly provocative. However, it was also the aesthetic innovation, the departure from a sublime — not ecstatic — and cruel aesthetic that posed an enormous challenge artistically but also reformed, for instance, the ballet.

Brecht's play *Die Maßnahme* refers in a complex way to different ritual practices and genres of ritual theater from the Christian as well as from the Japanese background and places them in a political context. Yet it is astonishing that Brecht — the advocate of a "theater of the scientific age," as he called it — made use of the ritual, for in his theoretical writings, Brecht had declared the rejection from the cult to be the very sign of his epic and self-enlightened theater.<sup>28</sup> Above all, *Die Maßnahme* is controversial and problematic for the precise reason that Brecht seems to affirmatively stage the self-sacrifice of a young revolutionary and the justification of his killing in favor of the communist idea. The play refuses to take a clearly distant or critical approach to the performed self-sacrifice for which the death of the young revolutionary is glorified. It is due to this identification of dying for the communist idea with Christian sacrifice that has led to the accusation that Brecht was a supporter of the communist ideology. Does Brecht, in favor of a political belief, abandon all criticism he himself made against the alliance between ritual and theater? Is *Die Maßnahme* merely the representation of the self-sacrifice one undertakes for the revolution? Howard Smither compares *Die Maßnahme* and its

<sup>26</sup> Yet it is a clichéd and folkloristic idea of Russian tradition.

<sup>27</sup> Jürgen Raab – Hans-Georg Soeffner: Pina Bauschs Inszenierung *Le Sacre du Printemps*. Eine Fallanalyse zur Soziologie symbolischer Formen und ritueller Ordnungen, in G. Brandstetter – G. Klein (eds.): *Methoden der Tanzwissenschaft. Modellanalysen zu Pina Bauschs 'Le Sacre du Printemps' / Das Frühlingsopfer*, Bielefeld, transcript Verlag, 2015, 233–250.

<sup>28</sup> Bertolt Brecht: *Kleines Organon für das Theater*, in W. Hecht – J. Knopf – W. Mittenzwei – K.-D. Müller (eds.): *Bertolt Brecht Werke. Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, Vol. 23, Berlin/Weimar/Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1989–1998, 67. In the following footnotes this edition will be referred to by the abbreviation GBA.

musical arrangement by Hanns Eisler with the music of socialist oratorios.<sup>29</sup> Especially influential for literary research was the interpretation by Helmuth Kiesel, whose reading is based on the thesis that Brecht's play is socialist agit-prop.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, I, however, would like to stress that *Die Maßnahme* is more ambiguous than these one-sided readings by some critics of the didactic play suggest, as Brecht does not simply stage the death of the young comrade affirmatively in the sense of political agitation but, by accepting and suffering his "Passion," the young comrade's self-sacrifice pushes the principles governing the revolutionary movement and its norms and values in all their ambiguity and inhuman cruelty to the forefront and makes them transparent.

Brecht's play *Die Maßnahme* is loosely based on the Japanese Noh play *Tanikō*, which Brecht's long-time employee Elisabeth Hauptmann translated for him at the end of the 1920s, drawing on the English version written by the sinologist Arthur Waley. Brecht had already explored and used this Noh play as a basis for his dramatic texts *Der Jasager* and *Der Neinsager* in 1930. However, Brecht simplifies the complex religious-cult structure of the Japanese original and transfers it into a modern context and style. Thus, the journey, in *Tanikō*, on which a boy, some students, and their teacher set out on as a pilgrimage, becomes a research trip (or expedition) in Brecht's *Jasager*. But Brecht adopts the basic traits of the fable: the boy falls ill on the way and cannot continue the journey. The participants of the expedition are now faced with the choice of either returning home or continuing the journey without the boy. Following an old custom, they decide not only to leave the boy alone but to kill him by throwing him into the valley. The custom requires that the boy be asked whether he agrees with his killing. But the custom also demands that he affirms this question. The boy behaves as expected, and so the expedition group "complains" about the "bitter law," as the *Jasager* puts it and carries out the killing "full of pity." It is radically challenging that none of the participants of the expedition question the old custom, not even the victim himself. This is what the play unmasks with its dramatic plot.

Brecht proceeds similarly with the adaptation of the Japanese Noh play in *Die Maßnahme*. Here Brecht gives the action a strong political dimension and frames the plot within a trial situation:

<sup>29</sup> Howard E. Smither: *A History of the Oratorio*, Vol. 4, Chapel Hill/London, University of North Carolina Press, 2000, 644.

<sup>30</sup> Helmuth Kiesel: DIE MASSNAHME im Licht der Totalitarismustheorie, in I. Gellert – G. Koch – F. Vaßen (eds.): *Massnahmen. Kontroverse, Perspektive, Praxis. Bertolt Brecht / Hans Eislers Lehrstück, Die Maßnahme*, Berlin, Theater der Zeit, Recherchen 1, 1998, 83–99. See also the list of reactions to the premiere by Pasche. He interprets the use of ritual forms in *Die Maßnahme* as Brecht's aesthetic strategy to ultimately disavow these forms: Wolfgang Pasche: Die Funktion des Ritualen in Brechts Lehrstücken *Der Jasager* und *Der Neinsager*, *Acta Germanica* 13 (1980), 137–150, 137.



Four communist agitators stand before a party court. In China, they have been carrying out communist propaganda and have had to shoot their youngest comrade. In order to prove to the court the necessity of shooting a comrade, they show how the young comrade behaves in various political situations.<sup>31</sup>

With these few sentences, Brecht himself describes the core of the play. Since the agitators are only able to carry out their mission unrecognized, they hide their faces behind masks — accordingly incorporating the aesthetics of Noh and Greek theater. This process is stylized as an initiation rite that symbolically completes the integration of one's own identity into the collective. The agitators become, as it is said in the play, "empty sheets on which the revolution writes its instructions."<sup>32</sup> But in the course of the play, the young comrade increasingly questions these "instructions." He fails in the eyes of the agitators by allowing himself to be guided by spontaneous compassion and "revolutionary impatience."<sup>33</sup> His impulsive action contradicts the long-term strategy of the agitators, who want the ranks of the workers in the struggle for the communist idea to be united behind them before actually intervening and before they ease the suffering of the people. The individual's needs and sorrows are thereby of no importance for this overall goal. The young comrade is questioning the group's path to revolution and the lack of collective compassion. In his rage, he not only tears apart the "Lehren der Klassiker" [Lessons of the Classics] — which could be the writings of Marx and Engels or Mao or even ancient or Japanese texts which emphasize devotion to a higher value — but also reveals his "naked face" by taking off his mask.<sup>34</sup> This is a highly symbolic scene. The unprotected (naked) individual is completely thrown back onto himself, just like Job in the Old Testament — naked and mourning before God. Such an allusion is characteristic of Brecht, who repeatedly refers to the Bible in his works.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Brecht: Das Lehrstück Die Maßnahme, in GBA 24, 96. All translations from Die Maßnahme and Brecht's work are my own.

<sup>32</sup> Brecht: Die Maßnahme, in GBA 3, 78.

<sup>33</sup> This is how Klaus-Detlef Müller describes it in Bertolt Brecht. Epoche – Werk – Wirkung, München, Beck, 2009, 90.

<sup>34</sup> Brecht: Ibid., in GBA 3, 90–94.

<sup>35</sup> The importance of the Bible and religious references are fundamental to Brecht's work as a whole, and especially to his poetry, as his essay *Über reimlose Lyrik mit unregelmäßigen Rhythmen* emphasizes (see GBA, 22.1, 357–364) and in which he develops his concept of a 'gestische Ästhetik' from Luther's translation of the Bible. This was recognized early on in research on his poetry from the 1920s. See Reinhold Grimm: Die Lutherbibel in Brechts Lyrik, in E. Beutner (ed.): *Dialog der Epochen. Studien zur Literatur des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts. Walter Weiss zum 60. Geburtstag*, Wien, Österreichischer Bundesverlag, 1987, 101–110; Gotthard Lerchner: Traditionsbezug zur Lutherbibel im Werk Brechts, in I. Barz – U. Fix – M. Schröder (eds.): *Gotthard Lerchner – Schriften zum Stil. Vorträge zur Ehrung Gotthard Lerchners anlässlich seines 65. Geburtstags und Aufsätze des Jubilars*, Leipzig, Leipziger Uni-Verlag, 2002, 146–164; Eberhard Rohse: *Der frühe Brecht und die Bibel. Studien zum*

But with this unmasked individual claiming for empathy, the risk arises for the whole group to be exposed as revolutionary agitators. In order to continue their revolutionary mission, they must remain unrecognized. As they flee, as the riots break out, they kill the young comrade, not without asking him — very much like in the *Jasager* and *Tanikō* — for his approval of their deed. In contrast to the Japanese original and the *Jasager*, however, Brecht replaces the unconditional trust in the rightness of the old custom with the obligation to realize the communist revolution, and thus also with historical necessity. The fundamental conflict between the suffering of the individual, on the one hand, and the subordination of individual life to the dictates of a higher “power” or cause, on the other — be it fate, custom, or revolution — remains in *Tanikō*, in the *Jasager*, and in *Die Maßnahme*. The comparison shows that in *Die Maßnahme*, it is now the revolutionary strategy that is of the highest value to the agitators. The realization of the communist idea becomes the power of fate — as in ancient tragedies or Noh theater — that determines their actions. For someone like Brecht, who from the very beginning of his writing and staging challenged precisely this trust in a higher value and the determination of individual actions by fate, this way of presenting can hardly be meant affirmatively but is, rather, highly critical.

Besides the allusions to Japanese Noh theater, *Die Maßnahme* is also full of references to the Passion of Christ. Thus, in the play, the young comrade observes and experiences various situations of suffering until he himself is eventually killed, remarkably *because* he shows empathy. Thereby, the play explicitly refers to and rejects the category of compassion [Mitleid], as Lessing conceptualized it, by drawing on the Christian commandment of brotherly love (see Mt 25). Instead, *Die Maßnahme* unfolds an aesthetic of coldness and rationality, but which — similar to the young boy’s demise in *Tanikō* — leads straight into the abyss and, respectively, into death. It seems that here Brecht is drawing the line at his own negation of compassion. A suggestive, strongly emotionalizing theater that demands compassion at all costs is for him highly manipulative. But if a culture is based on sheer rationality, it becomes brutal and totalitarian. His plays repeatedly demonstrate that he does not give up compassion once and for all, especially for the weak and helpless.<sup>36</sup> Not only

*Augsburger Religionsunterricht und zu den literarischen Versuchen des Gymnasiasten*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983; Karl-Josef Kuschel: Der andere Brecht. Versuch einer theologischen Analyse seiner Lyrik, *Stimmen der Zeit* 202 (1984), 629–643; Dick Boer: *Die Gewalt, die Armut und das gute Leben. Bertolt Brecht und die Religion, Texte und Kontext* 28 (2005), 30–42. How fundamental the Bible and the reference to religious and ritual forms and genres is also for his later work, I demonstrated in Fischer: *Ritual und Ritualität*, 137–180.

<sup>36</sup> Franz Norbert Mennemeier: Von der Freundschaft zur ‘Freundlichkeit’. Zu Bertolt Brechts Ballade von der Freundschaft und Legende von der Entstehung des Buches Taoteking auf dem Weg des Laotse in die Emigration, in G. E. Grimm (ed.): *Gedichte und Interpretationen. Deutsche Balladen*, Stuttgart, Reclam, 1988, 340–424; Detlev Schöttker: *Bertolt Brechts*



does Brecht expose the sacralization of the killing of the young comrade, but he also uses the forms and genres of the Christian tradition for his idea of an epic theater.

The killing scene is titled “Grablegung” in allusion to Jesus’ “burial” after his crucifixion.<sup>37</sup> The rationally calculated and cold-blooded killing of the young comrade is stylized as self-sacrifice for the higher cause through the boy’s agreement and his confession that he died in the “interest of communism [...] saying yes to the revolutionization of the world.”<sup>38</sup> The aim — the communist social order — gives meaning to the seemingly inevitable death or murder of the young comrade, it even “transcends” it and thus provides a “sacred” dimension and significance.<sup>39</sup> In this regard, the content and structure of *Die Maßnahme* are linked to a sacrifice ritual. But also, the language draws on the Christian tradition, biblical verse, and especially Luther’s translation of the Bible in the way it is determined by parallelisms and repetitions. Thus, Brecht makes the agitators say, “And we asked: ‘Do you agree,’ and he agreed, and went in haste and immediately fell into a state of compassion.” [Und wir fragten: Bist du einverstanden, und er war einverstanden und ging eilig hin und verfiel sofort dem Mitleid.]<sup>40</sup> Here Brecht clearly refers to the style of Luther’s translation of the Bible: “And he went up a mountain / And called to him / those he desired / and they went to him.” [Und er ging auf einen Berg / Und rief zu sich / welche er wollte / und die gingen hin zu ihm] (Mk 3:13f.).<sup>41</sup>

One must also bear in mind that *Die Maßnahme* is a musical piece that the composer Eisler described as a political oratorio.<sup>42</sup> The majority of the text was sung or spoken rhythmically.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the music quotes motifs from Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Matthäuspassion*. The alternate speech or alternate songs between choir and solo voice often refer to liturgical ways of speaking and singing. One such example is the conversation between two agitators and the director of a political party house right after their arrival in China:

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*Ästhetik des Naiven*, Stuttgart, Metzler, 1989; Jürgen Hillesheim: “Instinktiv lasse ich hier Abstände...”: Bertolt Brechts vormarxistisches Episches Theater, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2011, 453–459; Wolfgang Braungart: Heimat – Sprache – poetische Einbildungskraft (Hölderlin, Brecht), *Wirkendes Wort* 63 (2013), Vol. 1, 39–53.

<sup>37</sup> Brecht: *Ibid.*, in *GBA* 3, 96.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 97. [Interesse des Kommunismus [...] Ja sagend zur Revolutionierung der Welt.]

<sup>39</sup> Arbeitsgruppe München, Kunst und Todesritual. Handeln auf der Grenze zwischen Leben und Tod, in Erika Fischer-Lichte – Christian Horn – Sandra Umathum – Matthias Warstat (eds.): *Ritualität und Grenze*, Tübingen/Basel, Francke, 2003, 69–90, 79.

<sup>40</sup> Brecht: *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>41</sup> Luther’s translation was adapted by me to the new German orthography for better understanding.

<sup>42</sup> Klaus-Dieter Krabiell: *Brechts Lehrstücke. Entstehung und Entwicklung eines Spieltyps*, Stuttgart/Weimar, Metzler, 1993, 170–179.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*



THE PARTY LEADER: You must not be seen.  
 THE TWO AGITATORS: We will not be seen.  
 THE PARTY LEADER: If anyone is hurt, they must not be found.  
 THE TWO AGITATORS: He will not be found.<sup>44</sup>

This dialogical structure, which markedly uses parallelisms and repetitions, is similar to the form of the religious litany, which is a liturgical chant between the preacher and congregation. The assembly responds to the preacher with short formal phrases. The litany is generally characterized by a monotonous rhythm, which is always slightly semantically varied (one might think of: “mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa” in the Catholic Church). However, it does not give up its unchanging syntactic form, just as, in Brecht’s case, the answers of the agitators follow a syntactically constant pattern: “We will not be seen” [Wir werden nicht gesehen], “He will not be found” [Er wird nicht gefunden].<sup>45</sup> The liturgical chant between the preacher and the assembly has a community-forming function. The members of the congregation gathered in the church communicate with each other through singing and speaking together in response. Such “ritual gestures” bind the social group together.<sup>46</sup> Music, singing, and rhythmic speaking are important components of rituals, for example during demonstrations. They “de-subjectify” speaking and make it possible to experience a sense of community. In addition, they are realizations of consent facilitated by the communal performance itself.<sup>47</sup> In this sense, the ritual can be understood as a performative act which creates the social group as a community in the joint performance of the ritual and in the shared sense of being in agreement together. Brecht and Eisler attempted to realize this aim through the way the play was staged.

The premiere in December 1930 was closely linked to the communication system of the working-class movement.<sup>48</sup> In total, a non-professional orchestra and 300 singers from workers’ choirs, who took over the part of the “controlling choir” in the play, participated in the production. Although the characters in *Die Maßnahme* were played by prominent actors such as Helene Weigel and Ernst Busch, it was planned that their roles were also to be taken over by laymen in further performances. Both in terms of its content and its intended effect, *Die Maßnahme* was created as a pragmatic and functional artwork

<sup>44</sup> Brecht: *Ibid.*, 78. [Der Leiter des Parteihauses: “Ihr dürft nicht gesehen werden. / Die zwei Agitatoren: Wir werden nicht gesehen.” / Der Leiter des Parteihauses: “Wenn einer verletzt wird, darf er nicht gefunden werden.” / Die zwei Agitatoren: “Er wird nicht gefunden.”]

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Braungart: *Ritual und Literatur*, 99.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Klaus-Dieter Krabiel: Die Lehrstücke, in Jan Knopf (ed.): *Brecht Handbuch in fünf Bänden*, Vol. 1. Stuttgart, Weimar, Metzler, 2001, 28–39.

[Gebrauchskunst] for a community of “like-minded people.”<sup>49</sup> The predominant purpose of the play as of the “Lehrstücke” in general is practice. The play deals with the self-image and self-reflection of the working-class movement and the communist revolution. Moreover, the singers from workers’ choirs are themselves also those who participate in the play as well as being the audience for whom it is intended. Brecht regarded the workers not only as interpreters of the music but also as students.<sup>50</sup> As it is performed in the play, the control choir sings: “For a long time we no longer listen to you as / judges. Yet/ As learners” [Lange nicht mehr hören wir euch zu als / Urteilende. Schon/ Als Lernende].<sup>51</sup> Also, the audience should not remain passive but be actively involved in the performance. For this purpose, the central theses and thoughts spoken by the characters of the play were projected onto a screen during the premiere. In addition, Brecht had questionnaires distributed to the spectators in which he asked about the teaching and learning effect of such an event for both the participants and the audience. According to Eisler, the entire structure of the production had the characteristics of a “political meeting.”<sup>52</sup> The boundary between audience and actor became fluid — as in a ritual, because in rituals there is no line between participant and observer; everyone has a part to play. Rituals are joint actions and presentations at the same time and thus enable their participants to both perceive them and also actively take part in them.

In summary, the play refers to a ritual in many different aspects. First, in terms of content, the play is closely related to a ritual since the death of the young comrade is portrayed as self-sacrifice for the communist idea. Second, the play is structurally comparable to a ritual because the entire course of action follows the structure of self-sacrifice. Third, the play alludes aesthetically and musically to ritual forms and genres by taking up liturgical ways of speaking and singing and by quoting and modifying motifs of Bach’s *Matthäuspasion*. Fourth, the play’s references to Noh theater, Greek theater, the Christian liturgy, and the incorporation of the new media of that time (projections) lead to the denial of the creation of an illusion but instead give the audience the opportunity to become part of the event. As a result, the effect of the staging of the play is comparable to a ritual, in this way already revealing traits of what we nowadays call performance art.

Yet, it is precisely these various references to ritual forms and genres that have led many to understand *Die Maßnahme* as political agitation. Thus, the play is often interpreted as a ritual-like form of communal practice, designed to persuade the spectators and other participants to sacrifice their individual wills and even their own lives for the joint cause — the communist revolution.

<sup>49</sup> Krabiell: Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Brecht: Ibid., Fassung von 1931, in *GBA* 3, 116.

<sup>52</sup> Krabiell: Ibid.





himself later in 1948 formulated in his theoretical essay *Kleines Organon für das Theater*: “When one says that the theater has derived from the cult, one is only saying that it became theater through this exodus.”<sup>55</sup> Doesn’t the agitators’ stepping out of the group imply that this very “exodus,” as Brecht calls it, is itself performed in his play? On the one hand, the drama plays with and uses ritual forms for its aesthetics, it also comes close to a ritual in its effect, but on the other hand it does not simply aim to become a ritual itself, but to remain theater that uses, reflects on, and criticizes rituals at the same time. The opening scene already illustrates that *Die Maßnahme* is a deliberate, artistic adaptation and dramatization of rituals and religious genres. Yet the play is meta-theater, which is evident in the fact that the agitators themselves perform the situations in which the young comrade allegedly behaved wrongly. In doing so, the play does not simply carry out his self-sacrifice but rather *presents* it from a “theatrical-mimetic” distance.<sup>56</sup> It also forces the murderers themselves to reenact the crime they’ve committed from the victim’s perspective. With the affirmative *staging* of the young comrade’s self-sacrifice, which he accepts and which the control choir advocates, Brecht makes the entire ambivalence of materialist politics transparent. Through the way it is performed, the play creates space for the audience to gain a critical distancing from what they see.<sup>57</sup>

In contrast to theories of secularization, which understand religion and rituality as the “remains” of an unenlightened culture, the play shows the central importance of sacral and ritual meaning for political and cultural actions. *Die Maßnahme* reminds us of the lasting duration and significance of the sacred, even in the supposedly rationalized modern age. The young comrade does not simply die; his death is sacredly glorified.

Furthermore, the mere setting of the message with which the control choir introduces the play: “Your work has been lucky,”<sup>58</sup> is not what this play is about. The focus is on learning and understanding through acting. The challenge, however, remains that, on the one hand the portrayal of the young comrade by the agitators does not seem to evoke so much empathy among them that they see their action not only as a tragic necessity but also as morally wrong, and, on the other hand, if they were absolutely sure of the justification for the murder, why would they bring this case before the control choir at all? The performance is important for the agitators so that they can reassure themselves once again that they have acted correctly. But by deliberately displaying the execution of the young comrade as a performance by the agitators, the play raises the question for the audience of whether this is really so. The repetition

<sup>55</sup> Brecht: *Kleines Organon für das Theater*, in *GBA* 23, 67. [Wenn man sagt, das Theater sei aus dem Kultischen gekommen, so sagt man nur, dass es durch den Auszug Theater wurde.]

<sup>56</sup> See Arbeitsgruppe München, *Kunst und Todesritual*, 79.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Brecht: *Die Maßnahme*, in *GBA* 3, 75.



of the ritual in the theater thus allows the audience a critical view of the ritual itself. The self-sacrifice of the young comrade is a disturbing ritual that has become questionable, which is displayed as theater within theater itself.

This critical perspective can be further supported by the justification for the killing. So far, I haven't focused on the fact that Brecht's presentation of the argumentation of the agitators, who consider the sacrifice of the young comrade as necessary, is actually quite subversive in itself.

AGITATORS:                    Lamenting, we pummelled our heads with our fists  
    As all they could offer us was this hideous counsel: forthwith  
    To chop off a foot from our own body; for  
    It is a fearsome thing to kill.  
    But not only others, but ourselves too would we kill  
    if need be  
    Since only by violence can this killing  
    World be changed, as  
    Every living thing knows.  
    Yet it is not granted to us,  
    we said, not to kill.<sup>59</sup>

The control choir then expresses its “compassion” [Mitgefühl] for the agitators but not to the young comrade.<sup>60</sup> The speech of the agitators, thus, seems almost like an ironic and cynical replica of Brecht's own criticism of the self-assuring, tragic worldview of bourgeois art. For in this scene, the agitators and the control choir ultimately confirm their inability to change the “last remains of agony” [letzten Rest von Qual], as Brecht puts it in his essay *Voraussetzung der Tragik* [Precondition of the Tragic].<sup>61</sup> The well known and already profoundly explored positions of his concept of epic theater need not be explained in detail here.<sup>62</sup> What is important for the question of the relationship of Brecht's poetics to ritual is that his fundamental criticism of a theater of empathy and identification — as he sees it realized, especially in ancient tragedies and Aristotelian poetics, Lessing's poetics of compassion [Mitleidspoetik], and the

<sup>59</sup> Brecht: *Ibid.*, 97. [Agitatoren: “Klagend zerschlugen wir uns unsere Köpfe mit unseren Fäusten / Daß sie uns nur den furchtbaren Rat wußten: jetzt / Abzuschneiden den eigenen Fuß vom Körper; denn / Furchtbar ist es, zu töten. / Aber nicht andere nur, auch / Uns töten wir, wenn es nützt, / Da doch nur mit Gewalt diese tötende / Welt zu ändern ist, wie / Jeder Lebende weiß. / Noch ist es uns, sagten wir, / Nicht vergönnt, nicht zu töten.”]

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Brecht: *Voraussetzung der Tragik*, in *GBA* 21, 384

<sup>62</sup> Jan Knopf, for instance, concisely summarizes the research on Brecht's idea of epic theater, in Jan Knopf: *Der entstellte Brecht. Die Brecht-Forschung muss (endlich) von vorn anfangen*, in H. L. Arnold – J. Knopf (eds.): *Bertolt Brecht, München*, Edition TEXT + KRITIK, 2006, 5–20.

naturalistic theater — results in a parallelization of the theater with ritual practice. Brecht applies Marx's and Feuerbach's critique of religion to the aesthetics and social function of theater and drama, and states in his theoretical text *Der Messingkauf*, which he began working on in 1939, that the theater is still primarily an "institution and practice of cult" even in modern times.<sup>63</sup> In his text *Kleines Organon für das Theater [A Short Organum for the Theater]*, he followed up this allegation when he stressed: "The theater, as we find it, does not show the structure of society (depicted on the stage) as influenceable by society."<sup>64</sup> Rather, it exposes, as Brecht emphasizes, the heroes of a play to their inescapable fate and stages this in the form of sacrifice. In Brecht's words: "Human sacrifice by all means! Barbaric amusements!"<sup>65</sup> The goal of generating compassionate identification among the audience, which, according to Brecht, encompasses Aristotelian tragic theory, Lessing's poetics of drama, and naturalistic theater, leads to "agreement with the supposedly non-negotiable."<sup>66</sup> Such a theater fulfills the function of interpreting human action as natural and unchangeable and thereby serves to stabilize the prevailing social conditions and grievances instead of questioning them.<sup>67</sup> It must be stressed that Brecht's defamation of Lessing's and Aristotle's poetics and the naturalistic drama as theaters of emotions is far too simple and one-sided. For Brecht, tragedies especially, the concept of the tragic in particular, contribute to legitimizing the interests of power by portraying the last "remains of misery caused by the dominant social order" as "incurable" and "eternal."<sup>68</sup> In the suggestive theatrical experience, the audience is put in a fatalistic mood toward the "fate" being presented on stage. It is precisely this "belief in fate," which is generated by the aesthetic experience that, according to Brecht, makes the performance of a drama in the theater a ritual-like action. A theater similar to that of Lessing's or of the Ancient Greeks as well as the naturalistic theater, becomes a place where the audience can live out feelings in a controlled manner that might otherwise endanger the dominant political or social order, without, however, causing any concrete consequences for the existing social conditions. This way, the theater fulfills its social stabilizing function. With Brecht, this can only be realized in and through a coherent structure that does not allow any objections

<sup>63</sup> Brecht: *Der Messingkauf*, in *GBA* 22.2, 702. [kultische Institution]

<sup>64</sup> Brecht: *Kleines Organon für das Theater*, in *GBA* 23, 78. [Das Theater, wie wir es vorfinden, zeigt die Struktur der Gesellschaft (abgebildet auf der Bühne) nicht als beeinflussbar durch die Gesellschaft.] See also Brecht: [Nichtaristotelische Dramatik und wissenschaftliche Betrachtungsweise], in *GBA* 22.1, 168.

<sup>65</sup> Brecht: *Kleines Organon für das Theater*, in *GBA* 23, 78. [Menschenopfer allerwege! Barbarische Belustigungen!]

<sup>66</sup> Brecht: *Korsch Kernpunkte*, in *GBA* 21, 574.

<sup>67</sup> Brecht: *Kleines Organon für das Theater*, in *GBA* 23, 78; See also Brecht: "Nichtaristotelische Dramatik und wissenschaftliche Betrachtungsweise," in *GBA* 22.1, 168.

<sup>68</sup> Brecht: *Voraussetzung der Tragik*, in *GBA* 21, 384. ["Rest von Qual, der durch die herrschende Gesellschaftsordnung" entstehe, als "unheilbar" und "ewig" darstellen.]



to what is being shown. Here, too, Brecht implicitly draws a connection to the ritual in his critique. Because, as in a ritual — where the performance is encompassed by a marked beginning and ending — a coherent structure in theater also leads the viewer to entrust and give himself up unreflectively to the dramatic course of events.

In the speech by the agitators quoted above and the compassionate approval of the control choir for what the agitators did, Brecht now turns his critical eye to the class struggle and its functionaries. For the agitators, the killing of the young comrade is independent of their own will. Like ancient destiny, in the agitators' depiction the necessity of realizing the communist idea seems to demand the deed itself. Thereby, Brecht's play situates itself in the tradition of tragedy and, at the same time, makes a critical and non-affirmative reference to it. For, with the agitators, the play presents a world view that not only demands the sacrifice of the individual for the purposes of the revolution but also, from a poetic perspective, justifies the theatrical forms that Brecht fundamentally criticizes. Precisely because the agitators allude to Brecht's own criticism of tragedy and the tragic, they are presented in a much more subversive and critical way than Kiesel understood it. Yet, one has to admit that apart from such criticism, *Die Maßnahme* lacks a clearly exposed critical corrective. There is no character in this play criticizing the murder of the young comrade, not even the young comrade himself. Thus, it is a risk that the play takes by associating the death of the young comrade with self-sacrifice without openly subverting it.<sup>69</sup> But what the play truly demonstrates in a didactic way is the unity of politically revolutionary interests, which for the agitators are based on rational principles, and ritual-sacral meaningfulness. The play uses the symbolism of the sacrifice to make the mechanisms and political strategy of the communist system obvious and to show how strongly it already operates with the ritual and sacral as powerful instruments and media of propaganda. This problem is not dissolved in *Die Maßnahme*. It is made transparent but not generally rejected. The challenging and also complex claim of the play is that Brecht does not simply identify the justification and meaningful interpretation of suffering as political strategy and propaganda, but rather as a fundamental need of all those involved. That is why the young comrade agrees, and that is why the control choir says to the agitators, we have sympathy for you, acknowledging the tragedy of the situation, and by doing so stressing the supposedly 'holy' necessity to murder him. Thus, *Die Maßnahme* points beyond its fable to a problem that is open to modern art and culture as a whole: a rational

<sup>69</sup> A close and differentiated examination of Brecht's *Maßnahme* was developed by Hillesheim: "Instinktiv lasse ich hier Abstände...", 453–459. See also Rainer Grübel: *Die Ästhetik des Opfers bei Brecht und in der russischen Literatur der 20er und 30er Jahre*, in T. Hörnigk – A. Stephan (eds.): *Rot = Braun? / Brecht Dialog 2000. Nationalsozialismus und Stalinismus bei Brecht und Zeitgenossen*, Berlin, Theater der Zeit, 2000, 153–181.

understanding of the world does not sufficiently satisfy the individual's need for a meaningful interpretation of his suffering and for meaning in general. If this is the case, the open question that remains is whether, for Brecht, it is the field of art itself that can satisfy this need. After all, art remains the one thing in the world that is perhaps least to be judged by the criterion of pure rationality. At any rate, for Brecht, art is the place where these questions are played out, and the ritual and the sacral are not neglected.

BERTOLT BRECHT'S PLAY WITH RITUALS,  
NOH THEATER, AND MEDIA IN *DIE MASSNAHME*

Above all, Brecht gains deep aesthetic inspiration from the ritual. After 1945, he sees quite clearly, however — perhaps because his didactic plays, in particular, became a model for the National Socialist Thingspiele — that such an aesthetic as developed in *Die Maßnahme* also carries the risk of being perceived as totalitarian propaganda. But the assumption that he would have ignored these dangers and accepted them in order to convince the audience of the importance of sacrifices one must bear for the communist idea, was clearly *not* what he had in mind, as I have shown above. *Die Maßnahme* is not a play that favors totalitarianism, as Kiesel interpreted it,<sup>70</sup> but one that already reflects the abysses of a ritualistic theater serving political agitation. Moreover, it unfolds an aesthetic that criticizes and puts up for discussion the devotion to communism through a self-reflected poetic rituality.

What fascinates Brecht about the ritual is the productive aesthetic of the ritual itself, i.e., a non-mimetic, self-referential, and strongly performative aesthetic. He further intensifies this self-reflexive form derived from the ritual through his references (as we have seen: Noh, Greek tragedy, new media [e.g., projections]). Just as in ancient theater with its choir, which observes and comments on the events performed on stage, or in Noh theater, where the actors and musicians are constantly present on stage, even when they are not acting or playing music, Brecht allows the agitators themselves to perform the action in front of the controlling choir, thereby creating a distance to what is shown on stage. Brecht makes use of ritualistic and religious forms and genres to evolve an anti-illusionistic, sequential aesthetic interspersed with choral songs, commentary, lyrical insertions, and projections. Despite his criticism of the relationship between ritual and art, which is evident in many of his theoretical texts, certain aspects of the ritual seem at the same time to correspond to essential characteristics of his epic theater. Brecht, thus, creates a transcultural theater by bringing together ritual forms and genres from the

<sup>70</sup> Kiesel: *Die Maßnahme im Licht der Totalitarismustheorie*, 83–99.



most diverse ritual contexts in his play, and, especially through the reference to Luther's translation of the Bible and the use of language in the Christian liturgy, also develops an aesthetic of objection in linguistic terms. By this reference, he explicitly distances himself from a classicist aesthetic and the "oily smoothness" [ölige[n] Glätte] of blank verse, as he formulates in his essay *Über reimlose Lyrik mit unregelmäßigen Rhythmen* [*On Rhymeless Poetry with Irregular Rhythms*].<sup>71</sup> The language of his play, with its inversions, anacolutha, juxtapositions, and irregular rhythms, is based on a mode of speech that is not, as Brecht attributes to blank verse, "un-approvedly lulling" and "soporific" ["unangenehm einlullend," "einschläfernd"].<sup>72</sup> Rather, Brecht obtains a literary form from Luther's translation of the Bible and the Christian liturgy, whose established accents and re-accentuations he varies and dynamizes. Such a language counteracts the central risk of a ritual aesthetic — as he describes it in all his theoretical essays — of being captivating, overwhelming, and narcotic. It is a language that interrupts and suddenly brings on a new thought. It cannot simply be entrusted without reflection. For this language, precisely the ways of reciting and praying in the Christian liturgy and the language of Luther's Bible are key inspirations for him. Within the mixture of Noh theater, Greek tragedy, and Christian genres and forms of rituality, Brecht creates a unique style and further unfolds his idea of epic theater in this play that, through cultural differences, is still relatable and understandable in a transcultural way. It is an aesthetic that his play *Die Maßnahme* unfolds, reflecting on the abysses and risks that rituals and ritual theater can bear, and, by this, creating an innovative, self-reflective "poetic rituality," which he developed further after 1945.

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<sup>71</sup> Brecht: Über reimlose Lyrik mit unregelmäßigen Rhythmen, in *GBA* 22.1, 358.

<sup>72</sup> Brecht: [Nachtrag zu: Über reimlose Lyrik mit unregelmäßigen Rhythmen], in *GBA* 22.1, 364.

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## DRAMATIC GENRE, RITUAL, CONFLICT RESOLUTION

JAN L. HAGENS

*How do modern theater's attempts to reconnect to ritual relate to its ability, or inability, to find solutions for the conflicts it enacts? More specifically, when we think of how ritual is employed in the performance of dramatic texts, the generic strategies that first come to mind are tragic, as in the communal rite of sacrificing, and comic, as in the communal rite of mocking and celebrating. But can ritualistic elements contribute toward aims beyond these two fundamental yet divisive genres? When drama and theater envision reintegrative outcomes to their conflicts, which transformative conduits do they employ, and how do these conduits relate to specifically ritualistic approaches? How can "primitive" ritual contribute to drama, an aesthetically nuanced and frequently self-referential construct that, in its most absolute variants, displays psychological stories and personal decisions for a spectating audience? Building on Braungart's and Fischer's work on Literature and Ritual, we will examine some characteristics of ritual that may help to enable dramatic solutions, and perhaps even an entire dramatic genre, beyond comedy and tragedy.*

Among the literary genres, this is the *differentia specifica* of drama: that it participates in both word and world, brings together ideal and real, joins — to use theological terms — spirit and body. It shares this body with ritual, for which corporeality is a *sine qua non*. (It is a worthwhile question to consider if ritual could be conceived of as a purely mental process.) With respect to the notion at the center of the present volume — poetic rituality — drama thus has greater opportunities than the other literary genres, i.e., lyric poetry and epic or prose. Of course, lyric poetry and prose do have some opportunities, and Wolfgang Braungart in his writings rightly attempts to expand the notion of poetic rituality to all forms of literature, especially lyric poetry.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the particular affinity between ritual and drama remains uncontested, an affinity which becomes even more obvious once drama's trajectory toward the stage is taken into account: drama would be caught in a pragmatic

<sup>1</sup> Wolfgang Braungart: *Ritual und Literatur*, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 1996, 148–165, 254. Braungart's most important contributions to this discussion are listed in the bibliography.



contradiction between content and form, between what it says and how it relays that message, were it not for its realization on stage, in live theater.<sup>2</sup> Once drama's inherent tendency toward becoming theater has been realized in performance, the affinity between dramatic texts, theater, and ritual can be made explicit and become experiential.

As Saskia Fischer has laid out convincingly in her recent *Ritual und Ritualität im Drama nach 1945*, theater can reflect on and instantiate this close relation between drama, performance, and ritual.<sup>3</sup> In fact, in post-1945 Germany, Austria, and even Switzerland — after Nazi culture had annexed ritual for its own reactionary purposes between 1933 and 1945 — politically conscious theater had no choice but to reflect on its own relation to ritual. Ritual could only be reappropriated for progressive purposes through a highly reflexive approach that would interweave the practices of ritual and its critique. In order not to remain tentative, partial, and arbitrary, German-language post-war theater would eventually have to turn ritual into a self-aware practice, elevating ritual to become theater's own core around which to dynamically construct the aesthetics of its entire performance.

Within the dramatic genre, when we think of how various sub-genres employ ritual, the strategies that first come to mind are tragic, as in the communal rite of sacrificing, or of expelling the scapegoat, or of killing the aged king. The connection between ritual sacrifice and tragedy has of course been extensively researched, by scholars such as Jane Ellen Harrison, Gilbert Murray, Karl Meuli, Walter Burkert, René Girard, Jean-Pierre Vernant, Anton Bierl, and Wolfgang Braungart. In this respect, research sometimes neglects to make a distinction that is important and should be stressed. On the one hand, there is a historical and genealogical thesis regarding the origins of drama: that, to use Northrop Frye's terms from his *Anatomy of Criticism*, ritual fused with myth and thus became drama (and that thus drama saved ritual from going extinct); or that, to use Victor Turner's famous but not clearly distinguishing terms, "liminal" ritual developed into "liminoid" tragic drama (and in fact, did this twice, in ancient Greece and in late medieval Europe).<sup>4</sup> On the other

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the pragmatic contradiction between drama and performance, see Jan L. Hagens: Text and Presentation: How Do They Relate?, in *Text and Presentation XIX* (1998), 52–62. For a more complex analysis of the relation between text and performance, see Richard Schechner: Drama, Script, Theatre and Performance, in *Essays in Performance Theory 1970–1976*, New York, Drama Book Specialists, 1977, 36–62.

<sup>3</sup> Saskia Fischer: *Ritual und Ritualität im Drama nach 1945: Brecht, Frisch, Dürrenmatt, Sachs, Weiss, Hochhuth, Handke*, Paderborn, Fink, 2019. Saskia Fischer and Birgit Mayer insist that works of art can at the same time engage in ritual and critically reflect upon ritual; see Saskia Fischer – Birgit Mayer (eds.): Einführung, in *Kunst-Rituale – Ritual-Kunst. Zur Ritualität von Theater, Literatur und Musik in der Moderne*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2019, 7–16, 12.

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed description of "liminal" and "liminoid," as well as many illustrations (from Italian, French, Japanese, Korean, Greek, Medieval European, and Roman drama) of

hand, there is the systematic thesis that all drama at all times is also ritual in principle and essence, and always has ritual components. Most or even all of the contributors to the present volume will be more interested in the second thesis: that ritual is always at work in drama.

Another distinction should be underlined. It does make a difference if we are a.) practicing drama theory and viewing specific forms of drama or entire genres as developments or conceptual correlates of certain rituals (e.g., an entire tragedy or even the genre of tragedy as an adaptation or “translation” of sacrificial rites); or if we are b.) doing criticism and discussing specific ritual elements within a play (e.g., as inserts that fulfil a specific function within a performance, like a marriage ritual). It is one of the merits of Fischer’s book that it is not content with merely observing isolated ritualistic components in a play; rather, it reserves the category “poetic rituality” for those performances which have elevated ritual to be the foundational, organizing, and unifying principle that informs all of their parts. (Note that this approach may thus presuppose a definition of the artwork as an organic whole.)<sup>5</sup>

While the most conspicuous use of ritual in theatrical performance appears to occur in the tragic function, there is another, seemingly diametrically opposed use of ritual in performance that has attracted the majority of the remaining attention: the comic one. We can observe such an alternative function in, for example, the communal rite of mocking the old king and inaugurating the adolescent king, and the subsequent feast of rejoicing. Note that, in this case, we may already have discovered the possibility of sequencing two ritual elements in such a way as to promote an overall conflict resolution.

Continuing our inquiry in this direction, we are in a position to ask: can ritual contribute toward aims beyond the two fundamental yet divisive genres of tragedy and comedy? May ritual help establish a fundamental pattern of dramatic action that would engage in serious conflict but eventually lead it toward productive resolution? We know ritual can be employed in destructive fashion, but how might ritual further a play’s non-exclusionary objectives, even reconciliatory ones, on stage and outside of the theater? Both Turner and Schechner see ritual as transformative, most often in productive ways; and the drama of reconciliation by definition aims to be transformative toward conflict resolution. Ritual and drama of reconciliation thus appear to be able to function together. If ritual, as Braungart emphasizes, possesses both an

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ritual transforming into theatrical performance, see Victor Turner: *Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality*, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6 (1979), 490–494; and Victor Turner: *Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology*, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, New York, Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982, 20–60.

<sup>5</sup> For the distinction between ritualistic elements in drama versus ritual as informing an entire play’s shape, see Thomas B. Stroup: *Ritual and Ceremony in the Drama*, *Comparative Drama* 11.2 (1977), 139–146, 142, 144.



aesthetic and a social function, its integration into theatrical performance should increase theater's ability to achieve extra-theatrical effects, such as solutions in the social realm.<sup>6</sup>

Another side-glance into ritual theory may support this view. Turner labeled structured social conflict as "social drama," and he recognized a pattern of events, a recurring course of action: "breach, crisis, redress, restoration of peace through reconciliation or mutual acceptance of schism," i.e., violation of a social rule, conflict, attempts at solution, and finally either acceptance of division or, preferably, reintegration; in the crucial phase of this process, the action of redress, ritual plays a major role.<sup>7</sup> Note how Turner's view of ritual is decidedly different from the view that is now prevalent in performance studies and on the contemporary stage, which is dominated by conflict and destruction and which stops short of considering reintegration. Note also that in Turner's view of ritual, negativity and obliteration are important phases, but are mostly to be considered as integrated parts of a comprehensive process. Altogether, Turner's sequential template for social drama, especially through its *telos* of reintegration, suggests that ritual may be able to support the project of conflict resolution in artistic drama as well.

Braungart emphasizes that ritual and literature are not fundamentally different: he insists that, on the one hand, "ritual is not simply a forced social event," and on the other hand, "literature is not autonomous and self-determined."<sup>8</sup> Or, to formulate the relation in Victor Turner's terms: social drama and artistic drama imply each other, because artistic drama unfolds according to the basic pattern of social drama, but we best understand such social drama by applying the interpretive categories of artistic drama: "The processual form of social dramas is implicit in aesthetic dramas (even if only by reversal or negation), while the *rhetoric* of social dramas — and hence the shape of argument — is drawn from cultural performances."<sup>9</sup> This mutual implication does not mean that social drama and artistic drama are identical — quite the contrary: Turner even branded ritual, in contrast to drama, as regressive and totalitarian. One way to describe the development of Western theater over the course of the past century would be as an attempt to connect or re-connect with ritual, and Turner was quite adversarial toward such attempts. For him, the ritual theater, as for instance represented in a director such as Grotowski, "wishes to 'reliminalize' or 'retribalize' if not all modern

<sup>6</sup> Wolfgang Braungart: Ritual, in D. Weidner (ed.), *Handbuch Literatur und Religion*, Stuttgart, Metzler, 2016, 431.

<sup>7</sup> Turner, Victor: Acting in Everyday Life and Everyday Life in Acting, in *Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology*, in *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, New York, Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982, 102–123, 111.

<sup>8</sup> Braungart: *Ritual*, 429.

<sup>9</sup> Victor Turner: Dramatic Ritual / Ritual Drama: Performative and Reflexive Anthropology, *Kenyon Review* 1.3 (1979), 81.



men, at least that handful which could constitute a cult group of shamans."<sup>10</sup> Turner contested: "The concept of individuality has been hard-won, and to surrender it to a new totalizing process of reliminalization is a dejecting thought. (...) Liminoid theater should present alternatives; it should not be a brainwashing technique."<sup>11</sup> He insisted that modern man needs the freedom that drama, not ritual, provides.

Turner is probably correct in that there is much ritual in late medieval and early modern drama and less in Elizabethan drama and French and German Classicism, where freedom and individual agency are foregrounded. The modern subject is a sixteenth to eighteenth-century achievement we cannot ignore; the central status of the rational, moral, and decisive protagonist should not be superseded but sublated and integrated. For a modern spectator, for a contemporary audience, a conflict resolution is more convincing and satisfactory if it comes about through both communal participation in ritual and the individual's responsive reflection. As inhabitants of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, most of us want to witness singular characters, with decisions and actions that originate in a unique instant, and that do not wholly depend on the repetition of traditional patterns of ritual and ceremony.

Clearly, Turner felt that going back to medieval or pre-historic times was not an option. Instead of adopting Turner's radical and antagonistic stance, we could align ourselves with Richard Schechner, who does not differentiate so sharply between ritual and theater because, to him, both are forms of performance which can be distinguished according to their effect: ritual has more of a visceral, transporting, and transforming function; drama more of an intellectual and entertaining function.<sup>12</sup> The difference is a matter of degree and proportion. However, even if the affinity between ritual and drama is made evident by subsuming both under the category of performance, it remains a legitimate question whether there might not exist an unproductive tension in the historical and systematic relation between, on the one hand, primitive social ritual — a communal reality, pre-rational and pre-literary, immediately participatory, prescribed and codified, obligatory, unquestionable, repetitive, and even religious, without much individual agency in regard to right and wrong — and, on the other hand, individually shaped drama — an aesthetically complex and nuanced object that displays often psychological stories and self-conscious personal decisions for a more distant, spectating audience, in original and creative "as if" ways.

<sup>10</sup> Turner: *Frame*, 496.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 497.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Schechner: *From Ritual to Theatre and Back: The Structure / Process of the Efficacy-Entertainment Dyad (1974–1976)*, in *Essays on Performance Theory 1970–1976*, New York, Drama Book Specialists, 1977, 63–98, 75, 77.

Before developing my argument further, let me highlight, often with reference to Braungart's writings, some of the core characteristics shared by ritual and theatrical performance that may help promote positive resolution to dramatic conflict:

1.) Ritual and theater bring people together. As Braungart states, ritual is "performed by a community or for a community" and upholds values that "provide a sense of community and unity."<sup>13</sup> The collective playing and watching in the *theatron*, the looking-place, creates a togetherness that presupposes and supports social belonging. Ritualistic elements in theater can help make it more participatory, enabling more shared emotion and more empathy. Braungart mentions the "celebratory, festive nature" of ritual, which may contribute to positive outcomes, both in ritual and in theater.<sup>14</sup>

2.) Braungart writes that ritual is "aesthetically designed and self-referential."<sup>15</sup> Both ritual and theater may exhibit self-referentiality, but, as must be obvious from my present analysis, I do hold these characteristics to be primary not so much for ritual as for drama; Braungart himself agrees.<sup>16</sup> Ritual does its work best when it induces a state of participation that merges on the unconscious, that involves even the subconscious, reaching maybe not higher, but deeper. In drama, aesthetic self-reference can induce spectatorial self-reflection, which may then promote the critical distance that allows for careful conflict resolution. In a best-case scenario, drama's self-reference can alleviate pragmatic pressure, allowing for the ideational space and psychological distance that favor conflict resolution.

3.) However, like theater, ritual provides a condensation of past and future in the present moment; this leads both to an intensification, a heightening of emotion, and to an essentializing and universalizing.<sup>17</sup> Ritual's symbols, just like drama's "presentative symbolism," create and convey significance beyond discursive conceptual meaning.<sup>18</sup> The integration of ritualistic elements into performance may thus bring into reach what otherwise would remain ungraspable and unrelatable, and it could thus open up new pathways of resolution.

4.) According to Braungart, repetition is another defining feature of ritual.<sup>19</sup> Repetition may render a behavior unperceived and unconscious — or it may put it at a distance, thus allowing for a working-through, to avoid the dead end of mindless violence and reach positive resolution. Closely related to repetition is a feature that appears to me to be of crucial importance: the process of ritual

<sup>13</sup> Braungart: *Ibid.*, 427, 428.

<sup>14</sup> Braungart: *Ibid.*, 427.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Braungart: *Ritual und Literatur*, 220.

<sup>17</sup> For a more elaborate argument regarding the notion that ritual compresses meanings and heightens emotions, see Stroup: *Ritual and Ceremony*, 144.

<sup>18</sup> Braungart: *Ritual*, 433; see also Stroup: *Ibid.*, 140–141.

<sup>19</sup> Braungart: *Ibid.*, 427.



substitution. In ritual, the real violence of conflict or sacrifice is substituted by sacralized symbolic violence; then, ritual's metaphysical or religious technique, that most often aims to effect and control changes in the world, is further idealized in theater's aesthetic illusion-making, which, though not a game for its own sake, pulls further back from real-world effects and thus decreases the need for actual violence.<sup>20</sup> In this vein, critics like Girard interpret tragedy as an aestheticization of ritual sacrifice, as a sublimation of aggression and violence that carries a therapeutic cathartic effect; interestingly, the spectator is purged of violence without realising it, or without being aware of how this process, which contributes to conflict resolution, takes place.<sup>21</sup>

5.) Ritual situates the individual, as Braungart analyzes, within a "pre-existing" cultural context: it reaches a deeper sphere of reality. When ritual induces, supports, guides our feeling and doing, this alleviates an often overwhelming burden on the individual, on the — to use Braungart's quoting of Ehrenberg — "fatigued self."<sup>22</sup> Through ritual, or through a theater performance that is ritualistic, we participate in a communal, social, cosmic, or religious order. This order takes on much of our existential burden, and it reassures us of the alignment between our subjectivity and the world, of our belonging.

Perhaps we will better understand how ritual and drama can work hand in hand if we examine which transformative conduits drama and theater employ when they aim for reintegrative outcomes to their conflicts. Asking about methods and instruments of conflict resolution will highlight differences and commonalities between ritual and drama. Some of drama's relatively frequent conduits of conflict resolution appear not to use ritual at all or not *in extenso*, and none of the following methods appear to derive much of their problem-solving capacity from ritual: the zero case of coincidence and luck, when a conflict is solved by mere arbitrary and unpredictable chance; divine pre-determination; unstructured violence and brute force in chaotic warfare. Drama uses conduits of resolution that are closer to ritual when it resorts to the natural cycles of nature, as in the seasons or the old year and the new, of death and rejuvenation. Such natural cycles share with ritual that they occur in repeating patterns, and that in them a destructive pattern is often joined to a productive one: a tragedy thus can be sublated into a reconciliatory superstructure, i.e., into a drama of reconciliation. In nature, this occurs when fall and winter are followed by spring and summer; in ritual, this happens in the Christian mass, when it proceeds from *tristia* to *gaudium*, from sacrifice to resurrection in the

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 431, insists that art is not a mere game.

<sup>21</sup> René Girard: *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977, passim [*La Violence et le Sacré*, Paris, Grasset, 1972]; Braungart: *Ritual und Literatur*, 245; Erika Fischer-Lichte: Das theatralische Opfer: Zum Funktionswandel von Theater im 20. Jahrhundert, *Forum Modernes Theater* 13.1 (1998), 42–57, 55.

<sup>22</sup> Braungart: *Ritual*, 428.



community; in drama, a similar tandem pattern can be observed in Shakespeare's late plays, when he uses the change of seasons to support a perception of rejuvenation and to bend tragedy toward reconciliation, as in *The Winter's Tale*.<sup>23</sup> While the natural cycle may no longer be satisfying as an assumed cause of reconciliation in human affairs and interpersonal conflict, there remains a deep affinity between natural cycles and ritual: both are pre-rational, as well as repetitive. In this sense, ritual is almost like human-made nature. Thus, the natural cycle and the change of seasons work as parallels to and as illustrations of human affairs, and they can carry poetic and persuasive weight in the bringing about of reconciliation. The ritual pattern of birth, death, and rebirth underlies reconciliatory dramas more than tragedy, but, strangely, ritual's connection to the latter has been researched much more intensely.

Besides such natural, objective conduits of conflict resolution, drama may also employ more subjective conduits to lead its serious conflict to a productive ending: a protagonist's leap of faith can achieve this, when he or she is willing to enter into risk without a cost-benefit calculation, but this approach — as we see it, for example, in Goethe's *Iphigenia among the Taurians* — does not bear an obvious relation to ritualistic behavior — in fact, Iphigenia breaks the Taurians' sacrificial rite in order to save her brother's, his friend's, and her own life. Another subjective, emotional disposition that frequently enables dramatic conflict resolution is the ability to feel mixed emotions or to feel pity, so that catharsis becomes a stepping stone toward reconciliation, as in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* or Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*; or it is an ability to dream or a sense of humor that make re-framing and progress possible. However, none of these methods appears to derive from ritual.

A third group of conduits are intellectual skills that are located in the individual but also create reference to ideal objective standards: reason, cognitive flexibility, the ability to assume a higher vantage point or another's perspective, to see or even create alternative courses of action. These rational and ethical talents are mostly independent of ritual. The emotional, psychological, cognitive, and intellectual conduits of reconciliation that are located in the individual's subjective conditions and abilities are quite different from any features that possess the power of ritual.

However, a final group of conduits of conflict resolution seems to have more affinity to the idea and practice of ritual: the social and political one. Often it is institutions which enable the control of aggression and then make possible debate and negotiation, bargaining, mediation, arbitration, adjudication, and consensus. To give an early example, in the *Eumenides* it is judicial trial and

<sup>23</sup> For the most influential interpretation of the Christian mass as drama, see O. B. Hardison: *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages: Essays in the Origin and Early History of Modern Drama*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965, especially 35–79.

tribunal vote which achieve the ultimate breakthrough. Trials, where a social process becomes visible on stage, remain one of the most frequent rituals leading to conflict resolution in drama.

Another ritual often adapted to theatrical performance is “pageant-like formal processions.”<sup>24</sup> Unsurprisingly, the reconciliatory genres of Western drama have borrowed from Christian rites, such as the Eucharist (as in late medieval Corpus Christi plays and Spanish Eucharist plays, the *autos sacramentales*, e.g., Calderón’s *El gran teatro del mundo*) as well as forgiveness and penance (as in Shakespeare’s problem plays and late romances which may have been conscious of the church’s traditional ritual practices precisely because they were in the process of breaking up).<sup>25</sup> The institutional roles that advance the process of conflict resolution, such as witness, mediator, and healer, can often be found in ritual as well as drama.

Social ritual can of course be misused and thus become the cause of conflict, rather than conflict resolution: recall, as a case in point, the ritualistic celebration planned by Lear (in *King Lear* I.1), which prevents true acknowledgment between father and daughters, or in *The Tempest* IV.1, the distracting ritualistic masque which almost makes Prospero repeat the mistake of neglecting the duties of a responsible ruler. In the first case, the ritual is subconsciously divisive; in the second, the ritual, while intended as a celebration of harmony, is not timed to occur at the most productive moment and thus almost becomes a stumbling block on the path to conflict resolution. Ritual, especially because it is pre-rational, can be dangerous and destructive. When relying on ritual’s ability to effect change in the — in this case, fictional — world, success is not guaranteed; its actual success depends on how and toward what ends the methods of ritual are employed.

Drama knows many ways of solving conflict: natural, psychological, social, religious. However, the most interesting ones, because they are genuinely dramatic and theatrical, should be drama and theater’s very own conduits, developed from its proper experience and expertise, the specifically performance-related conduits. Some of these structures — like the play-within-a-play, Director’s Drama, *theatrum mundi* or *scena vitae* — are not necessarily linked to ritual, and it would require much space to lay out how they might function as rituals; other structures can more immediately be understood as ritualistic.<sup>26</sup> For instance, the strategy of *deus ex machina* was a mainstay of

<sup>24</sup> Robert Hapgood: Shakespeare and the Ritualists, *Shakespeare Survey* 15 (1962), 121; Stroup: *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>25</sup> Shakespeare’s use of Christian ritual has been extensively researched; a recent superb representative of this approach is Sarah Beckwith: *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2011.

<sup>26</sup> I plan to devote a separate article to this task. For more detail on the notion of Director’s Drama, see Jan L. Hagens: Forging a Link between Stage and World: The Genre of Director’s



Athenian theater especially during the final catastrophic phase of the Peloponnesian War, when it became a means of supporting civic morale in the face of imminent defeat: in a desperate military situation and against the odds, a god would ensure rescue, safety, and victory. Such helpful divine interference was so often employed as the crucial mechanism of solution that it assumed the status of ritualistic pattern and eventually established its own theatrical form, the *Soteria* plays. These plays were neither tragedies nor comedies but a genre beyond those more divisive courses of action.

Today, the most effective theater should practice a two-track approach to performance: having invited the audience to participate in ritual, it also elicits self-reflection. In a sense, Fischer's entire book can be read as being about the tension between these two poles, between a fascist way of employing ritual and a reflexive and progressive way of employing ritual. Fischer emphasizes the difference between ritual and literature when she claims that poetic rituality displays more variation, innovation, creation, and critique than ritual *per se*, but she also stresses that rituality and reflexivity do not necessarily stand in exclusionary opposition to each other.<sup>27</sup> The *telos* of self-reflexive ritual may be difficult, but it is not impossible. Everything depends on the exact quantity and quality of relation between ritual and reflection that an artwork is able to achieve. This cannot be a mere both/and, but it must be a one-through-the-other or a parts-whole relation. A performance that wants to lead a potentially tragic conflict toward positive resolution needs to interweave ritual and reflection. In its ritual elements, such reflexive ritual would let us participate in and experience the shared stability of pre-existing structures in the world, of a — if you will — divine order; but it is through its new and progressive ideas, through language, and through its human agents' decisions and actions, that it would allow us to discover such an objective order. This seems fitting for rational twenty-first-century subjects: each of us, as a member of humanity, needs to find a path forward — hopefully, a shared path to resolution.

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<sup>27</sup> Fischer: *Ritual und Ritualität*, 96.



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ALONG THE HERDING TRAILS THE YEARS...  
SCRIPTED AND EMBODIED RITUALITY  
IN A YOIK-NOH PERFORMANCE<sup>1</sup>

JOHANNA DOMOKOS

*This paper explores how two major forms of poetic rituality manifest in the dramatic works of the Sámi author Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (1943–2001), owing to the influence of Sámi and Japanese cultures. More precisely, this presentation focuses on the mapping of scripted ritual elements, which inspire, influence, and contribute through their embodiment to the aesthetic presentivity of a yoik-Noh play and its performances. Scripted rituality relates to the role and function of ritual elements and patterns that are fixed in some form before they reach their addressee (the writer, the reader, the actor, or the audience). Its counterpart, embodied rituality, relates to the role and function of ritual elements and patterns as they manifest, as well as carrying out the interpretative and performative processes while the text or performance “happen.” Moreover, this study also demonstrates the dialectic relation between scripted and embodied ritual elements during the multiphase artistic process.*

RITUAL AND ART

As emphasized in the main theses of Wolfgang Braungart’s article *Ritual and Aesthetic Presentivity*, included in this book, art is constitutive for rituals and rituals are constitutive for art<sup>2</sup>. Art and ritual substantially draw from their *aesthetic presentivity*.<sup>3</sup> Understood as central for their aesthetic organization,

<sup>1</sup> The present paper is based on my previous research results published as Betwixt, liminal and transformative. Key concepts in Áilu’s work, in T. Valtonen – L. Valkeapää (eds.): *Minä soin – Mun čuojan. Kirjoituksia Nils-Aslak Valkeapään elämäntyöstä*, Rovaniemi, Lapland University Press, 2017, 259–276. That study reflected on the relation of the ritual and the liminal. This paper elaborates on poetic rituality a step further and develops new analytic concepts, that of scripted and liminal rituality for a more nuanced understanding of ritual elements in arts.

<sup>2</sup> Wolfgang Braungart: *Ritual*, in D. Weidner (ed): *Handbuch Literatur und Religion*, Stuttgart, Metzler, 2016, 427–434, 427; Saskia Fischer: *Ritual und Ritualität im Drama nach 1945*, Paderborn, Fink, 2019b, 28.

<sup>3</sup> Braungart: *Ritual*, 433; Fischer: *Ritual und Ritualität*, 34.



the general structuring characteristics of the ritual possess systematic relevance. In this regard, such formally structured and standardized processes become central to both ritual and art, aiding in the manifestation of performative, symbolic, self-referential, and communicative aspects. Thus, ritual elements in a socio-cultural or artistic practice give birth to structure while also enabling new meanings to arise.

### POETIC RITUALITY

An understanding of ritual is highly relevant for the analysis of literature and theater, since ritual elements not only generally support but also substantially determine the aesthetics of literary works and performances. In dealing with this material, Wolfgang Braungart and Saskia Fischer have both worked on formulating the concept of *poetic rituality*. According to Braungart and Fischer, poetic rituality sheds light on the liminal characteristics of poetic as well as dramatic forms, and references to ritual practices, ritual forms and structures which are set in motion in a way that allows new aesthetic characteristics and semantic aspects to arise.<sup>4</sup> Thus poetic rituality manifests itself as an intrinsic aspect of such literary works and performances where the adaptation of ritual patterns becomes constitutive and determines the aesthetics of the artistic production in an essential way. The present paper explores how poetic rituality manifests itself in a play of a contemporary Sámi author, Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (1943–2001), and in its two different adaptations. It focuses on how *scripted* and *embodied rituality* prove to be essential categories in investigating the poetic rituality of this or any other piece of art.

### SCRIPTED AND EMBODIED RITUALITY

The above-mentioned works of Braungart and Fischer on aesthetic presentivity and poetic rituality focus our attention on the structuring, as well as the performative relevance, of ritual in the arts. Building upon these two lines of argumentation, the terms of *scripted* and *embodied* rituality can be introduced. *Scripted rituality* relates to the role and function of ritual elements and patterns that are fixed in some form before they reach their addressee (the writer, the

<sup>4</sup> Wolfgang Braungart: Poetik, Rethorik, Hermeneutik, in A. Aurnhammer – W. Braungart – S. Breuer – U. Oelmann (eds.): *Stefan George und sein Kreis: Ein Handbuch*, Berlin/Boston, De Gruyter, 2016, Vol. 1, 509; Fischer: *Ritual und Ritualität*, 92–93; Saskia Fischer: Poetische Ritualität und Schuld im Theater nach 1945 – Nelly Sachs, Mary Wigman und Pina Bausch, in S. Fischer, B. Mayer (eds.): *Kunst-Rituale – Ritual-Kunst. Zur Ritualität von Theater, Literatur und Musik in der Moderne*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2019a, 39–62, 40–41.

reader, the actor, or the audience). Its counterpart, *embodied rituality*, relates to the role and function of ritual elements and patterns as they manifest, as well as carrying out the interpretative and performative processes while the text or performance “happen.”

The first concept, scripted rituality, maps the ritual elements and patterns used as “scripts” for creating the art form and thus becomes constitutive in the mediality of the work. Thus the following elements of a work are all good examples of scripted rituality: (1) cited ritual texts, (2) socio-cultural and artistic ritual forms used as sources of inspiration in creating a literary or theatrical work, (3) the rhythm, repetition, broken lines, and symbolic language found in a poetic text, (4) the dialogic characteristic of a play, (5) the performance instructions in a staged version of a dramatic text, (6) the designated positioning of the characters (like the *waki* or *shite* or the chorus and musicians in a Noh performance), (7) or the static visual elements of the scenery (like the painted green pine tree on the back wall of Noh performances, or its static lighting).

The concept of embodied rituality underlines the performative and singular aspects of such processes. These are the elements that carry the *liveliness*, the *hic et nunc* quality of the event. Embodied rituality contributes to the emergence of new characteristics and aspects. Examples of such transitory processes include: (1) the mental images created in the mind of the reader while reading a play, (2) imagining how certain ritual elements could look in a real performance, (3) the audience watching the ritual gestures of the actors and endowing them with personal meanings or feelings; or (4) perceiving the ritual music and several other common interactions during the reception of an artistic work or event.

In the following sections, I will give a brief overview of the conditions contributing to the birth of Sámi theater and drama, as well as looking at the most successful trademark of contemporary Sámi culture: the modern yoik. The relatively recent establishment of these artistic forms in Sámi society demonstrates the importance of social training in the development of ritualistic artistic patterns, which then enable the birth of artistic fields of literature, music, and theater as communicative media.

## SÁMI THEATER

Although modern Sámi drama and theater are very young artistic forms, they have consistently produced mature works since their inception. About fifty years ago, at the end of the 1960s, the multimedia Sámi artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää could still say that the Sámi did not have separate art forms in the modern sense, though the aesthetic nature of spoken word, musical, and handicraft culture were highly valued in Sámi society. However, these artforms

were always closely related to practical life. Thanks to the highly dynamic and effective Sámi emancipation movement of the 1970s and 1980s, institutions dedicated to the production and promotion of Sámi arts, as well as education about them, have developed rapidly. Various festivals and events created by Sámi cultural activist artists have offered an arena for presenting Sámi art beyond the Sámi communities, triggering a cultural shift in labor of establishing autonomous art forms. Strongly based around a dozen of their high quality, highly productive, and mobile artists, by the beginning of the twenty-first-century Sámi arts had gained a strong reputation in national, Nordic, and indigenous contexts. In creating their unique profiles, Sámi artists often draw from universal, Scandinavian, indigenous, and uniquely Sámi cultural rituals and objects (e.g., the latter includes the topics, the artifacts, the images, and sounds of the reindeer herding life style, or the costumes and beliefs related to traditional singing).

#### SÁMI DRAMA AND YOIK

The birth of the literary genre of Sámi drama is strongly connected to the development of Sámi theater. Often the directors or actors were the ones who produced these texts for performance. Today Sámi drama enjoys a wide range of numerous plays written mainly in one of the many Sámi languages; however, the integration of other languages into the plays is also common. This does not pose any particular challenge for the multilingual Sámi artists and their audience; rather, it is more often the Sámi language itself that might create barriers to understanding (as opposed to the official national languages or English).

One of the main characteristics of Sámi drama and theater performances is an openness to the Sámi singing tradition, the yoik, as well as the inclusion of historic or new age shamanic symbolism. The Hungarian scholar, Ildikó Tamás describes the yoik as:

...the symbol of identity, of the belonging together of the community sharing common concepts about human existence... Yoik is much more than an improvised song and much more than a folk song, and if we want to define what it is, we need to cross the borders between musicology, philology, and folklore studies to encompass a reflection of the widest possible horizon of Sámi culture. Yoik contains qualities of both the sacred and the profane, and its functional aspects penetrate other areas of Sámi society than simply those of ritual songs.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Tamás Ildikó: *Tüzön át, jégen át. A sarkvidéki nomád lappok énekhagyománya*, Budapest, Napkút Kiadó, 2007, 25. Trans. Johanna Domokos.



Artists of the Sámi theater and performing arts quickly understood the yoik's potential to become the ideal trademark and export product of Sámi culture. Based on small-scale melody, with variable rhythmic patterns, the poetics of the *living yoik* are flexible, allowing for a large degree of adaptation and incorporation of outside elements while remaining identifiable as a yoik. For example, modern yoik singing can accommodate the rhythms of the African djembe drum, American country and rock 'n' roll, and even Hawaiian music or the Indian tabla, as well as Burundian whisper music with further elements of pop, rock, jazz, blues, rap, or techno, while Sámi music itself has lent its own influence to traditional and commercial music. Since many Sámi artists were exposed to these genres from an early age (however not in their mother tongue), it was challenging, but not especially difficult, to develop a specific Sámi theater practice. And today, though the indigenous population of Sámi does not always enjoy favorable conditions for their cultural survival and revival, there are publishing houses and theaters in all of the four countries where the Sámi live (in the North of Sweden, Norway, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula of Russia, where their traditional homeland is now situated).

#### NILS-ASLAK VALKEAPÄÄ (1943–2001)

The most recent grand Sámi master, Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, was versed in many languages and cultures (e.g., North Sámi, Finnish, Norwegian, Swedish, and English). He was highly knowledgeable about his own indigenous tradition but also familiar with many other traditions and contemporary cultural practices around the world, including indigenous and non-indigenous, ancient, modern, and postmodern. Endowed with excellent social skills, as well as multiple talents as a writer, painter, composer, actor, and performing artist, he managed to form stable artistic relationships with a handful of other people in order to pioneer new Sámi artistic forms and bring them to a position of global visibility by the beginning of the twenty-first century. At ease with verbal, musical, and theatrical performance and improvisation, he partook in several kinds of ritualistic events around the globe, be it a Native American tribal ceremony, a literary festival in Oslo, or performing with shakuhachi flute performers in Japan.

Valkeapää's visits to Japan started in 1988, when he read his poems and sang yoiks at a literary performance of Nordic authors in a Noh theater hall in Tokyo. His performance was very well received by the Japanese audience, and this formed the basis of a lifelong connection to Japan. Cultivating close friendships with Japanese experts in his home country helped Valkeapää to extend his insights into different Japanese artistic and spiritual traditions, mainly

that of Noh theater and haiku poetry. Additionally, Valkeapää's longstanding admiration of the works of Nobel Prize-winning author Herman Hesse must have also contributed to his affinity with Eastern spiritual practices.

In 1995, upon receiving an invitation to the international *Northern Light Poetry Festival* in the northern Japanese city of Sapporo, Valkeapää began to conceive of a *yoik-Noh poetic concert* (as he later called it). By combining his poetic verbal style with yoiking and adding the spirit and structure of the ritualist Noh theater, Valkeapää was able to create a productive, compelling, and successful piece on a topic very close to his heart: the insecurity of young people. His performance script was ready in September 1995 and was entitled *Ridn'oaivi ja nieguid oaidni* (The Frost-haired and the Dream-seer). This performance was planned to be simultaneously poetic and musical, with equal amounts of time devoted to text in Sámi and Japanese as well as to traditional yoiking (c. 25 minutes each). Just as Noh theater is thought to embody the ancient, intuitive, and syncretic worldview of Japanese culture, which forms the foundation of Japanese identity, the same is true for the yoik of the Sámi.

Valkeapää's yoik-Noh poetic concert, performed with a three-person yoiking band plus two Japanese actors, was reconceptualized after his death by the Sámi National Theater Beaivváš (SNTB) in Norway, under the direction of Haukur Jón Gunnarsson, one of the best Kabuki directors in Europe, who had already served as theater director of the Sámi National Theater for three terms. Gunnarsson kept the same proportion of yoik and text for these stagings, which were performed locally and internationally in 2006–7 and again in 2013. The remainder of this essay will investigate how scripted rituality relates to the embodied rituality in the two scene versions and their different performances.

Analyzing the performance texts — meaning the scene versions of the two differently ritualized performances — we must state that Valkeapää intended to write a scene version and not a drama from the very beginning. However, the scene version prepared ten years later for the Sámi National Theater was altered substantially. No changes were made to the poetic text, but completely different yoiks were inserted in the place of traditional ones. Moreover, Valkeapää's simplistic yet powerful performance was changed from a one-man show to a complex theatrical production by five professional actors and six professional musicians on the stage (plus several backstage performers and a director).



ON A PRECEDING TEXT,  
A HAIKU AND THE YŪGEN PRINCIPLE

Thanks to the insight provided by two essays recently published by the Japan expert Jun'ichirō Ōkura, a close friend of Valkeapää, we have learned that two haikus by the sixteenth-century Japanese poet Matsuo Bašō became part of Valkeapää's Sámi play.<sup>6</sup> Ōkura also reveals that one of his own plays, which he offered to Valkeapää for use in his performance, was an additional source of influence. Ōkura's play cited several of the yoik songs from Valkeapää's LPs as well as yoik poems included in his 1991 Nordic Literary Prize-winning book.<sup>7</sup> It also included scenes where the protagonist — who bore a strong resemblance to Valkeapää — appears as a wise spirit from the other world. Titled "Elämän joiku", meaning "The Yoik of Life", this play symbolized the essence of Valkeapää's poetry as it was seen and interpreted by Ōkura.<sup>8</sup> It conveyed a deep respect and devoted support of life in all of its different manifestations. Although Valkeapää politely declined Ōkura's script, preferring to write his own version, Ōkura's text and its Noh theater spirit made a strong impression on him. In fact, Ōkura's text can be seen as a tangible bridge between Noh theater and Valkeapää's later piece, though we also know that Valkeapää had a longstanding prior interest in Noh theater.

The demonstrable genealogical relationship between premodern and modern Japanese ritualistic literary texts and the Sámi liminal play is due in large part to the transcultural viability of certain ritualistic patterns. While some Japanese cultural, spiritual, and artistic ritual elements are difficult to implement transculturally, others prove to be quite adaptable. The literary texts under present consideration could exemplify both instances; however, this essay concentrates on patterns successfully adapted to the Sámi text, and in doing so, manifesting scripted rituality. Furthermore, no matter how elaborately a pattern appears, the more universal it is, the easier it can be implemented again.

Ōkura's original performance script is, as he calls it, a *yūgen Noh play*.<sup>9</sup> With this genre specification Ōkura refers to the mystical Mugen Noh theater tradition, with emphasis on the yūgen aesthetic principle. As he explains, Noh plays can be divided into three groups according to the human and transcendental worlds they depict. One of these three sub-genres, Mugen Noh,

<sup>6</sup> Jun'ichirō Ōkura: Áilu Japanissa, in T. Valtonen – L. Valkeapää (eds.): *Minä soin*, 361–375. Ōkura: Japanilaisia piirteitä Áilun tuotannossa, in *Ibid.*, 376–397.

<sup>7</sup> Nils-Aslak Valkeapää: *Beaivi, Áhčážan*, Guovdageaidnu, DAT, 1988.

<sup>8</sup> The original play written in Japanese, then translated into Finnish has not yet been published. However, its Hungarian translation is available as Jun'ichirō Ōkura: *Az élet jojkája*, trans. Johanna Domokos, in J. Domokos (ed.): *A szerencsefia. Kortárs számi drámák*, Budapest, Napkút Kiadó, 2017, 109–121.

<sup>9</sup> Ōkura: Áilu Japanissa, 368.



involves supernatural worlds, featuring gods, spirits, ghosts, or phantasms in the *shite* role. Similar to the role of a *shite*, a human being in the role — called the *waki* — also appears.

Regarding the typical storyline of a *yūgen* Noh play Ōkura states the following:

In the opening act of a *yūgen* Noh play, a person, who lives in this world, appears. He is on his way somewhere and is often a Buddhist monk. To start off, he says where he is going and what stories he has heard about that place. Then the protagonist comes to the scene, and they meet each other. The protagonist of the play is the soul of a deceased local person disguised as a living man, who now comes to visit this world. Then this ghost begins to recall the past. He talks about this and that to the monk, who in a way is a representative of the local people. After a while the monk falls asleep. The second half of the play features the main character almost entirely alone, namely the ghost from the other world. Usually, he dances in very slow, stylized movements while the chorus accompanies him. This chorus tells stories about the main character and also about his mood. At the end of the play, the representative of the other world leaves, while the human character wakes up from sleep and wonders whether the dream was true or not.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, this is the overarching structure of both Ōkura's and Valkeapää's texts. In Ōkura's piece the transcendental protagonist, referred to as *shite* in the play, appears to the wandering reindeer herder, referred to as *waki*. Drinking from a clean local spring after a day's walk, the reindeer herder looks around for a place to rest. The *shite* incites him to yoik together, and after yoiking the *shite* disappears and the *waki* falls asleep.

In the second part of the play, the *shite* dances as the chorus recites poems from Valkeapää's award winning and much translated poetry/photo book, *Beaivi, Áhčážan*, published in 1989<sup>11</sup>. These poems are about the circle of life that affects nature, individuals, and entire peoples. One of the quoted poems (no. 559) translates in the following way:

And a part of life is that the old ones leave  
 Make room for the new life  
 Humans come and go  
 People are born, disappear  
 That is how the ocean of life sighs  
 The waves  
 Wave after wave

<sup>10</sup> Ōkura: *Ibid.*, 366. trans. Johanna Domokos.

<sup>11</sup> Valkeapää: *Beaivi*, 1989, unnumbered pages.



rejected Ōkura's piece for his performance, the two of them spent a substantial amount of time discussing the translatability of this haiku.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the haiku's imagery of the wandering sun and moon became the most often repeated and reformulated motif in Valkeapää's work. So, here is Basho's haiku, written traditionally in one line, followed by Ōkura's one-line translation, and then Valkeapää's adaptation, rendered in his own poetic style.<sup>15</sup>

Basho:

月日は百代の過客にして、行きかふ年もまた旅人なり

translates as: [Moon and Sun are the passersby of hundreds of generations, and the coming years are also travelers.]

Ōkura (in Finnish):

Kuu ja aurinko ovat ikuisia matkalaisia. Matkamiehen tavoin tulevat ja menevät myös vuodet

translates as: [The moon and the sun are forever traveling. Like the travelers, the years also come and go.]

Valkeapää (in Sámi):

Mánnu ja Beaivi  
leat čudiid buolvádagaid  
njolggedeaddjit johtit  
Johtolagaid johtet maid jagit;  
bohtet, mannet

translates as: [The Moon and the Sun / are the trotting wanderers / of hundreds of generations / Along the herding trails the years, too, trek, / coming, passing] (translated by R. Eriksen and H. Gaski).

In the line above, the Japanese poet Basho, himself a lonely wanderer, uses a human allegory to describe time by way of a repetitive pattern, following the strict syllable pattern and aesthetic prescriptions of haiku tradition. This short and crystalized poem offers a universally relevant theme, which is central to both traditional Japanese poetry as well as the personal poetry of Valkeapää (in addition to its cultural symbolism for the Sámi). The poem also serves as a

<sup>14</sup> The author of this paper would like to thank Jun'ichirō Ōkura for all the insights he provided in the creative writing processes of his and Valkeapää's play during their personal meetings in 2015 and 2016 in Helsinki.

<sup>15</sup> Ōkura: *Ibid.*, 369.



transcultural way of opening up the hearts and minds of the Japanese audience to Valkeapää's equally simplistic style. This has much to do with the *yūgen* aesthetic principle manifest in traditional Noh plays as well as in the modern Noh pieces by Ōkura and Valkeapää.

The fourteenth – fifteenth-century Zen aesthetician, actor, and playwright, master Zeami, prescribed a number of required qualities thought to be essential to Noh as an art form. *Yūgen* is one of these principles.<sup>16</sup> The name *yūgen* means “deep meaning, sensitive or tasteful, and full of sentiment, profound sublimity.” It is a concept valued in various forms of art throughout Japanese culture. Originally used to mean elegance or grace, representing perfect beauty in the poetic tradition of *waka*, *yūgen* means the invisible beauty that is felt rather than seen in a work of art. The term is used specifically in relation to Noh to mean the profound beauty of the transcendental world, including mournful beauty involved in sadness and loss. This aesthetic principle is an important component in both Ōkura's and Valkeapää's plays, encouraging the poetic meditative atmosphere to arise. As Ōkura points out in his article, this atmosphere allows for the manifestation of silence and the sublime; additionally, slow rhythm is a constitutive structural part in both plays.<sup>17</sup> Thus, *yūgen* contributes to aesthetic presentivity in both pieces.

#### THE PLAY

Although he meticulously followed the structure and the traditional roles for a *yūgen*-Noh [mystic Noh] play, in his piece *Ridn'oaivi ja nieguid oaidni* [*The Frost-haired and the Dream-seer*], Valkeapää reimagined the role of the *shite* as a timeless mythical figure called *Ridn'oaivi* [the Frost-haired]. *Ridn'oaivi* acts as a mediator of the wisdom that young people can use to achieve a responsible harmony with nature and with the inner self. Similarly to Ōkura's play, the role of the *waki*, the human counterpart of the *shite*, is embodied in a young Sámi *boazovázzi* [reindeer herdsman]. He wanders the tundra alone with his herd on an autumn night, while lamenting on the following:

how strange,  
when I make a halt, it is as if I am on the move,  
and as if at home, when I am roaming.

and my travels are not ended by wandering,  
even now — after a couple of dog's runs —

<sup>16</sup> Beatrix Schönau: *Zeami színháza és a nó elmélete*, Budapest, Primo, 1993, 62. Tamás Vekerdy: *A színészi hatás eszközei – Zeami mester művei szerint*, Budapest, Gondolat, 1988, 119–120.

<sup>17</sup> Ōkura: *Ibid.*, 369.



that you need... do not ask me what you need,  
 love, and dare to love...  
 yourself, then you can love others, too...  
 love!  
 (translated by R. Eriksen and H. Gaski)

And later:

do not be afraid little brother  
 fear rather,  
 that there will come a time  
 when such questions do not  
 even crop up in thoughts...  
 if man forgets that  
 he is a part of nature, of life,  
 but  
 don't be afraid little brother  
 life takes care of its own creatures,  
 people disappear, peoples too,  
 epochs end;  
 (translated by R. Eriksen and H. Gaski)

As for the third voice in the play, known as the *jiuati* in Noh theater, the chorus was imagined — just as in Ökura's piece — as being personified by Valkeapää's yoiking band, who served as commentators of the story in yoiking style. That means that the commentary did not take the form of words put to melody, but rather — characteristically of the yoik — by melody carried by the vowels of semantically meaningless short particles (such as, "heeei" "oooooh", "loooy," or "laaaa").

#### TWO DIFFERENT PERFORMANCES OF THE PLAY

When we watch the different performances of the play, all of the poetic and musical elements, plus the directorial instructions and scenographic references for carrying out the actual performance, belong to what we have termed *scripted rituality*. These fixed elements contribute to the staging of a play as well as to the rituality of theater. Moreover, these fixed elements form the liminal pillars to the creative, transformative process of action from the page to the action on stage, and thus scripted liminality becomes embodied for the duration of the performance.

In the performances in Japan in 1995, the spoken parts of the play were read by two Japanese actors sitting on the right side of the stage (where traditionally



the chorus sits in a Noh play). Meanwhile, in the left back corner, where the instrumentalists usually sit in a Noh play, two yoikers in colorful baize dresses were standing. These two units never left their places during the performance. The character of *boazovázzi* [the reindeer herdsman] moved mainly along the rear and front ends of the central axes of the stage. The most mobile figure on the stage was the main character, Ridn'oaivi, in traditional leather Sámi dress, played by Valkeapää himself. While the verbal parts were acted out by Sámi actors in Sámi costumes, their voices were spoken by the Japanese actors, who were dressed in black suits. Aside from a *gákti* (a traditional Sámi costume) no other props or settings were used. The simplistic setting, the author's presence in the performance, the infrequent rehearsals ("maybe three times," as Ökura reveals in his 2017 article),<sup>18</sup> and the improvised acting, contribute to the categorization of the first two performances as art performances. As is well known, Valkeapää was a very talented improviser who often performed in his homeland as well as around the world during the healthy period of his life (in 1996 he had a very serious accident, which led to his early death in 2001).

Regarding the acting out or the embodiment of the liminal storyline, the play was constructed along the tension of the "old me" [Ridn'oaivi] and the "young me" ([nieguid oaidni] lit. the Dream-seer, who is the reindeer herdsman). During the play no other elements interfered with this "inner monologue," vocalized in Japanese words and acted out by the two Sámi characters, who occasionally also sang yoiks. In this sense, this play manifests the liminal state of a person embodied in two characters, which is carried out with movements, words, and yoiks by the six people on the stage. The Japanese audience was endowed not only with a somewhat familiar liminal storyline – the Noh structure of the play – but also witnessed a nuanced interweaving of Sámi and Japanese cultural codes. As pointed out above, Valkeapää included in his play well-known haikus by Basho, the Japanese haiku master from the seventeenth century. This ritual and liminal aesthetic experience made a strong impression on the Japanese audience, who remained in a deep silence for several minutes after the play ended.

A few days before he passed away, Valkeapää sent a postcard to the Sámi National Theater Beaivváš expressing his interest in staging his drama as a Noh play. The card was postmarked in Japan on the day of his death, November 26, 2001. Valkeapää had worked closely with several artists from this company even before the group's inception in 1981. The Icelandic theater director Haukur Jón Gunnarsson, who served the Beaivváš group between 1991 and 1996, and again 2007–2015, is one of the most successful promoters of Japanese Kabuki theater in Europe, for which he was awarded the UNESCO Uchimura prize in 2003. As he explains on the playbill:

<sup>18</sup> Ökura: *Ibid.*, 368.

To be true to Valkeapää's intentions and his use of the dramaturgy of Noh theater, we have chosen to present the play in the stylized, stringent form that also characterizes Noh theater. But we have sought to create our own form of expression rather than imitating the style and movements of Noh, using Valkeapää's own music together with the movements, to comment on and connect the text sequences.<sup>19</sup>

Without expanding on how the Beaviváš performance<sup>20</sup> turned this sparse poetic text into another kind of fascinating meditative event, I will investigate the role of two theatrical devices that made this stage performance different from the previous excellent performance of Áilu (Valkeapää's Sámi name). Naturally, these devices strongly contribute to a very different interpretation of the play.

The performance opens with the members of the chorus slowly entering the stage in complete silence in their stylized costumes, one after another. Moving from the back of the stage to the front, they perform in sequence a gesture that seems to be opening space and time for the "moment" of the performance. While the hand gesture of the first figure opens the horizontal axis for the three-dimensional performance to come, the clapping of the second figure symbolizes the "now," and the hand movements of the third figure bring forth the vertical dimension. These three gestures are performed again in the middle of the performance by the spiritual figure Ridn'oaivi, and at the end by the earthly figure, the reindeer herdsman. This tripartite gesture enforces the interconnection of these levels; and in doing so enables liminality to arise between three poles. The chorus consists of two older characters (paternal and maternal figures) and a third, younger, daughter-like figure standing between them. This female figure will move closer to the reindeer herdsman several times, especially at the end of the play, leaving the viewer to interpret this act as the manifestation of the love Ridn'oaivi expresses in the middle of the play.

Aside from the very elaborate setting and costumes bearing the Noh style, two canes become the most symbolic objects of the performance. Carried by the two principal figures, they play a crucial role in the intermingling of the spiritual and human worlds. Though the canes are not mentioned at all in the original poetic text, nor in the author's stage directions, the main characters always carry them. The straight, life-size cane of the reindeer herdsman contrasts with Ridn'oaivi's longer and more elaborate shamanic cane, which is topped with a reindeer antler. At the end of the second act, while guiding the herdsman back to sleep, Ridn'oaivi leaves his shamanic cane at the young

<sup>19</sup> Sámi National Theater Beaviváš (SNTB): *Ridn'oaivi ja nieguid oaidni* [*The Frost-haired and the Dream-seer*], Sámi/English Playbill, 2013, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Director: Haukur J. Gunnarsson; Choreography: Indra Lorentzen; Scenography: Aage Gaup; Costumes: Berit Marit Hætta; Musical director: Roger Ludvigsen; Actors: Egil Keskitalo (Ridn'oaivi), Nils Henrik Buljo (Herdsman); Chorus: Inga-Máret Gaup-Juuso, Ingor Ántte Áilu Gaup, Mary Sarre; Musicians: Roger Ludvigsen (guitar), Esa Kotilainen (keyboard), Patrick Shaw Iversen (flutes), Espen Høgmo (percussion).



man's side and takes the other cane for himself. This event marks the end of the liminal phase, enhancing the feeling of a dream made real, and it also adds a visual dimension to the poetic message.

#### CONCLUSION

Just as Noh theater embodies the ancient, intuitive, and syncretic worldview of Japanese culture, the singing tradition of yoiking embodies timeless Sámi culture. Noh is fundamentally a symbolic theater with primary importance attached to ritual in a select aesthetic atmosphere. So, too, is the yoik. The combined yoik and Noh traditions in the plays of both Ōkura and Valkeapää give unique manifestations to a series of scripted ritual elements. As this analysis has pointed out, many of the structuring elements of Noh in Ōkura's play can also be found in Valkeapää's piece. The structure of the storyline is the same in both plays, and, as demonstrated, they follow the *yūgen* Noh play pattern. In both plays we find the roles of the *waki*, the *shite*, and the chorus, who together carry out the verbal and musical dialogues. Both texts manifest the poetic style of Valkeapää and its major themes: dreams, reindeer herding, wandering in the tundra, the rise and fall of nations, the cycles of nature and life in general etc. — which are all central themes of the Noh tradition as well. This random thematic coincidence proves the thesis that transcultural ritual patterns are more easily transferred if they contain substantial content elements that are similar.

The poetic and musical elements structuring both plays, the storyline following a fixed pattern, and the stage instructions for how to carry out the dialogues, all belong to what we have termed scripted rituality. These fixed elements contribute later to the staging of the play as well as to the rituality of theater.

The present study aimed to highlight some relevant events relatable to the concept of scripted and embodied rituality as well as liminality. Given that performances and their concepts arise out of the encounter between the artistic "sender" and the audience "recipient," who negotiate and regulate their relationship in different ways, scripted and embodied rituality, of course, cannot be nailed down to simple interpretations. Instead, these ritualities themselves continuously bring forth the meanings that come into being for the human actants involved in the performative event. This essay took liminality as a constitutive characteristic of performative events such as writing, reading, staging, or participating in a performance. Scripted and embodied rituality were exemplified in the narrative and dialogic structure of the play and its performance, both showing a strong authorial and directorial intention to aesthetically accommodate the performative events for the local audience. Let



us also recall that these two basic distinctions are well suited to the unifying term of poetic rituality as defined by Wolfgang Braungart and Saskia Fischer — which is a key element of a larger concept known as transformative aesthetics.

As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the play's harmonious merging of real and supernatural realms reveals not only the life philosophy of the author but also an essential characteristic of Sámi traditional knowledge. Using transcultural performance traditions for reflecting on the metaphysical crises of our time, Valkeapää's work reminds us of the forgotten wisdom which holds that our spiritual balance can be found when we are completely subordinate to Nature and socially bonded to each other. By prompting us to recognize our role as an infinitesimal but nonetheless integral part of the universe, Valkeapää's ritual theater simultaneously serves as a poetic meditation and a poignant warning. With its emphasis on the human experience of the liminal phase, *Ridn'oaivi ja nieguid oaidni* becomes a particularly suitable site for transformative processes to take place between people within the same community as well as across different communities, thereby further enriching and opening our minds.

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# VALÈRE NOVARINA AND JÁNOS PILINSZKY OR THE POETIC THEATER OF UNSELFING RITUAL

ENIKŐ SEPSI

*The texts of the French dramaturg Novarina, as with the Hungarian poet Pilinszky's stage works, are indubitably text-centric, but the former can also rely on daily theatrical practice. To provide an overview of the different connections between emptying and ritual for the analysis of Novarina's theater, I call on not only the classics (Gluckman, van Gennep, Turner), but also Artaud, who calls theater spatial poetry that uses language metaphorically: it exchanges everyday meaning for another one. Developing the thought further with Richard Schechner, we can also say that in the theater, "real events" are revealed as metaphors fundamentally tied to rites. The poetic ritual of art goes further, to become self-reflexive, self-questioning. The spectator approaches this self-enclosing object anamorphically, when it is a matter of ritual. In other words, it is only in being immersed in the rite that certain meanings become visible.*

*A recurrent scene in Valère Novarina's works is that of communal eating, the supper, just as the central recurrent theme is the consumption of words. It is a biblical theme, on account of the Last Supper, too, and aside from this, it also represents the dynamic opposite of self-emptying. The other ritual, which defines the fundamental dramaturgy, is the threefold unity of statement-denial-new statement: Novarina completes the bodily and physical metaphor of the theater as (the Lord's) supper by denying it in the same essay. The anti-selves [anti-personnes] of Novarina's theater, his reversibly operating time, actions, and statements relate to theater as via negativa.*

## THE THEATER OF UNSELFED POETRY

*Theaters must become the place of unselfed lyricism. Here, the I is a collective. It needs an entire wagonful of actors, like Carnival, twenty-two or forty-four actors for the portrayal of a single person. On stage, the individual is without characteristics, without limits, unrecorded in real estate registers and without foundation, plummeting into somatic chasms — and there, all of a sudden, lies the omission of prayer, the empty space of prayer: an empty space, an absence... Prayer is nothing other than collapsing onto the ground and the renewed taste in the mouth of the ground, the humus, the humilitas humana, human humility. — Valère Novarina*



In its artistic sense, Valère Novarina's path from philology to philosophy leads from writing to the theater. The recollecting nature of language prepares him to find his way back from the page and the reader's imaginary (mental) theater to the original font — nothingness ["néant," "rien"], emptiness (the French word *vide* is an anagram of *Dieu*, God), which for Mallarmé meant nothing more than virtual completeness in its own motionlessness, in the word's suspended almost-annihilation (*Crisis of Verse*). For Artaud, on the other hand, whose work exerted a decisive influence on the French theater of the 70s,<sup>1</sup> emptiness embodied the possibility of a merciless encounter with reality's verso, its shadow.<sup>2</sup> For him, the Western use of language and the theater's logocentrism was an obstacle; Eastern performance represented its polar opposite, with its gestural systems embodying more ancient circumstances and myths.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, oriental theater is much more metaphysical, while the occidental tends more to psychologize.<sup>4</sup> In Artaud's teleological vision, the theater's particular, universally encoded "diction" must be as hieroglyph-like, precise, and immediately legible as in a dream.<sup>5</sup> His spiritual heirs (Robert Wilson, Jerzy Grotowski, Valère Novarina, et al.) set out on separately branching paths in realizing this vision. In his early performances, Wilson either excluded language entirely (*Deafman Glance*) or displayed it as a sound effect, equal in rank to the visual spectacle, a musical motif exterior to the body's periphery (*Letter to Queen Victoria, Stalin, Freud, Einstein on the Beach*). Grotowski's actor allows impulses to pass through himself that originate in the body's organic nature and are not worked out in advance but come to the surface during the course of rehearsals. In this sense, in his inaugural address on taking the Chair in Anthropology of Theater in the Collège de France in 1997, he distinguishes between theater that requires learned artistic craft and is thus artificial — "art," "artificiel" — and the organic theater. This organic theatrical *via negativa* strives to attain the state in which the actor is a *vehiculum* (the expression Peter Brook used in reference to Grotowski's theater), an empty vessel ready to accept and carry something.

According to Artaud, the phonemic diction of his holy theater of hieroglyphs strips things of their everyday meaning and clothes them with a different one.<sup>6</sup> And this is nothing other than the working of metaphor, the process

<sup>1</sup> Previously, in the 1960s, French theater had defined itself as Brechtian.

<sup>2</sup> Antonin Artaud: *Le théâtre et les Dieux* [The Theater and the Gods], in *Oeuvres complètes*, VIII, Paris, Gallimard, 1971, 196; see also Maurice Blanchot: Artaud, in *Le livre à venir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1959, 50–58; Blanchot: *La cruelle raison poétique*, in *L'entretien infini*, Paris, Gallimard, 1969, 432–438.

<sup>3</sup> Artaud: *Théâtre oriental et théâtre occidental*, in *Le théâtre et son double*, Paris, Gallimard, Folio/Essais, 1964, 105–113.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>5</sup> Artaud: *Le théâtre de la cruauté*, Paris, Gallimard, Folio/Essais, 1964, 145.

<sup>6</sup> Artaud: *Le théâtre et la poésie*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, V, Paris, Gallimard, 1971, 15.

created by poetic language. This is why Artaud speaks of “poetry in space.”<sup>7</sup> In his text “Theater of Cruelty and the Closing of Representation” Jacques Derrida emphasizes that this attempt by Artaud to bring a language into being that belongs exclusively to the theater is nothing other than the desire to create a representation “that is complete presence, that bears nothing in itself other than its own death, of a present that never repeats itself — that is, one that stands outside of time, not-present.”<sup>8</sup> (At that time, Derrida was writing his *Grammatology*, whose main theme is the “differentiation” between language and writing.)

Neither does Valère Novarina believe in the illusion of supportable presence:<sup>9</sup> True presence attaches to nothing, the *present* is a gift, a present. The present existing before us is in the *future*: something handed to us, pointed out and appearing open (...) we are handed over as *persona* (...) The word *persona* opens us up.” (399)<sup>10</sup> When the curtain rises, the actor — or, rather, any person performing an act — enters his own Passion as a disassembled figure (233) and submits to the acts of language. “Exactly the way a good swimmer swims thanks to the water. The undulation of the text goes forward, breathing, while the actor remains motionless (...) No hesitation, no portrayal, no contingency: the text is seemingly dictated, the actor is its victim and transmits it to the audience in a stream, with a single impulse. The actor undertakes a passive act. Or he steps into the Passion of language. It is the actor’s Passion, his passivity, his *idiocism*, and his failure is that which renders the spectator *visible*.” (190–191) In other words, just as in Artaud’s theater of cruelty, catharsis is banished from Novarina’s as well (it renders the spectator visible — perspective is in his eyes, and the point of death is in his soul), or rather, in this respect it is an Aristotelian theater.<sup>11</sup> The actor provides respir(it)ation and before the forgetful audience, he remembers, and, in doing so, the text that he allows to pass through his body, that he breathes out into the space, returns from death, repeats the original creative act on his body, via the biologically transpired

<sup>7</sup> Artaud: *Théâtre oriental et théâtre occidental*, 112.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida: Le théâtre de la cruauté et la clôture de la représentation, in *L’écriture et la différence*, Paris, Seuil, Essais, 1967, 364 [re-présentation qui soit présence pleine, qui ne porte pas en soi son double comme sa mort, d’un présent qui ne se répète pas, c’est-à-dire d’un présent hors du temps, d’un non-présent.]

<sup>9</sup> As Michel Corvin observes in a footnote in his foreword to the French edition of *The Unknown Act*, many links tie Novarina to Artaud. This similarity is distant but important: “The concepts of body, matter, flesh, death and holes, separation and emptiness, breath and rhythm, a new genesis, are also fundamental concepts in Artaud. Artaud’s monism also comprises the osmosis between matter and spirit.” (Michel Corvin: Préface, in Valère Novarina: *L’Acte inconnu*, Paris, Gallimard, Folio Théâtre, 2009, 13–14.)

<sup>10</sup> Numbers in parentheses refer to fragments from the following publication: Valère Novarina: *Lumières du corps*, Paris, P.O.L., 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Brunel: *Théâtre et Cruauté ou Dionysos profané*, Paris, Librairie des Méridiens, Bibliothèque de l’Imaginaire, 1982.



*logos*. And this *logos* is, first of all, a verb (*verbum*, the Word), with the character of a verb (in contrast to the horizontality of adjectives — as we could continue in the voice of the well-known Hungarian poet, János Pilinszky).<sup>12</sup> The *persona*, the mask worn and displayed by us, the personality, the no-one [“personne”], is an empty point that at its center speaks and denies. (233) In exhalation, it transubstantiates: the spiritual is not immaterial but the metamorphosis of matter, its exhalation/expiration. Man, created by speech in the image of the Creator, becomes active through speech. In place of Artaud’s hieroglyphics, Novarina’s theater interrogates the image of man (which in its essence is speech), his anthropoglyphs, *in vivo*. The text erupts through the actor’s body with his respir(it)ation: it is the common Passion of actor and text. True mimesis is the activation of existence, the setting of existence into motion. As an *imitatio Christi*, the actor de-portrays [“dé-représente”] and destroys the human idol. The Word crucified on the cross of space hurls human words into space, the body given over to this passive act. Through prayer, which is respir(it)ation, life is given back, since respiration evokes what is missing (Christ’s other name is the gouged out, the one who is empty, like us, who are *personae*).<sup>13</sup>

This is the Pascalian (Paschal) act. Novarina follows Pascal’s thoughts in his use of numbered fragments which stand in the latently influential stream of the French essay: they engage in dialogue with Jules Lagneau, Alain, Simone Weil, and Claudel (even though their names do not crop up, and the intertextuality may not always be conscious). According to Alain, ritual provides rules and objects to the attention, which is why it might be the origin of art.<sup>14</sup> His student, Simone Weil, extends the train of thought with her concept of artistic de-creation [détréation]. The characteristic of the de-created state is the in-active activity whose origin is found in the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Related concepts include desire without an object, and undirected attention. In truth, it is the tense compromise between metaphysical stillness and the movement necessary for any physical action. Human autonomy, evil, and mortality are crucified on the cross of space and time. By means of grace, the “I”, assuming itself to be autonomous (this autonomy is the ego’s greatest illusion), is gradually erased by its own volition: this process is the opposite of creation, namely, de-creation (taking one back to the uncreated state, in contrast to destruction, which leads into the void).<sup>15</sup> Reminiscences of János Pilinszky might arise in

<sup>12</sup> Novarina participated in the new French translation of the Bible with other poets (Jacques Roubaud, Olivier Cadiot), dramatists (e.g., François Bon), and novelists (Jean Echenoz, Emmanuel Carrère, Jean-Luc Benoziglio).

<sup>13</sup> Continuing in the vein of Simone Weil’s thinking, imagination seeks to fill the rupture occurring at this point — which could also be filled transcendently — with illusions.

<sup>14</sup> Alain: Du cérémonial, in *Système des beaux-arts*, Paris, Gallimard, 1926, 40–41. (For more detail on the subject, see my study: A propos d’Alain, in *Revue d’Etudes françaises*, No. 10, 2005, 95–105.)

<sup>15</sup> Simone Weil: Décréation, in *La pesanteur et la grâce*, Paris, Plon, 1988 [1947], 42.



the Hungarian reader's mind, since his oeuvre from 1963 onwards becomes interwoven with Weil's world of thought. In the author's image — which, from his *Szálkák* [*Splinters*] onward, dominates his poems, and which corresponds with the metaphor of the quill in Simone Weil — it is not so much the aspect of subjection, or rather the Platonic sense of mania, which is emphasized, but its stillness, not only the influence on the present of the Passion as *praesens perfectum perpetuum* but the stationary center of a constantly repeating Passion in which it stands. Or, rather, the act of writing in space and not bounded in time. In this sense, the artist is a medium (like the Sheryl of *Beszélgetések* [*Conversations*]). I quote Pilinszky's poems in the original Hungarian and in the English translations of Ted Hughes.

*Intelem*

Ne a lélekzetvételt. A zihalást.  
Ne a nászasztalt., A lehulló  
maradékot, hideg árnyakat.  
Ne a mozdulatot. A kapkodást.  
A kampó csöndjét, azt jegyezd.

*Exhortation*

Not the respiration. The gasping.  
Not the wedding table. The falling  
scraps, the chill, the shadows.  
Not the gesture. Not the hysteria.  
The silence of the hook is what you must note.

Arra figyelj, amire városod,  
az örök város máig is figyel:  
tornyaival, tetőivel,  
élő és halott polgáraival.

## Record

what your city, the everlasting city  
has watched,  
with its towers, its roofs,  
its living and dead citizens,  
to this very hour.

Akkor talán még napjaidban  
hírül adhatod azt, miről  
hírt adnod itt egyedül érdemes.

Then you may make known,  
perhaps, even in your day,  
what is alone  
worthy the annunciation,

Írnok, akkor talán nem jártál itt hiába.

Scribe, then perhaps you will not have passed in vain.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> János Pilinszky: *Exhortation*, trans. Ted Hughes – János Csokits, in János Pilinszky: *The Desert of Love: Selected poems*, London, Anvil Press, 1989, 57.

*Betűk, sorok*

Megérdemelné a békés halált  
minden írnok, aki az éjszakában  
tollat fog és papír fölé hajol.

*Letters, Lines*

Each scribe deserves  
a peaceful death, who at night  
takes pen in hand and bows over the paper.<sup>17</sup>

Pilinszky's first liturgical piece, the *KZ oratórium* [*Concentration Camp Oratorio*], appeared in 1964 in the volume *Requiem* (and later in *Végkifejlet* [*Dénouement*]). Claudel's practice is a reference point in the art form: "Claudel developed the poetic oratorio toward the stage and, with a bit of exaggeration, toward opera and melodrama. I sense hazily that I must 'distort' oratorio in the direction of film."<sup>18</sup> In Pilinszky's understanding, the oratorio is a repetition of the Mass: prayer, Introit, Gospel, *consecratio*, and *communio* follow each other. The following story-insert is certainly best understood as the *consecratio*.

Hol volt, hol nem volt,

élt egyszer egy magányos farkas.

Magányosabb az angyaloknál.

Once upon a time

there was a lonely wolf

lonelier than the angels.

Elvetődött egyszer egy faluba,

és beleszeretett az első házba, amit meglátott.

Már a falát is megszerette,

a kőművesek simogatását,

de az ablak megállította.

He happened to come to a village.

He fell in love with the first house he saw.

Already he loved its walls,

the caresses of its bricklayers.

But the windows stopped him.

A szobában emberek ültek.

Istene kívül soha senki

Olyan szépnek nem látta őket,

mint eaz a tisztaszívű állat.

In the room sat people.

Apart from God, nobody ever

found them so beautiful

as this childlike beast.

Éjszaka aztán be is ment a házba,

megállt a szoba közepén,

s nem mozdult onnan soha többé.

So at night he went into the house.

He stopped in the middle of the room

and never moved from there any more.

<sup>17</sup> Translated by Peter Czipott for this paper. See also the translation of Katalin N. Ullrich on Babel Anthology's site: [https://www.babelmatrix.org/works/hu/Pilinszky\\_J%c3%a1nos-1921/Bet%c5%b1k\\_sorok/en/35381-Letters\\_Lines](https://www.babelmatrix.org/works/hu/Pilinszky_J%c3%a1nos-1921/Bet%c5%b1k_sorok/en/35381-Letters_Lines) [Peaceful death is well-deserved / by each scribe, who at night / takes a pen and bends over paper.]

<sup>18</sup> János Pilinszky: *Naplók, töredékek* [Journals, Fragments], Budapest, Osiris, 1995, 17.

Nyitott szemmel állt egész éjszaka,  
s reggel is, mikor agyonverték.

He stood all through the night, with wide  
eyes and on into the morning, when he was  
beaten to death.<sup>19</sup>

In his 1967 interview on Vatican Radio, he stated that his model for the sacral theater is the Mass: “Following the problems posed so pointedly by the theater of the absurd, we must do everything possible for the creation of a new sacral theater [...]. Our age, which displays in high relief the end of a process of profanation, also offers numerous qualities that make possible the birth of a new sacral artform, which I can best imagine as taking some sort of oratorical form. It certainly sounds too bold, but it is in no way an accident that our attention again turns its concentration toward the drama of dramas, the liturgy of the Holy Mass.”<sup>20</sup> In motionless observation (“lying flat on the paling, hard as a press”), the poem is heard as if it were silent, as if it were part of the Mass, the liturgy: a prayer for embodiment; a motionless drama.

Novarina’s texts, just like Pilinszky’s oratorio and stage works, are indubitably text-centric, but the former can also rely on daily theatrical practice. Pilinszky’s theatrical “pieces,” written in the seventies, draw a great deal on his poetic technique: in truth, he worked out a theatrical poetics and not a theory of the theater. His dramaturgy draws upon Simone Weil’s texts, Grotowski’s, and, most of all, Wilson’s theater. Although his trust in the word occasionally falters (indeed, in the seventies it moves to the sentence or, much more likely, to a sort of deficient mechanism), after nearly falling silent he nevertheless chooses the mediator-actor of immobile intensity Sheryl Sutton (and not the deaf-mute little boy) as the lead player in his dialogue-essay, and in his final notes he speaks of planning a book whose title would have been “He Finally Speaks.”<sup>21</sup> Just as with Pilinszky or Wilson, so in Novarina’s works, the actor does not express himself: he is a being divided in two, his own witness, observer of his own Passion — a person who steps outside personhood.

In those expressions we arrive at in studying Valère Novarina’s works — the theater of unselfed poetry, the theater’s modern (concealed) liturgy, etc. — we must understand a deep inner compulsion, a teleological longing, rather than

<sup>19</sup> János Pilinszky: *Fable*. Detail from *KZ-Oratorio*, trans. Ted Hughes – János Csokits, in Pilinszky: *Ibid.*, 50. (An earlier version in M. Vajda (ed.): *Modern Hungarian Poetry*, Budapest, Corvina Press, 1977, 149–150.)

<sup>20</sup> János Pilinszky: *Publicisztikai írások* [Journalistic Writings], Budapest, Osiris, 1999, 526. What we know about the productions achieved during the author’s life is that the first one was presented in Kecskemét in 1963, and also staged in Orléans in 1967. According to the 3rd May 1969 issue of *Film, színház, muzsika* [Film, Theater, Music], the Universitas Group also staged it, under the direction of József Ruszt. (Posthumous productions: 1994 at the Castle Theater, Gyula, directed by István Iglódi; 13–15 November 1996 in Paris, jointly by the Théâtre Molière and the Maison de la Poésie, under Michael Lonsdale’s direction.)

<sup>21</sup> Pilinszky: *Naplók, töredékek* [Journals, Fragments], 200–201.



concrete programs. Given that, we must be wary of emptying the concepts of meaning via overuse. Better to leave the prayer's empty space, the plunge to the earth, the possibility of *humilitas humana*.

RITE AND THEATER:  
RITUALS IN VALÈRE NOVARINA'S WORKS

To provide an overview of the different connections between emptying and ritual for the analysis of Novarina's theater, I call on not only the classics (Gluckman, van Gennep, Turner) but also Artaud, who calls theater spatial poetry that uses language metaphorically: it exchanges everyday meaning for another one.<sup>22</sup> Developing the thought further with Richard Schechner, we can also say that in theater, "real events" are revealed as metaphors fundamentally tied to rites.<sup>23</sup> The poetic ritual of art goes further to become self-reflexive, self-questioning. The spectator approaches this self-enclosing object anamorphically, when it is a matter of ritual. In other words, it is only in being immersed in the rite that certain meanings become visible.

In his essay *Les Rites de passage* Max Gluckman illuminates the terminological confusion surrounding the concept,<sup>24</sup> whose solution he sees in the creation of a concept of rite in which its exemplars relate to intangible meanings.<sup>25</sup> Van Gennep's well-known schematic describes the structure of rites of transition, in which the fundamental aim of transitional rites is to assist and ensure some change of state; its process can be divided into three episodes: rites separating from the earlier world are preliminary, the rites of the transitional stages are liminal, and the rites of acceptance into the new world he terms postliminal.<sup>26</sup> This scheme accurately depicts Novarina's circular dramaturgy, which traverses three stages, overturning an initial state and then building upon its recurrence in a new, transformed condition.

Victor Turner further develops van Gennep's scheme,<sup>27</sup> revealing the peculiarities within each stage in the form of their main characteristics. A new concept, *communitas*, signals the elevated ego-state, the achievement of a higher-level I-Thou relationship, during the course of which, connecting to the liminal state, people are denuded of their earlier selves and encounter

<sup>22</sup> Artaud: *Théâtre oriental et théâtre occidental*, 112.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Schechner: *From Ritual to Theatre and Back: The Efficacy-Entertainment Braid*, in *Essays on Performance Theory 1970–1976*, New York, Drama Book Specialists, 1977, 74.

<sup>24</sup> Max Gluckman: *Les Rites de passage*, in M. Gluckman – D. Forde (eds.): *Essays on the Ritual of Social Relations*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1962, 20–22.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>26</sup> Arnold van Gennep: *The Rites of Passage*, Routledge Library Editions, Anthropology and Ethnography (Paperback Reprint ed.), Hove (East Sussex, UK), Psychology Press, 1977 [1960].

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

each other as more complete beings. In Turner's classic work *From Ritual to Theatre* he changes the adjective "liminal" to "liminoid" when referring to art (and religion): "I had distinguished 'liminal' from 'liminoid' by associating the first with obligatory, tribal participation in ritual and the second as characterizing religious forms voluntarily produced, usually with recognition of individual authorship, and often subversive in intention toward the prevailing structures."<sup>28</sup> Turner fundamentally considers the individual's social dimension, understood as *communitas*, to be a liminoid, voluntarist lifestyle.<sup>29</sup>

Richard Schechner, the theorist, director, and dramatist also mentioned by Turner, uses the stages of infant development borrowed from Winnicott (I, not-I, not not-I) with respect to the actor's work (Turner evokes this border-crossing in his book). For the actor, the role, the character to be played, is the not-I, and after he has integrated something of the character in himself, the not-I transforms into an inner not-not-I. Turner assigns the director only a catalytic role in this process that he describes variously as "alchemical" and "mystical," and he terms this third ego-condition as richer and deeper. Furthermore, in Richard Schechner's practice — when he leaves the script open to modification — the text also undergoes the same transitions. Quoting one of Grotowski's interviews, Turner determines that the image of the actor in theaters of laboratory character is that of the active person who becomes not a different person but himself, in order to be able to enter a connection with another.<sup>30</sup> Grotowski, for his part, calls an active culture one in which an artistic team or individuals do not perform, do not create theater but experience existence ("acting is being, not performance"<sup>31</sup>); and there are and have been many of these worldwide. The rehearsal process is an important ground for these experiences; Turner's 1982 book cites the examples of Grotowski and Schechner in particular among experimental theaters, in which vocal training, psychodramas, dance, and certain elements of yoga play a major part, directed toward the creation of *communitas*.<sup>32</sup>

In his *Performance*, Schechner emphasizes those productions which lead not only from one state to another but also from one I-identity to the other ("transformance").<sup>33</sup> It is real experience, and its results fundamentally characterize rite, whereas theater is basically characterized by recreation, and when the two become tightly interwoven then theater begins to blossom and can

<sup>28</sup> Victor Turner: *From Ritual to Theatre. The Human Seriousness of Play*, New York, Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982, 118.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> "All these disciplines and ordeals are aimed at generating communities or something like it in the group." Ibid., 119.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Schechner: *Performance Theory*, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004, 136–137. (see the chapter "Theater for Tourists").



survive for a long time.<sup>34</sup> The attention given to the nature of making theater is already an attempt to ritualize performance “in order that we discover the forms of valid action in the theater itself.” “In an age when authenticity is ever less observable in life,” explains Schechner, “it is the performer who is obligated to cast off his traditional masks and become himself — or at least *let him show how he dons and removes the mask*. Instead of mirroring his times, they expect him to improve them. *Healing and the Church serve as models for the theater.*”<sup>35</sup> He uses the twelfth-century Mass as an example to demonstrate that the liturgy used “avant-garde” techniques: “It was allegorical, it drew in the audience, it handled time teleologically, and it extended the performance’s sphere of influence beyond the church onto the road home.”<sup>36</sup> Novarina’s destructive and constructive theater, interrogating anthropoglyphs in real time, also relies on the result-orientation of ritual; indeed, in the above sense it also has a liturgical objective. Furthermore, it not only reflects upon the method of creating theater but also on the existence of Man as a speaking animal.

In building his experimental theater, that alloys the results-orientation of ritual with theatrical entertainment, Schechner made use of rituals in the anthropological sense. In producing his work *Dionysus 69* he took its birth ritual from the Western Iranian *Asmat*, while in his *Mysteries and Paradise* at the Living Theatre, he used yoga and elements of Indian theater as building blocks; and in several productions in collaboration with Robert Wilson, Philip Glass incorporated Indonesian gamelan, Indian raga, etc. The Asian influence is clear and undeniable in the Poor Theater phase of Grotowski’s experimental theater<sup>37</sup> but also in Barba’s work; indeed it occasionally happened that Barba shared his experiences with Grotowski, who then made use of the borrowed material: this may be how elements of the Kathakali south Indian dance theater were incorporated into his training exercises.<sup>38</sup>

To this day it also happens that such rituals set out on European tour, which evidently results in their acceptance into theater (e.g., the whirling dervishes). Schechner arrives at the conclusion that every rite, indeed, any everyday event, can be extracted from its original environment and produced as theater, and he explains the phenomenon by observing that it is not the underlying structures but merely the context that differentiates ritual from theater.<sup>39</sup> As a matter of fact, it is also possible — and we can agree fundamentally about this — that ritual can arise from theater.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 107, 108, 109.

<sup>35</sup> Emphases added. Ibid., 108.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>37</sup> From 1960 to 1968: it was in this period that his *Steadfast Prince*, *Acropolis*, and *Apocalypsis cum figuris* were created. See Ibid., 117.

<sup>38</sup> See Schechner’s discovery: Ibid., 118.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 122.



In Novarina's theater, this model can best be caught in the act in his closing sequences. For example, the performance of *The Imaginary Operetta* closes with the banner "Love can see", and its unfurling is preceded by the actor's prayer in which the performer asks pardon for those actors "who did not act." The same prayer is voiced at the conclusion of *The Unknown Act*: "Seigneur, pardonne aux acteurs qui n'ont pas agi."<sup>40</sup> We can find similar attempts in domestic (Hungarian) examples as well. In some of Attila Vidnyánszky's productions, for instance in *The Passion of Csíksomlyó*,<sup>41</sup> in addition to relying on the eighteenth-century Franciscan school drama tradition<sup>42</sup> and on Géza Szöcs's piece *Passion* he forcefully builds upon ritual songs of folk religiosity (which are scarcely in existence any longer), on folk tales, folk poems, and folk symbol and metaphor systems (in András Berecz's production), in the confidence that forgotten traditions can be effective anew via the theater. Other examples include András Visky's *Backborn*,<sup>43</sup> in Gábor Tompa's production, which deals with Holocaust themes using ritual methods. In any event, Schechner also regards the work of Grotowski and the Living Theatre as a movement from theater toward ritual, except that "these rituals have not become lasting because they do not tie to actual social structures outside the theater."<sup>44</sup>

The adaptation of these fundamentally poetic (Artaud) or anthropological and teatro-anthropological approaches (van Genep, Gluckman, and especially Turner) to theater (Schechner) provides useful points of reference for the theatrical rites, which I term kenotic, that can be observed especially in Novarina's theater. Poetic rituality offers an explanatory framework to understand organizational modes of drama, while rituality concepts that are of anthropological origin do the same for understanding the dynamics of "anthropoglyphic" processes which, while patterned after actual existence, run their course on the stage.

<sup>40</sup> Novarina: *L'Acte inconnu*, 181.

<sup>41</sup> National Theater, Budapest, 2017; director: Attila Vidnyánszky, choreographer: Zoltán Zsuráfszky, dramaturg: Zsolt Szász.

<sup>42</sup> In the town of Csíksomlyó in the eighteenth century, it was still a living tradition to produce a new school drama from year to year: between 1721 and 1787, they produced a total of forty-two separate *Passion* plays. They were presented in the great hall of the local Franciscan high school. Because of Joseph II's edict dissolving religious orders, this confessional theatrical practice gradually ceased — as can be read in the work's prospectus.

<sup>43</sup> See András Visky: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andr%C3%A1s\\_Visky#Plays](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andr%C3%A1s_Visky#Plays). The play has also been produced under the title, used by the author, *Born for Never*.

<sup>44</sup> Schechner: *Ibid.*, 122.

RITUALS OF SELF-EMPTYING, EATING,  
AND SUPPER IN NOVARINA'S WORKS

A recurrent scene in Valère Novarina's works is that of communal eating — the supper — just as the central recurrent theme is the consumption of words. It is a biblical theme, on account of the Last Supper too, and aside from this it also represents the dynamic opposite of self-emptying. In the chapter on Valère Novarina and János Pilinszky, entitled "The theater of unselfed poetry," we mentioned the importance of the God-emptiness anagram [Dieu-Vide] in Novarina's oeuvre. That explication is only reinforced by his lines about the spatial composition of *Un Coup de dés* [*A Throw of the Dice*], and the influence exercised upon him by empty spaces: "At the age of 18, I experienced a particular enlightenment when I read an extensive study of Mallarmé's *A Throw of the Dice*: all of a sudden in the Sainte-Geneviève Library, I found myself in the depths of the drama of word and body. At the intersection of opposites: at the intersection of the page's two dimensions and the bodily, extensive aspect of the stage."<sup>45</sup> The beckoning emptiness of presence is the fundamental paradox not only of Novarina's conception of God but also of his entire oeuvre. Just as does God, so the actor empties himself, retreats: it is not the actor who acts but the word that acts through him. The Swiss literary and theatrical historian, Marco Baschera, sees the same enactor of ritual in the Novarina-actor and the priest: the priest also disappears during the ritual's final act, the distribution (blessing) of the Eucharist. According to Baschera's analysis, while the priest disappears so that the believer can unite with Christ in taking the bread (Host), he speaks Christ's words, thus effectively doubling Christ: He becomes simultaneously the body in the bread and the word in the priest's mouth.<sup>46</sup> According to Leigh Allen's excellent analysis, the Novarinian actor is simultaneously impersonal speech and the one who eats.<sup>47</sup> The actor is also doubled: sometimes he is a body and at other moments, an absentee (absence, hole, etc.). The actor is thus a Christ-imitator, which is why he "walks on water" in *Pendant la matière* [*During the Matter*], while he seeks his equilibrium or becomes the embodiment of the Passion, part of the story of suffering. In *Espace furieux* [*Enraged Space*], he says: I am God's theater: the place of the drama of divine speech that we hear.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Evelyne Grossman: Artovarina. Un théâtre résurrectionnel, in O. Dubouclez (ed.): *Valère Novarina: Une poétique théologique?*, *Littérature* 176 (December 2014), 88–96, 91.

<sup>46</sup> Marco Baschera: Le transsubstantiation et le théâtre, in E. Sepsi (ed.): *Le théâtre et le sacré – autour de l'oeuvre de Valère Novarina*, Budapest, Ráció Kiadó – Eötvös Collegium, 2009, 60.

<sup>47</sup> Leigh Allen: Le rituel de la (s)cène dans quelques pièces de Valère Novarina, in O. Dubouclez (ed.): *Valère Novarina: Une poétique théologique?*, *Littérature* 176 (December 2014), 63.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted by Leigh Allen: *Ibid.*, 63.

God enters man, the actor, temporarily via the words, and this joy finds expression in loquacity, in the repetition of names, in the manufacture of neologisms. In *The Pool of Names*, he listed the nicknames of his native land and also published the list separately in his *La loterie Pierrot* [*Pierrot's Lottery*], along with photographs taken of several of his productions (*The Imaginary Operetta*, *The Unknown Act*, *The Red Origin*, etc.). These lists — litanies — also bear the elements of French medieval marketplace comedy that are also present in the comic music of Christian Paccoud, where they provide contrast in the least profane moments. This ritual draws a great deal on forgotten medieval traditions<sup>49</sup> but also on circus acrobatics and its breathtaking bravery.

The telling toponyms of *The Unknown Act* exhaust the complete content of a dialogic commentary. Two cantors are conversing:

LE CHANTRE 1: L'ordre grammatical règne à Angoulême, à Helsinki, à Kinshasa ; l'ordre médiatique règne à Pont-à-Mousson, Bernay-en-Brie, Pont-à-Mousson, Samson-le-Fresnay ; l'ordre alphabétique règne à Barcelone, Brasilia, Babylone, Pont-à-Mousson, Brive, Brême, Bordeaux, Berne et Besançon.

LE CHANTRE 2: En fin finale, enfin, vinrent les anthropodules, qui rédigeaient pour la première fois la Loi des Anthropopandules. Loi des Anthropodules aux Anthropopandules : "Les Anthropodules chérissent alternativement le A et le B."<sup>50</sup>

[FIRST CANTOR: Grammatical order rules in Angoulême, in Helsinki, in Kinshasa; Mediatic order in Pont-à-Mousson, Bernay-en-Brie, Pont-à-Mousson, Samson-le-Fresnay. Alphabetical order rules in Barcelona, Brasília, Babylon, Pont-à-Mousson, Brive, Bremen, Bordeaux, Bern, and Besançon.

SECOND CANTOR: At the very end came the anthropodules that first drafted the Law of Anthropopandules. The Law of Anthropodules as applied to Anthropopandules: "The Anthropodules shall alternately cherish A and B."]

These rituals serve the joy of multiplicity and are the expressions of the joy of multiplication in Novarina's pieces. Novarina also discovers multiplicity in the Bible, in the Old and New Testament stories that respond to each other,

<sup>49</sup> Désoubli, rencontre avec Valère Novarina, in N. Koble (ed.): *Moyen-Age contemporain: Perspectives Critiques*, studies selected by Nathalie Koble and Mireille Séguy, *Littérature* special edition (December 2008), 148.

<sup>50</sup> Novarina: *Ibid.*, 36–37.



in their ability to be set in correspondence with each other, and in their variations.<sup>51</sup> After a similar set of 246 sentences placed one after the other without any connection to each other, the character of the novelist in *The Imaginary Operetta* symbolically purges himself,<sup>52</sup> and the Woman of Panagonia drenches the Endless Novelist with water, baptizing him while saying: “Come and be cleansed of this flood of words.”<sup>53</sup>

In the comic supper scene of *The Enraged Space*, the black plate belongs to Judas, while all the rest are white. The symbol of the Last Supper means that by means of eating, God lives inside our bodies. In his essay *Fragile Shelter* Novarina relates the word “stage” (*skéné*) to the Hebrew word meaning “divine presence”:

Now let us examine the word ἐσκήνωσεν (*eskénósen*) more closely: He came to live among us. *Eskénósen* derives from Σκηνή (*skéné*), and in the letters σ, κ, ν (sigma, kappa, nu) the rabbis quickly recognized in the word שכנה (*sekina*) the letters *sin* ש, *kaf* כ and *nun* נ, which in the Kabbala mean DIVINE PRESENCE. The shadow of one language behind the other always illuminates from within: one verb acts behind another, a hidden tale beneath it, the Hebrew beneath the Greek, the Greek beneath the Latin, the Latin beneath the French; the Septuagint, the Vulgate, the Masoretic texts complement each other and respond to each other — this deeply embedded counterpoint is what gives the speech of the Bible its depth, its entire perspective, its temporal spectrum, and it is because of this that it very quickly branches out in several directions like a fugal composition or mountainous terrain, where space deepens, vanishes, and renews itself under the walker’s and listener’s steps. (...)

Σκηνή, *skéné*, is also the theatrical stage, the theater’s volatile construction, its graceful abode. The stage is a fragile shelter, an occasional mechanism, a hut — and if it had a theatrical holiday in the year, says “Louis de Funès”, then one would have to choose Sukkot, the holiday of tents. De Funès says, “The actor’s abode is always an airy tent, a breathing house that he carries with himself. The flesh-and-blood body, which is our light residence, tiny house, and our body, is nothing other than the poor earth. Neither foundation nor plank, neither for people nor actors, nor for the children, nor for anyone, ever.”<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup> “C’est un livre qui se dédouble, qui rime, qui miroite et reflète toutes les images, multiplie ses échos jusqu’au profond du corps. On touche à la joie du pluriel ; on comprend que le pluriel n’est pas incohérence, mais joie.” [It is a book which splits, which rhymes, which mirrors and reflects all the images, multiplies its echoes down to the depths of the body. One apprehends the joy of the plural; one comprehends that the plural is not incoherence, but joy.] (Valère Novarina – Olivier Dubouclez: *Paysage parlé*, Chatou, Les Éditions de la Transparence, 2011, 131.)

<sup>52</sup> [“Voyez” dit Jean ; “Soyez attentifs!” ajouta Jacques ; “S’arrêtera-t-elle?” demanda Pierre.], Valère Novarina: *L’Opérette imaginaire* [The Imaginary Operetta], Paris, P.O.L, 1998, 147.

<sup>53</sup> Novarina: *Opérette imaginaire*, 160.

<sup>54</sup> Valère Novarina: *Demeure fragile* [Fragile Shelter], in *Devant la parole*, Paris, P.O.L, 1999, 109. Trans. Peter Czipott.

In Novarina's oeuvre, and in the volume *Devant la Parole* [Ahead Speech], in which we find "Fragile Shelter," as well, the figure of the French actor is a constant point of reference, but the statements and dialogues attributed to him are in every instance imaginary. From the quotation we can also see that the theater is the supper, as well as the location of the Last Supper, its fragile shelter. And thus, in every piece (by Novarina) and every performance there is a supper scene.

The other ritual, which defines the fundamental dramaturgy, is the three-fold unity of statement-denial-new statement, which we have already analyzed from a different viewpoint in preceding chapters. In this chapter, however, the reason we must repeat its mention is that Novarina completes the bodily and physical metaphor of the theater as (the Lord's) supper by denying it in the same essay:

The kenotic theater repeats the stage's nonexistence on the stage; this is the theater's *first* formula, the simplest of its proclaimed chemistry, its negative cornerstone; the actor enters and speaks thus: "Behold, this here does not exist." Anatopical, uchronic, analogical, antistrophic, anamorphic, diaphonic, perspectral, anaphore-like and diaphanous, antiandric, transthanatal, antianthropic and primarily antianthropopodularic, aponic and superacoustic and anacosmic and supersexualized, the theater progresses by means of counterpoints, countershadowing the counterparts and duplicating them with words bursting forth in *logaèdres*;<sup>55</sup> they spread out the inside-out and irreversible world before us: behold, now space sacrifices itself. Behold, space hands over the persona-containing person. Such is the theatrical antimatter; the nowhere visibly appears in it: and in the midst of all this, there is man — and the universe. The theater is an explicitly physical place where the body, arriving, speaks thus: *nothing is more impossible for me than the body*. The actor arrives to recreate the complete geometry of the human body.<sup>56</sup>

Novarina's *logaèdre*-concept and the metaphor, express the self-contradiction of the word's incarnation:

*Logaèdres! Logaèdres!*

The action of words commutes in round trips. The sentence proceeds forward like time, and, like its opposite, it inverts its capabilities, becomes a retroactive music that sounds and acts in the memory. Every word influences other words *retroactively*: it affects every word since the beginning of the book, but also every word already

<sup>55</sup> Both *logaèdres* and *logoèdres* are Novarina's neologisms, hapax legomena that apply the notion of form to words (*logos*).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 157–158.

spoken, ever since words were spoken... This characteristic of the inversion of time cannot be observed more clearly than in language.

Actors, all sorts, act by means of the *logaèdres*! Act the *logaèdres*! Act by means of the theatrolites!<sup>57</sup>

Negative theology discusses God by formulating what is not God, that is, with the help of denial. The anti-selves [anti-personnes] of Novarina's theater, his reversibly operating time, actions, and statements (in *The Imaginary Operetta*, we hear a sentence spoken backwards) relate to theater as *via negativa*: statements about theatrical practice can be taken, if not by negation, then as paradoxes. The *logaèdres* (which we sometimes translate as *logoèdres*, alluding to the *logos*) are the spatial realizations of speech that upset the traditional, linear theatrical space.

In his text *Távolságból egység* [Unity out of Distance],<sup>58</sup> in which he engages in dialogue sometimes with Péter Balassa and at other times with Gadamer,<sup>59</sup> András Visky dissects a cognitive metaphor resembling Novarina's — totally independently of Novarina's works; specifically: that the theater is a "wedding feast," a celebration (true, this linguistic manifestation of the cognitive metaphor does not place as great an emphasis on the material dimension of eating). The wedding feast of the king's son is a Mass sacrifice or Lord's Supper, a known cult symbol of Christianity, "a ceremony that obediently and devotedly repeats the founding sacrificial act," which "the theophanic appearance among the participants keeps alive."<sup>60</sup> The "transformation" that comes into existence thanks to the *transubstantiation* breaks through the space and "becomes the joint experience of all the onlookers."<sup>61</sup> "The event imitates the foundational act in a repetitive manner, but 'true imitation always means a modification.'"<sup>62</sup> We can understand Novarina's subversive, circular dramaturgy in this manner, too. The imitators must be "destined for death" — "they must undergo an actual death to change the vision of the onlookers."<sup>63</sup> Further spinning the Shakespearean phrase, "all the world's a stage," Visky also regards the Apostles as actors in the great theatrical work of salvation; and vice versa: he considers

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 161–162.

<sup>58</sup> András Visky: *Távolságból egység. Értekezés a módszerről* [Unity out of Distance: A Report on Method], in *A különbözőség vidékén* [In the Land of Difference], Budapest, Vigilia, 2007, 5–19.

<sup>59</sup> Specifically with Hans-Georg Gadamer: *A színház mint ünnep* [Theater as Celebration] (in Hungarian), trans. Judit Szántó, *Színház*, 1995/11.

<sup>60</sup> Visky: Ibid., 7.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 12.



actors as apostles “destined for death,” just like the spectators, in the role of *theoroi* who do not merely look but also see, as long as they do not remain outside the wedding feast (see anamorphosis).

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PART 2:  
*CASE STUDIES*







## RITUAL AND THEATRICALITY IN GOETHE'S *WILHELM MEISTER*

JENNIFER A. HERDT

*As Goethe's character Wilhelm Meister outgrows his aspirations to a life in the theater, so the novel Wilhelm Meister asks whether the formative powers of drama, and with it ritual, have been outgrown in the prosaic world of modernity. Taking its point of departure from the ritual scene in which the Tower Society reveals itself to Wilhelm, this essay will argue that even as Goethe seeks to write a novel capable of serving as "secular scripture," he wrestles with the question of the role of ritual for the modern individual, tasked with taking responsibility for his own self-formation.*

Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* is a novel that reflects extensively on the theater and at a key turning point incorporates a ritual, upon which it then reflects.<sup>1</sup> In part, the novel is taking stock of the relative significance for ethical formation — *Bildung*, the ethical formation of modern, mature human individuals — of theater on the one hand and the novel on the other.<sup>2</sup> It is also asking whether *Kunstreligion* — the religion of Art — can and should replace inherited religions, and what place ritual might have in *Kunstreligion*.<sup>3</sup> As Goethe's character Wilhelm Meister outgrows his aspirations to a life in the

<sup>1</sup> This essay is a modified version of portions of chapters 5 and 6 of Jennifer Herdt: *Forming Humanity: Redeeming the German Bildung Tradition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* was hailed as an exemplary *Bildungsroman*; it was published in 1795, just as Schiller launched *Die Horen*, a literary journal in which Goethe was a key collaborator; it was a moment in which literature, and the novel in particular, was seen as playing a key role in the project of aesthetic education, itself envisioned as a path to political maturity and emancipation. See Herdt: *Forming Humanity*, 133–155; Todd Kontje: *Private Lives in the Public Sphere: The German Bildungsroman as Metafiction*, University Park (Pa.), Penn State University Press, 1992, 3–9; Todd Kontje: *The German Bildungsroman: History of a National Genre*, Columbia (S.C.), Camden House, 1993, 5–6; Rolf Selbmann (ed.): *Zur Geschichte des deutschen Bildungsromans*, Vol. 640 of *Wege der Forschung*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988, 64–66.

<sup>3</sup> On *Kunstreligion*, see Herdt: *Ibid.*, 121–122; Wolfgang Braungart: *Literatur und Religion in der Moderne*, Paderborn, Fink, 2016, 200; Dorothea E. von Mücke: *The Practices of the Enlightenment. Aesthetics, Authorship, and the Public*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2015, 65.

theater, the novel *Wilhelm Meister* asks whether the formative powers of drama, and with it ritual, have been outgrown in the prosaic world of modernity.<sup>4</sup> Even as Goethe seeks to write a novel capable of serving as “secular scripture,” he wrestles with the question of the role of ritual for the modern individual, tasked with taking responsibility for his own self-formation. These concerns come into particularly sharp focus in the carefully orchestrated ritual scene in which the Tower Society reveals itself to Wilhelm.

Wilhelm views theater as the arena within which he can truly become a persona, but he comes to see that ordinary life is, in fact, this arena. This involves an initially painful disenchantment. The novel as a genre offers the ideal context for processing this disenchantment and this personal development, given the space it opens up for the exploration of subjectivity and interiority. How does ritual fit in with all of this? While the novel is prosaic — a prose genre devoted to prosaic reality — it can incorporate reflection on ritual. The key example of this is the scene in which the mysterious Tower Society (quite reminiscent of the Freemasons) reveals itself to Wilhelm Meister as the force that has played a fate-like role in his development. Important as this ritual is within the novel, the novel itself does not constitute an example of “poetic rituality” as defined by Saskia Fischer, since ritual elements do not fundamentally structure the novel as a whole.<sup>5</sup> And while this scene surely borrows from traditions of play-within-a-play, it is, of course, as an example of play-within-a-novel, a different, incompletely performative, form of reflexivity. Hamlet orchestrates a play in order to ascertain Claudius’ guilt; the Tower Society orchestrates a ritual in order to catalyze Wilhelm’s emancipation from adolescence, but Goethe nests this ritual within the fluid, pluriform realms of subjectivity opened up by the novel. The ritual is not actually performed, only retold. Goethe is wrestling here with the question of whether both drama as an art form and ritual as a decisive site for ethical formation have been outgrown in modernity. He gives no final answer to this question. That in itself demands the reflective consciousness characteristic of modernity; and of the novel.

The long and complex plot of *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* can nevertheless be summed up briefly: Wilhelm, growing up in a bourgeois household where he is expected to follow his father into the life of commerce and thereby

<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Jacobs: *Wilhelm Meister und seine Brüder: Untersuchungen zum deutschen Bildungsroman*, Munich, Fink, 1972, 17; Rolf Engelsing: *Der Bürger als Leser: Lesergeschichte in Deutschland 1500–1800*, Stuttgart, Metzler, 1974, 184–192.

<sup>5</sup> Saskia Fischer: *Ritual und Ritualität im Drama Nach 1945*, Paderborn, Fink, 2019, 95–99. Other key reference points in the literature include Wolfgang Braungart: “Ritual und Literatur,” in D. Weidner (ed.): *Handbuch Literatur und Religion*, Stuttgart, Metzler, 2016, 427–434 and Erika Fischer-Lichte: *Das Theater der Rituale*, in A. Michaels (ed.): *Die neue Kraft der Rituale*, Heidelberg, Winter Verlag, 2008, 117–139. This discussion builds on ritual studies, and in particular the work of Victor Turner: *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, New York, Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982.



become a productive bourgeois citizen, instead entertains aspirations of helping to cultivate a cultured public through the establishment of a German National Theater. Sent on a business trip, he instead falls in with a traveling theatrical troupe and indulges his acting fantasies, only to realize after some time that he has idealized the tawdry reality of theatrical life. Groping around for a sense of direction in life, Wilhelm discovers that a mysterious Tower Society has intervened at various stages of his journey to influence the course of events and offer him veiled guidance. When Wilhelm seeks direction, they retreat, yet when he attempts to act independently, he discovers that they have anticipated and outmaneuvered him. Via a series of dramatic reversals and unexpected revelations, the tale ends happily: Wilhelm is extricated from a misguided engagement to the capable but unimaginative Therese, becomes involved in the noble Lothario's enterprise of dismantling feudalism on his estates, and wins the heart and hand of the benevolent and aristocratic Natalie. But instead of settling down into some specific form of active life, he sets out on yet another journey, postponing marriage and settled adult life.

What does Wilhelm learn by way of his lengthy detour through the world of theater? To some extent, the dominance of this theme reflects the earliest form of the novel, in which Goethe envisioned that Wilhelm's theatrical ambitions would be realized. Goethe worked on the novel from 1777–1785, and it reflected his own involvement in the Weimar court theater and the hopes of many of the time to transform society by establishing National Theaters throughout Germany. The notion of a "National Theater," while reflecting the ideal of a national literature rooted in the special character of the German language, was not quite what the name indicates. These were theaters, the first of which was established in Hamburg in 1767, which performed plays in German, but many of these plays were translated from French and Italian, as there was not an adequate supply of original German material. The idea was that court-subsidized theaters would raise theater to cultural respectability, improve the lives of actors by giving them a steady income and taking them off the road, and by relieving these economic pressures also release the inherent power of theater to form sounder, more elevated public taste.<sup>6</sup> In a 1784 lecture to the "German Society" at Mannheim, Schiller expressed the aspirations of the day:

The stage is the channel, open to all, into which the light of wisdom pours down from the superior, thinking part of the people, to spread from there in milder beams through the whole state. More correct ideas, sounder principles, purer feelings flow from here through all the veins of the people. The mists of barbarism, of dark superstition vanish, night gives way to victorious light.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> W. H. Bruford: *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation: 'Bildung' from Humboldt to Thomas Mann*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975, 31–32.

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Schiller, quoted by Bruford: *Self-Cultivation*, 31.

When Goethe picked up work on *Wilhelm Meister* nearly a decade later, he retained but extensively reworked the material from the original sketch in *Wilhelm Meister's Theatrical Mission*, which now helps to make up the first five books of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. Thus, Wilhelm's involvement with theater remains a strong element in the novel, even if its significance for the whole is transformed; it becomes, as for Anton Reiser, more an avenue for self-realization than for public transformation.

As Wilhelm writes to his friend Werner, "Even as a youth I had the vague desire and intention to develop [auszubilden] myself fully, myself as I am."<sup>8</sup> Now the means have become more evident. A focus on personal formation and cultivation ["eine . . . allgemeine . . . personelle Ausbildung"] is possible only for the nobility; the middle classes are expected to be useful (HA 7.5.3, 291, E 175). No one asks who he is, but only what he has; his capacities, insights, and knowledge are means to external ends, not organic components of a personal whole. Irresistibly drawn to the kind of harmonious development [Ausbildung] of his nature denied to him by his social class, Wilhelm finds it possible only in the world of theater.

This ideal of harmonious personal development has often been lifted out of its Book 5 context as a clear statement of Goethe's own conception of *Bildung*. Certainly, it echoes Schiller's complaints about the mechanical, instrumentalized character of bourgeois existence and his vision of aesthetic education as therapy. But it has also rightly been noted that this ideal, as grasped and expressed by Wilhelm at this point, still betrays his own *naïveté* and a certain superficiality. For Wilhelm dwells on particulars such as the nobleman's "formal grace" and "relaxed elegance," his sonorous voice and measured manner (HA 7.5.3, 290, E 174).<sup>9</sup> He himself has made progress in self-cultivation by devoting himself to physical exercise and overcoming his physical awkwardness, to training his voice and speech so as to become presentable as a public person.<sup>10</sup> Such preoccupations with external appearances are placed incongru-

<sup>8</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, in E. Trunz (ed.): *Goethes Werke: Hamburger Ausgabe in 14 Bänden*, Vol. 7, Hamburg, Christian Wegner, 1950, 68; reprinted Munich, Beck, 1981, Vol. 7.5.3, 290; *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, trans. Victor Lange – Eric A. Blackall (eds.), Princeton (N.J.), Princeton University Press, 1995, 174 (subsequent references are given parenthetically to HA 7 and E).

<sup>9</sup> Bruford: *Self-Cultivation*, 37.

<sup>10</sup> "Goethe one last time caught the reflection of the representative publicness whose light, of course, was refracted in the French rococo court and refracted yet again in its imitation by the petty German princes," Jürgen Habermas: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger, Cambridge (Mass.), The MIT Press, 1989, 13. Habermas focuses on the contrast between nobility as displaying or embodying authority in his cultivated personality, and the bourgeois need to prove oneself through making, production: "the nobleman was what he represented; the bourgeois, what he produced." However, what Wilhelm yearns for is a "freely self-actualizing personality" that he thinks at this point is to be found among the nobility, as opposed to the bourgeois, but which he must learn is in fact yet-to-be realized; it is a matter not simply of appearing but of being a certain way.



ously side by side with Wilhelm's expectation that life in the theater will enable him finally to take as good only what truly is good and find beautiful only what truly is beautiful (HA 7.5.4, 292, E 175). As Bruford comments, "We can only understand the emphasis [Goethe] makes Wilhelm lay on these externals and Wilhelm's extraordinary expectation that as an actor he will, though a mere 'Bürger', find in displaying himself on the stage a similar satisfaction in his own all-round development, if we take Goethe's attitude toward his hero as ironical, here as in so many other places."<sup>11</sup> Wilhelm has long since come face to face with the faults and foibles of actors, and in Book 3, his first encounter with actual nobility (in the form of a count who invites the troupe to stay in his mansion and prepare a performance for his guests) has also made painfully clear that aristocracy does not necessarily bring with it either good taste or genuine cultivation. Nevertheless, at a critical crossroads, a point at which his father's death has freed him from parental expectations, and at which both the commercial possibilities represented by Werner and the theatrical life offered to him by Serlo lie equally open, Wilhelm opts for the theater.

It is only in Book 7 that these dreams finally appear to him as illusions. Jarno, as usual, makes fun of Wilhelm's enterprise: "How is it now with that old fancy of yours of achieving something good and beautiful in the company of gypsies?" (HA 7.7.3, 433, E 265). This time, Wilhelm responds savagely: actors are full of themselves; each wants to be the one and only, and doesn't see that even as a band they can achieve very little; they expect to receive the utmost respect from others and cannot bear the slightest fault in their fellows; they are self-deceived and utterly lack self-understanding. Jarno, overcome with laughter, for once takes the part of the actors. Wilhelm has offered a wonderful account of human nature itself, and these qualities are amply displayed by every social class: "I would gladly excuse an actor for any fault that arose from self-deception and a desire to please, for if he does not appear as something to himself and others, he is nothing at all. His job is to provide appearances [Schein], and he must needs set high store on instantaneous approval, for he gets none other. He must try to delude and dazzle, for that's what he's there for" (HA 7.7.3, 435, E 266). But the same is not to be said of human beings as such: "I can readily forgive an actor all the human failings, but not humans for an actor's failings." Hard-nosed realism must not become an excuse for moral failing; off-stage, Jarno's words imply, *Sein* — being, precedes *Schein* — shining appearances. Self-deception and egoism must be replaced by a genuine self-knowledge that allows also for genuine respect and concern for others.

The play here on *Sein* and *Schein* has been introduced earlier, back in Wilhelm's Book 5 letter to Werner, defending his decision to opt for the theatrical life. Here *Schein* is seen as a special attribute of the nobility, which the middle

<sup>11</sup> Bruford: *Ibid.*



classes can cultivate only on stage: “A nobleman can and must be someone who represents by his appearance [scheinen], whereas the burgher simply is [sein], and when he tries to put on an appearance (literally, ‘to appear’), the effect is ludicrous or in bad taste. The nobleman should act and achieve, the burgher must labor and create, developing some of his capabilities in order to be useful” (HA 7.5.3, 291, E 175). Wilhelm here connects the right to shine, to cultivate an impressive appearance, with the opportunity to develop a fully-developed personality. By Book 7 he has learned to be more suspicious of outer appearances. They still seem to be revealing, as when Werner arrives and marvels over the change in Wilhelm’s appearance; he now looks positively noble. The changes seem to extend even to physical characteristics: “Your eyes are more deep set, your forehead is broader, your nose is more delicate and your mouth is much more pleasant” (HA 7.8.1, 499, E 306). Werner, in contrast, has become skinny and bald, and round-shouldered, his voice shrill, his face pale. We hear echoes here of Lavater’s influential theory of physiognomy (1775), according to which physical features expressed specific character traits. But it is telling that it is Werner who draws attention to these features and who sees them as significant. Even here, his focus is on the economic significance of these external characteristics, their instrumental rather than intrinsic meaning: “With your figure you should be able to get me a rich heiress” (HA 7.8.1, 499, E 306, translation modified). Wilhelm, in the meantime, has acquired the shining appearance he longed for, but he now more clearly sees that it is not this that guarantees the capacity to find beauty and goodness only in the truly beautiful and good, any more than membership in the hereditary nobility guarantees the possession of true virtue.

With this we approach the matter of the Tower Society’s employment of ritual, like theater — a matter of appearance, of *Schein*. On the one hand, Goethe uses the Society as a mouthpiece for his own philosophy of ethical formation. On the other hand, he treats the Society and its efforts with a light irony that invites the reader to further test and probe that philosophy, rather than simply taking it as authoritative. Within *Wilhelm Meister*, the Society is a way of grappling with the role that external guiding forces or authorities can take when the very notions of external providence and external authority, and certainly of traditional religious authorities, are problematized in favor of organic, internal teleology. But the Tower Society is portrayed as itself a work in progress, as continually reinventing itself, in process of continual change even as it seeks to influence the development of individuals under its survey. This extends to its use of ritual.

At the key moment when the Tower Society decides to reveal itself to Wilhelm, it does so by summoning him up to the tower of Lothario’s castle, in a space rendered mysterious and unfamiliar through the presence of darkness, tapestries, a cloth-covered table “instead of an altar,” and figures who appear

suddenly from behind curtains, speak, and again disappear. Clearly, there is a deliberate attempt here to draw on the power of ancient religious ritual to construct a sense of an alternate, higher reality alongside ordinary mundane experience. It is in this context that Wilhelm is informed, "You are saved, and on the way to your goal" (HA 7.7.9, 495; E 303), and presented with his certificate of completed apprenticeship. Yet a few pages later Jarno pokes fun at the ritual: "Everything you saw in the tower was the relics of a youthful enterprise that most initiates first took very seriously but will probably now just smile at" (HA 7.8.5, 548; E 335). Wilhelm is aghast: "So they are just playing games with those portentous words and signs? ... We are ceremoniously conducted to a place that inspires awe, we witness miraculous apparitions, are given scrolls containing mysterious, grandiose aphorisms which we barely understand, are told we have been apprentices and are now free — and are none the wiser." (HA 7.8.5, 548, E 335–336). Jarno makes an effort to defend the practices, at least as props for the young, who "have an unusually strong hankering after mysteries, ceremonies and grandiloquence"; they "want to feel, albeit dimly and indefinitely, that [their] whole being is affected and involved" (HA 7.8.5, 548–549; E 336). Jarno's own unusual passion for knowledge and clarity almost derails the entire enterprise; aware now of the excesses of his own prosaic bent, he still regards disenchantment as salutary, even if he recognizes that it is destructive for most if it comes too soon. Wilhelm, meanwhile, is offended at having been subjected to yet another level of patronizing manipulation, even though it is true that he certainly does want to feel that his whole being is affected and involved in discerning his path forward in life.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, Jarno's perspective is not authoritative; it is merely one perspective. We cannot simply assume this to be a final statement that ritual is a merely adolescent affair, although it is indeed probable that Goethe is passing judgment on clumsy modern attempts to recreate the transformative potential of ancient ritual. Literature, among the arts, is the most highly reflexive — it *reflects* on ritual rather than enacting it, although rituals of course often employ texts. At a certain moment, the novel aspired to be secular scripture — meriting the kind of reading and re-reading that scripture undergoes and serving as a touchstone for tracing one's own spiritual development.<sup>13</sup> Moreo-

<sup>12</sup> Richard Schechner argues that "the basic opposition is between efficacy and entertainment, not between ritual and theatre. Whether one calls a specific performance ritual or theatre depends on the degree to which the performance tends toward efficacy or entertainment."

From *Ritual to Theatre and Back*, in R. Schechner – M. Schuman (eds.): *Ritual, Play, and Performance*, New York, Seabury Press, 1976. On this measure the Tower ritual is would-be ritual exposed as mere entertainment, as void of character-forming power — even as the exposé itself may yield character transformation.

<sup>13</sup> See Herdt: *Ibid.*, 140–147. On the notion of "secular scripture," see Nicholas Boyle: *Sacred and Secular Scriptures*, Notre Dame (Ind.), University of Notre Dame Press, 2005. As Braungart perceptively notes, repetition is constitutive of literary aesthetic, insofar as even the most



ver, ritual is the home context for scripture. But the novel was not supposed to be a ritual script for new social rituals. Rather, the novel was about the formation of individuals capable of resisting instrumentalization by the collective, by the state. The Pietists had paved the way by taking scripture out of its context within public liturgy and enshrining it in private self-examination.<sup>14</sup> *Kunstreligion* — the religion of Art — was conceived as an alternative to authoritarian religious institutions. Art would help to construct self-forming individuals. *Bildung* was understood as a collective task that is realized only when individuals take a hand in their own self-realization. And yet there was some recognition that ritual would be somehow indispensable as carrier of meaning and significance and that ritual is properly collective. With this came a recognition, too, that we never start *de novo* — literature, like ritual, necessarily works with the given, even as change/transformation of the inherited forms is possible. Goethe is, finally, asking questions here, not giving answers. Is *Kunstreligion* up to the formative task envisioned for it? How do we design rituals that are capable of taking us in, so to speak, when we know that we ourselves have created them? This is parallel to the question of how Goethe in *Wilhelm Meister* can chart a path for his protagonist's development, given that 1) the ideal is one of autonomous self-realization of one's individual instantiation of humanity, and 2) Goethe does not actually have the authority to determine what will count as genuinely good or beautiful. Goethe's genius was to undermine his own authority as author, just as he simultaneously depicts and undermines the authority and influence of the Tower. This ambiguity points beyond Goethe and forces the reader into reflective assessment. His questions continue to reverberate through modern theater, literature, liturgy, and ritual studies, still enabling us to grapple with issues concerning the individual and the community, autonomy and exemplarity, repetition and innovation, embodiment and transcendence.

We can and do create formative rituals, and they can engage us fully. They remain capable of overcoming a simple divide between *Schein* and *Sein*, appearance and reality. This is because the beauty of goodness appears to us, and because it appears it is capable of drawing us. But we also engage in reflective assessment of how rituals are forming us — they do not have unquestionable authority over us. These are two different moments; caught up in the ritual, we do not in that moment critically question. Later, we may ask: did this ritual

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innovative work acquires its specific character against the backdrop of established literary forms. The problematic of personal individuality with which Goethe is wrestling is thus mirrored at the level of literary form, *Ritual und Literatur*, 27.

<sup>14</sup> On the Pietist contributions to the development of *Kunstreligion* and the *Bildungsroman*, see Herdt: *Ibid.*, 78–81; Engelsing: *Bürger als Leser*, 27–37; Hans-Georg Kemper: "Göttergleich": Zur Genese der Genie-Religion aus pietistischem und hermetischem 'Geist', in H.-G. Kemper – H. Schneider (eds.): *Goethe und der Pietismus*, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 2001, 171–208.



orient us to the truly good and beautiful? Or did it malform us in some way? This dialectical movement between ritual engagement and reflective analysis is the characteristically modern mode of ethical formation; and one we still inhabit.

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CREATION OF CRUELTY – REFLECTIONS ON THE ‘RITES  
OF PASSAGE’ IN EDWARD ALBEE’S PLAY  
WHO’S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?

— ◊ —  
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*The purpose of this essay is to point out a possible connection between Antonin Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty and Edward Albee’s play Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, with a particular focus on Artaud’s vision of rituality in his metaphysical theater. The analysis also takes into account that Artaud did not formulate a strongly defined concept of ritual. Working within some inherent freedom — meanwhile bearing in mind the necessity of a satisfactorily adequate definition — will give an interpretation based on Arnold van Gennep’s theory (using the ritual concepts of Max Gluckman and Victor Turner), that illustrates the ritualistic characteristics of the play. As a result, the study identifies a relationship between Albee and Artaud in relation to the effect mechanism (or in other words the mechanism of effectivity) while focusing on rituality, pointing to the possibility of a parallel reading.*

INTRODUCTION

It is important that we take the first step in this examination by first saying a few words about what might seem to be an unusual parallel between Antonin Artaud’s theatrical vision and Edward Albee’s play, as their relationship is rarely discussed in academic analysis of the play. This is probably due to the worldwide success of Albee’s work and the unique character of Artaud’s ideas, creating a seemingly paradoxical case when considering the success of Broadway and the unfavorable reception of the Theater of Cruelty. Therefore, this paradox stems from success and failure, stretched between the enthusiasm of the masses and a lack of acceptance, underlining and enforcing the idea that the “prophecy” of Artaud is only intended for the chosen ones, creating a wall of separation between itself and the masses, in spite of Artaud’s fundamental objective: “the Theater of Cruelty proposes to resort to a mass spectacle.”<sup>1</sup> Such analysis of Artaud’s texts might reveal existing parallels, however, the understanding of which can be aided by the work of Robert Brustein. Although

<sup>1</sup> Antonin Artaud: The Theater and Cruelty, in *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards, New York, Grove Press, 1958, 85.



he did not arrive at his findings in relation to Albee's play, they are indirectly applicable in support of the above-mentioned relationship. In Brustein's interpretation, the primary task of Artaud's theater is to perform a kind of exorcism of fantasies<sup>2</sup> or, in Artaud's words, the effect of the Theater of Cruelty is "impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the mask to fall, reveals the lie, the slackness, baseness, and hypocrisy of our world."<sup>3</sup> The above, however, as well as being the core of Artaud's thoughts, also includes the moral foundation of Albee's play. In C. W. E. Bigsby's study, it is concluded that Albee believes the most basic task of human existence is to face the truth and to live with it, as a true relationship with it can only be realized on a pure foundation deprived of self-deception.<sup>4</sup> For Albee, the only sincere response — both for society and the individual — is open confrontation.<sup>5</sup> The story of Martha and George is actually a reflection of this process — in Bigsby's view, the play is interpreted as a moral guide for the modern world, a gospel that teaches man to accept reality<sup>6</sup> — which means that this is where the objective of the Theater of Cruelty is most apparent as it is in line with the moral projection of the play:

HONEY (Apologetically, holding up her brandy bottle) I peel labels.  
 GEORGE We all peel labels, sweetie; and when you get through the skin, all three layers, through the muscle, slosh aside the organs [...] and get down to bone... you know what you do then? [...] When you get down to bone, you haven't got all the way, yet. There's something inside the bone... the marrow... and that's what you gotta get at.<sup>7</sup>

As Jerzy Grotowski notes, cruelty should not be understood externally: the essence of cruelty is that we are not lying. If we do not want to lie, if we do not lie, we'll be cruel, inevitably.<sup>8</sup> Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* leads its characters, readers, and viewers to the naked skin that emerges from beneath the fallen mask, which is to be penetrated, reaching deeper and deeper to eventually arrive at the point where the fragile "self" is revealed beyond the cover of illusions.

In addition to the moral responsibility of facing ourselves, this act also has a practical function, which Artaud calls abscess drainage<sup>9</sup> — the episode of

<sup>2</sup> Robert Brustein: IX. Antonin Artaud és Jean Genet. A Kegyetlen Színház, in *A lázadás színháza II.*, trans. László F. Földényi, Debrecen, Európa, 1982, 169.

<sup>3</sup> Artaud: The Theater and the Plague, in *The Theater and Its Double*, Ibid., 31.

<sup>4</sup> C. W. E. Bigsby: Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Edward Albee's Morality Play, *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1967), 257, <http://www.jstor.org/>.

<sup>5</sup> Bigsby: Ibid., 262.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Albee: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, New York, New American Library, 212–213.

<sup>8</sup> Jerzy Grotowski: *Színház és Rituálé*, trans. András Pályi, Budapest, Kalligram, 1999, 61.

<sup>9</sup> Artaud: *The Theater and the Plague*, in Ibid.

exorcism that is designed to turn our demons against us in a process of purification.<sup>10</sup> Brustein interprets this as the liberation of our feelings formerly suppressed by social structure, and, as he states, the projection of these ideas on stage generates catharsis, thus extinguishing the violence within us. Artaud's goal is nothing but the harmless drainage of repressions: "a theater which presents itself first of all as an exceptional power of redirection,"<sup>11</sup> that is, the elimination of emotions and instincts that would, in different circumstances, take a more dangerous form.<sup>12</sup> The result of the process is a kind of cleansing — which takes place in the purgatory of "Artaud's catharsis." *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, in this sense, can be seen as a mirror image of the defining mechanism in the Theater of Cruelty, first liberating demons (Act I: Fun and Games and Act II: Walpurgisnacht) and then destroying (Act III: The Exorcism) demons and violent tendencies, which results in the individual shaking off self-destructive energies.

#### RITUALISM IN THE THEATER OF CRUELTY

In light of the evaluation thus far, the concept of the ritual in Artaud's metaphysical theater should be looked at more closely in order to outline the concept's definition, so that we can see the applicability and relevance of Artaud's visions to the play itself.

In his essay *Les Rites de passage*, Max Gluckman highlights the turmoil in the terminology around the concept<sup>13</sup> and sees the solution in the creation of a definition based on the findings of previous authors, but one that also goes beyond the sum of its parts. As he declares, "Ritual is distinguished by the fact that it is referred to 'mystical notions', which are patterns of thoughts that attribute to phenomena supra-sensible qualities which, or part of which, are not derived from observation or cannot be logically inferred from it, and which they do not possess."<sup>14</sup>

In Artaud's essays, of course, we cannot find such a definition of ritual, since his writings are characterized by a vision derivative of poetic images, as Jan Kott finds, the Theater of Cruelty created a need for pure icons, liturgy, and rite within a magical theater, but Artaud himself did not give a definite answer on how this metaphysical iconography and rituality appears in actual fact.<sup>15</sup> It is

<sup>10</sup> Artaud: *On the Balinese Theater*, in *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>11</sup> Artaud: *No More Masterpieces*, in *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>12</sup> Brustein: *Ibid.*, 167–169.

<sup>13</sup> Max Gluckman: *Les Rites de passage*, in Max Gluckman (ed.): *Essays on The Ritual of Social Relations*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1962, 20–22.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>15</sup> Jan Kott: *The Icon and the Absurd*, *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. XIV, Autumn (1969), 20.

important to note, however, that this poetic speech itself carries the rituality that can be found in the “concept” of the Theater of Cruelty. There are many references to this by Artaud, especially using the recurring concept of magic, which is closely related to Gluckman’s definition, all the more so because it is not merely defined as one of several building blocks, but becomes in essence “the theater itself [that] appears to us, all in all, to identify itself with the forces of ancient magic,”<sup>16</sup> which comes to life by identifying with the magical.<sup>17</sup> Artaud’s poetic-metaphorical discourse thus focuses on mysticism, which in this case is concentrated on concepts of magical forces and spells, linking to the aforementioned phenomenon beyond perception; aiming to outline a manifestation of the transcendent. But the interpretation of this transcendental presence requires clarification: in Gluckman’s view, the term “religious” refers to an act and belief that refers to an existing spirituality,<sup>18</sup> which in this context is more concrete and defined than the ritual, which is abstract. This neatly correlates to the same idea and its lack of concrete boundaries in Artaud’s essays.

Following this train of thought and applying it to a framework of religious discourse, the lack of God on Artaud’s stage should be noted: “far from believing that man invented the supernatural and the divine, I think it is man’s age-old intervention which has ultimately corrupted the divine within him.”<sup>19</sup> — thus referring to a murder of God reminiscent of Nietzsche’s ideas, the consequence of which was a split between God and man, ending their inherent unity. Artaud, therefore, considers the false divinity created by man unacceptable, and, as he says, we have to rediscover a true religious, mystical concept,<sup>20</sup> which, according to Gluckman’s work, can be found in the ritual.

#### *rites of passage* – THE CONCEPT OF RITUAL APPLIED TO THE PLAY

It is interesting to note that, although the existence of various ritual elements in Albee’s play is often referenced in academic discourse, this is mostly specific to certain parts of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The reason for this is probably due to the structural build of the narrative because throughout the course of the plot the ritualistic character of the play varies in intensity, but it is nevertheless conceivable to examine it as a whole from a wider perspective. Arnold van Gennep’s schema can provide help in the matter for the way in which he describes the construction of rites of passage. In his view, the fundamental

<sup>16</sup> Artaud: *The Theater and Cruelty*, in *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>17</sup> Artaud: *PREFACE: The Theater and Culture*, in *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Gluckman: *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>19</sup> Artaud: *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Artaud: *Metaphysics and the Mise en Scene*, in *Ibid.*, 46.



purpose of rites of passage is to facilitate and secure a change of state, the process of which can be divided into three phases: the ritual of separation from the earlier world is preliminal; the ritual along the boundaries is liminal; and the ritual of entering into the new world is called the postliminal rite.<sup>21</sup>

This schema is further developed by Victor Turner, who explores the main features of each section. The definitions of the preliminal and postliminal phases in this respect are not hard to define: the former means the separation of an individual from his former social status, and the latter entails integration into a new state. However, the liminal phase is more complex than the other two: it lacks any specific classification; the participants (the “travelers”) are neither here nor there, they have no valid status, they no longer have the former and have not yet reached the latter. Another important feature of liminality is that it is often created following a “prophetic fracture,” that is, a situation where the seemingly fundamental social values lose their former status and ability to act as axioms of social behavior. At the same time, order breaks down, as a result of which the former structure falls apart; but it is the loosening of these conditions that can lead to the highest state of the self — the all-pervasive gnosis. Liminality in this sense carries the possibility of *communitas*, a just relationship, in which people can shed their previous selves to come together as purified human beings.<sup>22</sup>

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THE BEGINNING OF THE SPLIT

The preliminal phase of the play in this sense begins with the first mention of the child: the disclosure of the secret is a violation of the rules of the game, the rules which ensured the existence of the previous order of appearances. However, it is important to note that this is valid only within the relationship of George and Martha, since it is a secret that does not extend to their wider circles. In this approach, therefore, it is necessary to speak of a structure that is relatively narrow in scope and is based on the silence of the couple; its operating principle is nevertheless the same as larger social structures: the rules of its sustainability are accepted and observed by everyone. Martha, however, by merging reality and illusion, causes this fragmentation to emerge, thus marking the starting point for their *rite of passage*:

<sup>21</sup> Arnold van Gennep: *Átmeneti rítusok*, trans. Zoltán Vargyas, Budapest, L'Harmattan, 2007, 49, 55.

<sup>22</sup> Victor Turner: *Átmenetek, határok és szegénység: a communitas vallási szimbólumai*, in Paul Bohannon – Mark Glazer (eds.): *Mérföldkövek a kulturális antropológiában*, Budapest, Panem, 2006, 673, 675, 689–695, 698.

- HONEY (To GEORGE, brightly) I did not know until just a minute ago that you had a son.
- GEORGE (Wheeling, as if struck from behind) WHAT?
- HONEY A son! I hadn't known. [...]
- GEORGE (To HONEY) She told you about him?
- HONEY (Flustered) Well, yes. Well, I mean...
- GEORGE (Nailing it down) She told you about him.<sup>23</sup>

Following the arrival of Nick and Honey in Act I — despite George's two warnings: "Just don't start on the bit, that's all.", "Just don't shoot your mouth off ... about ... you-know-what."<sup>24</sup> (or maybe just because of these: "MARTHA (really angered) Yeah? Well, I'll start in on the kid if I want to.", "(Surprisingly vehement) I'll talk about any goddamn thing I want to, George!")<sup>25</sup> — Martha breaks the most basic system-establishing rule: silence. George, as a result, rightly (in the context of our analysis) calls his wife "goddamn destructive...,"<sup>26</sup> indicating already in this early stage of the play, that the foundation of the structure of their life has lost its validity, and has thus become dysfunctional. His wife senses almost immediately the resulting uncertainty, however the transformative question is asked a lot later in the play: "Truth and illusion. Who knows the difference, eh, toots? Eh?"<sup>27</sup>

The answer to the question is the shift into liminality, the aim of which is George's desire to end the lies in their life, that is the illusion they have created by concealing from themselves the fact that they are social outcasts as a childless couple that does not meet the normative expectations of society (nor, perhaps, their own). Their longing for a blonde-haired child — "MARTHA: And I had wanted a child ... oh, I wanted a child."<sup>28</sup> — and their fabrication, has nevertheless created for them the opportunity to identify with the role of the parent — although perhaps not in New Carthage's eyes — and at the same time with an apparent idea of integration.

The invention of Jimmy, is, on the one hand, an opportunity for George and Martha to define themselves as mother and father, filling the void that the absence of children created in their marriage but, also, in addition to the desire of fulfilling these roles, the idea of a son also means protection, not only from threats of the outside world but also in "the mire of this vile, crushing marriage"<sup>29</sup>:

<sup>23</sup> Edward Albee: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, New York, New American Library, 1983, 44–45.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 18, 29.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 18, 29.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

MARTHA      And as he grew ... and as he grew ... oh! so wise! ... he walked evenly between us ... (*She spreads her hands*) ... a hand out to each of us for what we could offer by way of support, affection, teaching, even love ... and these hands, still, to hold us off a bit, for mutual protection, to protect us from George's ... weakness ... and my ... necessary greater strength ... to protect himself ... and us.<sup>30</sup>

Martha's moving confession in Act III further enhances the significance of imagining the child by making it clear that their son does not simply have the function of filling a void, merely to provide them with the sensation of having a child, and it is also not just a means of defense against external expectations, but a primary component of the structure that determined their previous lives: "the one light in all this hopeless ... darkness ... our SON."<sup>31</sup>

#### "CRUEL GAMES"

Disclosure of the secret, however, leads the couple to liminality, depriving them of their position in their previous system but not yet nominating a new one they can take. Liminality is therefore a form of insecurity, and, according to Turner, one of its main features is that the participants have to go through serious trials and humiliations.<sup>32</sup> In this case, this can be grasped in the "cruel games" — Humiliate the Host, Hump the Hostess, Bringing up Baby (or in the case of Honey and Nick, Get the Guest) — which are all newer and newer degrees of destruction of the former personality.

Although the play constitutes a web of games of various kinds, the above-mentioned four are the decisive stages of the pathway through liminality, in which George and Martha in particular (but the initiation and discovery of Nick and Honey is also significant), penetrate deeper layers of cruelty. Veronika Gspann's view is that the games have a dual function: on the one hand, they show how the couple's life has slipped away from reality, where the gameplay and bloody quarrels are pointless void-filling acts deriving from desperation, but on the other hand, this structure of games is a revealing insight into the inner workings of their marriage.<sup>33</sup> The following is a more detailed analysis of this process, a possible reading of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* which interprets George and Martha's night of unleashed demons as a kind of *rite of passage* by working through the theories of Gennep, Gluckman, and Turner.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>32</sup> Victor Turner: *A rituális folyamat. Struktúra és antistruktúra*, trans. István Orosz, Budapest, Osiris, 2002, 117.

<sup>33</sup> Veronika Gspann: *Edward Albee drámái*, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1992, 63.



## HUMILIATE THE HOST

The overture to “cruel games” is Humiliate the Host, which can be divided into three smaller games. Of these, the first two are not named — I will refer to them as *The Story of Our Boxing Match* and *The Fall of George, the Heir to the Throne*, while the third one is named after George, the *Book-mentioner*. One of the most important features of Humiliate the Host is that it is primarily determined as being Martha’s game (she plays the role of the game master) and is directed exclusively against George. The three phases of the game give rise to three different variations of humiliation, during which Martha attacks her husband with increasing cruelty, shredding George’s former self, which was legitimate in the preliminal stage.<sup>34</sup>

During the first game, Martha tells the story of their boxing match twenty years ago when she accidentally knocked out George with a right hook while joking around, so that he fell into a blueberry bush. Humiliated by his physical weakness, George becomes the underdog in the scene, as Martha, by summoning the past, repeatedly punches her husband — this time not physically but figuratively — and just like Daddy back then, there are witnesses to this moment as well, increasing George’s sense of defenselessness. At the climax of this scene, George leaves the room and returns with a rifle, points it at Martha’s back, then pulls the trigger while Honey begins to scream: “POW!!! (*Pop! From the barrel of the gun blossoms a large red and yellow Chinese parasol.*) [...] You’re dead! Pow! You’re dead!”<sup>35</sup> — George says, “killing” his wife in a symbolical way. The strong tension in *The Story of our Boxing Match* is thus extinguished by a comical closure, which gives way to some relief and laughter, while also stimulating the characters’ impulses.

Martha’s statement that the above incident left an indelible mark on their lives is remarkable given the path leading to the second part of the game, and George certainly thinks so: he blames his lack of accomplishments on it.<sup>36</sup> *The Fall of George, the Heir to the Throne* already focusses on this failure, continuing the humiliation in which Martha talks extensively to Nick and Honey about her contempt for her husband and calls him “a great ... big ... fat ... FLOP!”<sup>37</sup> This is the point where, for the first time, one of the characters in the play crosses the line of verbal insults into the realm of physical aggression (Martha’s pretend murder with the toy rifle should be categorized as the former, as the intent there is expressed verbally). As a result of another humiliation,

<sup>34</sup> “GEORGE: [...] Do you think I like having ... whatever-it-is [...] tearing me down; You can sit there in that chair of yours, you can sit there with the gin running out of your mouth, and you can humiliate me, you can tear me apart ... ALL NIGHT ... and that’s perfectly all right ... that’s O.K. ...” (bold highlighting: Anikó Lukács); Albee: *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

a desperate and angry George throws a bottle at the bar cabinet, which then breaks into pieces. The room, drenched in silence immediately after, testifies to the new level of aggression that has been reached. Even Martha, who is known for her quick-thinking response time, needs a few moments to decide what kind of tone she should adopt: "I hope that was an empty bottle, George. You don't want to waste good liquor ... not on your salary."<sup>38</sup> She is not intimidated by the rising level of heightened emotions.

This is where the first act of the drama — which is well suited to its title "Fun and Games" — ends: the playing of cruel games has begun, where breaking the rules serves as a means of torturing George. Rule breaking (primarily mentioning the child) results in the disintegration of the former unstable structure, leading directly to the second act, *Walpurgisnacht*<sup>39</sup>, in which the third part of the game already carries the above change within itself. It is important, however, that Martha continues to use her well-established tactics, that is, to verbally attempt to humiliate her husband. The center of this story is George's unsuccessful book, and how Daddy prohibited the publication of the manuscript. The words of his father-in-law reiterate the example of verbal aggression, the purpose of which — both in the past on Daddy's part and in the present through Martha — is George's humiliation: "Look here, kid, you don't think for a second I'm going to let you publish this crap, do you? Not on your life, baby... not while you're teaching here... You publish that goddamn book and you're out ... on your ass!"<sup>40</sup> The Book-mentioner — as opposed to the previous two games, which can be interpreted as an attack on George's physical weakness and, later, on his social ability — targets his intellect, which is a more sensitive point than those which come before. During the night, the growing pain of aggression and cruelty, as well as the pain of Martha's verbal abuse, are all reflected in George's reaction: no longer satisfied with a symbolic murder after his "I'LL KILL YOU!"<sup>41</sup> exclamation, he launches himself at his wife and begins to strangle her until Nick succeeds in separating the couple.

#### GET THE GUESTS

"THE GAME IS OVER"<sup>42</sup> — says George, thus ending the trials of Humiliate the Host, and as a result (through the endured humiliation) he begins his *rite of passage*. It is important to highlight that, among the participants, George is

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Allan Lewis: The Fun and Games of Edward Albee, *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1964), 34, <http://www.jstor.org/>.

<sup>40</sup> Albee: Ibid., 135.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 136.

the first one to reach the state of liminality, where he confronts himself and sets a major goal to not only overcome his own lies but also those of Nick and Honey, and then Martha's as well, thus creating a communal, ritual cleansing.

Get the Guests focuses on the initiation of Nick and Honey, in the context of a game that George calls The Story of his Second Book, and it is based on Nick's earlier revelations. During Humiliate the Host, the young man, in an unexpected and unguarded moment, reveals to George the details of his seemingly idyllic marriage: "NICK: I married her because she was pregnant. [...] She wasn't ... really. It was a hysterical pregnancy. She blew up, and then she went down. GEORGE: And while she was up, you married her. NICK: And then she went down."<sup>43</sup> George deliberately exploits Nick's moment of weakness, in order to know more revealing details of the true circumstances of the couple's marriage.

- GEORGE            [...] you marry a woman because she's all blown up ... while I, in my clumsy, old-fashioned way...
- NICK                There was more to it than that!
- GEORGE            Sure! I'll bet she has money, too!
- NICK                *(Looks hurt. Then, determined, after a pause)* Yes [...] You see...
- GEORGE            There were other things.
- NICK                Yes [...] We sort of grew up together, you know [...] And it was ... always taken for granted ... you know ... by our families, and by us, too, I guess. And ... so, we did. [...] I wouldn't say there was any ... particular passion between us, even at the beginning ... of our marriage, I mean.<sup>44</sup>

After finishing the first game, holding the secrets of Nick and Honey, George starts a new game, with the focus no longer on him (at least not in his former position as the victim) but on his guests. The story of George's second book, which uses an ironically childish tone to intensify the cruelty and humiliation aimed at Nick and Honey, is an attempt to detract from the apparently perfect marriage of the younger couple, pointing out that behind the illusion of the "American Dream" lies an empty and loveless relationship.

The discovery of truth (the story of George's tale) destabilizes Nick's status, gradually pushing him into the state of liminality (to its edge for the time being), where the man who appears to be the "wave of the future"<sup>45</sup> will experience the ruthlessness of this state as it eliminates the lies, and the former self of complete confidence is replaced by a man fearfully trying to preserve that identity. Honey's reaction — realizing Nick's betrayal of exposing their secrets

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 93–94.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 102–105.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 68.



(an important analogy with Martha's disclosure of the child) — is a desperate attempt to escape from reality's grasp: a retreat to the comforting solitude of the bathroom, finding safe haven on the cool floor.

"The patterns of history"<sup>46</sup> — says George in closing, seeing the parallels between the first and second games. But it is important to point out that despite the similarities, there is still a significant difference between Humiliate the Host and Get the Guests, which can be best attributed to George's next statement: "I hate hypocrisy."<sup>47</sup> Following that, it can be stated that the second game was primarily aimed at destroying hypocrisy, whereas this does not apply to the first one, since George did not deceive others (his lie — the child — was a secret). While in both cases there is a confrontation of the self, Martha was not morally motivated in Humiliate the Host to humiliate her husband, while George, having reached the liminal state, was deliberately trying to destroy the falsities of his guests.

At this point it is important to note that, despite the above considerations, the catalyst of the confrontation, if not entirely consciously, is still Martha, thus answering the question of why she decides to break the system-forming rule, which is the complete silence about their child, on this particular night.

MARTHA      You know what's happened, George? You want to know what's really happened? (*Snaps her fingers*) It's snapped, finally. Not me ... it. The whole arrangement. [...] SNAP! It went snap tonight at Daddy's party. (*Dripping contempt, but there is fury and loss under it*) [...] And I sat there and I watched you, and you weren't there! And it snapped! It finally snapped! And I'm going to howl it out, and I'm not going to give a damn what I do, and I'm going to make the damned biggest explosion you ever heard.<sup>48</sup>

Martha's quoted revelation shows its life-changing nature, which revolves around the recognition of the unsustainability of the earlier structure and the inability to maintain its appearance. However, Martha's bitterness stems from her husband's overall person (the emptiness of their relationship and the resulting alienation), and Humiliate the Host is an expression of this desperation, wherein the transgression of rules constitutes a means of humiliating George and, hence, cannot be regarded as conscious disruption of the system. In light of the foregoing, the disruption of the earlier structure can thus be attributed to George's figure — "cruelty cannot exist without consciousness

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 156–158.

and systematic methodology.<sup>49</sup> — who, as a result of the mentioning of the child and the resultant humiliation of the first game, enters the liminal phase, which is when the chain reaction sparks the catastrophic collapse of a web of lies, the first stop of which was Nick and Honey's Get the Guests.

#### HUMP THE HOSTESS

The Hump the Hostess part is different in two important ways from George and Martha's earlier game (Get the Guests should be defined as George and Nick's game), which can be grasped firstly in Martha's losing her position of control, although as yet unaware of this. Being unaware of the change, and shifting roles in the relationship, she commences their second game by continuing the attacks on her husband, while beginning to leave the realm of verbal provocation, penetrating a deeper layer of cruelty. But Martha only wants to scratch the surface of Hump the Hostess, and this is where the second discrepancy can be seen, which involves the reversal of roles, with George beginning to dictate the terms. While the first game took place within the realm of speech — as George's responses to the game are not components of the game itself — the second game shows a shift in the conditions of operation that goes beyond verbal limitations and can only be expressed physically:

- MARTHA      (*Her anger has her close to tears, her frustration to fury*) [...] You come off this kick you're on, or I swear to God I'll do it. I swear to God I'll follow that guy into the kitchen, and then I'll take him upstairs, and...
- GEORGE      (*Swinging around to her again ... loud ... loathing*) SO WHAT, MARTHA?
- MARTHA      (*Considering him for a moment ... then, nodding her head, backing off slowly*) O.K. ... O.K. ... You asked for it ... and you're going to get it.<sup>50</sup>

The intention to commit adultery (functioning mostly as verbal provocation) and the following response of approval and disinterest (almost daring her to actually do it: "GEORGE (*to Nick*): I couldn't care less. So, you just take this bag of laundry here, throw her over your shoulders, and...")<sup>51</sup>, takes cruelty to a higher degree, the mutually humiliated participants reaching the point in their struggle where they must face the final stage: "And the west, encumbered

<sup>49</sup> Veronika Darida: Antonin Artaud és a mentális terek, in *Színház-utópiák*, Budapest, Kijárat, 2010, 167.

<sup>50</sup> Albee: *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

by crippling alliances [...] must ... eventually ... fall.”<sup>52</sup> — reads George in the closing of the second act, realizing his and his wife’s true place in the world, so that all the repressed anger and bitterness can rise to the surface, he decides, laughing and crying at the same time, to embrace confrontation: “Can you hear me, Martha? Our boy is dead.”<sup>53</sup>

BRINGING UP BABY

Albee’s goal, as A. Robert Lee states, is to show that, using various masks and ritualistic games, he can eventually strip his characters of their dishonest selves, pointing to how society creates norms that lead to identifying with false roles, resulting in a lifestyle that is enervated, empty, destructive, and above all a betrayal to human existence.<sup>54</sup> Facing this reality is therefore a moral act: the individual disposes of his illusions, all the things used to hide away from the madness of life. It is significant, however, that a person behind such a wall of lies, even if the wall is strong, builds a fundamentally unstable structure that will shake at the first sign of life as it really is and will bury the self-deceived, anxious “self”. The construct is therefore destructive to the whole of human existence, for these illusions will not be fertile ground for seeds of reality and an honest existence: building that wall is reminiscent of salting the earth after the Battle of Carthage.

This is where the real game begins: the Bringing up Baby segment, which continues the events after Humiliate the Host, has George in control, and his task is to finalize the destruction of illusions — the exorcism of all lies. George’s arrival in the third act is a symbolic predication of this: he enters with a huge bouquet of flowers and begins the opening of their last game:

GEORGE           *(Taking a snapdragon, throwing it, spear-like, stemfirst at MARTHA)*  
 SNAP!  
 MARTHA           Don’t, George.  
 GEORGE           *(Throws another)* SNAP!  
 NICK               Don’t do that.  
 GEORGE           Shut up, stud.  
 NICK               I’m not a stud!  
 GEORGE           *(Throws one at NICK)* SNAP! Then you’re a houseboy. [...]  
 MARTHA           Does it matter to you, George!?

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 174. (Quoted from Oswald Spengler: *The Decline of the West*)

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>54</sup> A. Robert Lee: Illusion and Betrayal: Edward Albee’s Theatre, in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 59, No. 233, Spring (1970), 53, <http://www.jstor.org/>.



- GEORGE        (*Throws one at her*) SNAP! No, actually, it doesn't. Either way ... I've had it. [...] (*Throws another at her*) SNAP! [...]
- MARTHA        (*A little afraid*) Truth or illusion, George. Doesn't it matter to you ... at all?
- GEORGE        (*Without throwing anything*) SNAP! (*Silence*) You got your answer, baby?
- MARTHA        (*Sadly*) Got it.<sup>55</sup>

The difference between truth and illusion can be compared — even if only symbolically — to the physical experience of the flowers hitting Martha's body, and its opposite, the understanding of which turns Martha's frightened question into a grim answer. George is already aware of the full screenplay of the last game, while Martha still merely suspects the nature of the trials before her.

Following George's announcement: "Now; we got one more game to play. And it's called bringing up baby."<sup>56</sup> — the humiliated Nick leaves the room and, following the orders of George, starts looking for Honey to have all participants involved in the grand climax of the final game. Martha's behavior is very telling: sensing the possibility of the total collapse of the previous structure (of which she is a substantial part), and beyond the humiliation of Hump the Hostess, she decides to change her tone: "I don't like what's going to happen. [...] (*Pleading*) No more games. [...] (*Almost in tears*) No, George; no. [...] No, George; please. [...] No, George. [...] No more games ... please. [...] Ugly games ... ugly. [...] (*Tenderly; moves to touch him*) Please George, no more games; I..."<sup>57</sup> George, however, has made his decision: rejecting Martha's pleading and tenderness, he clenches her hair, shoves her head back, and hits her repeatedly.

In the third act, George, as part of a large and dramatic exorcism, in spite of Martha's begging, commits his ritual child murder. As Allan Lewis notes, the goal of the exorcism is to abolish everything that is falsehood and fraudulent; an act of ultimate desperation aimed at destroying illusions behind which the truth cannot be seen.<sup>58</sup> George appears to be the executor of this, by eliminating the most substantial life of their life: Jimmy, the illusion of the "American Dream".

#### CONCLUSION - THE END OF THE JOURNEY

While George destroys the symbol of their self-deception and ultimately eliminates the preliminal structure, this is also an arrival at the ultimate

<sup>55</sup> Albee: *Ibid.*, 203–205.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 206–208.

<sup>58</sup> Lewis: *Ibid.*

deconstruction of their former identities. As Matthew C. Roudane highlights, Albee's characters are suffering from existence in an absurd world, in which they nevertheless recognize the possibility of change. This can be seen in the experience of awakening, which — referring to one of the very important metaphors in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* — leads them to the marrow of the bones, that is, the essence behind appearances. Having been stripped of their illusions, Albee's actors are naked in front of us. The outcome of the process is their ability to relate to both the inner and outer world, but more importantly, to each other, with honesty.<sup>59</sup> From destruction, therefore, there is the possibility of creation, which, on the one hand, purifies the characters by pushing them toward complete openness, thereby exposing their lies, and on the other hand, it also implies the possibility of real communication. The cacophony accompanying the “killing” of their son is juxtaposed with Martha's poignant description of Jimmy, and George's requiem for their unborn child, which gives way to sporadic dialogue and then silence.

GEORGE        All right. (*pause*) Time for bed.  
 MARTHA        Yes.  
 GEORGE        Are you tired?  
 MARTHA        Yes.  
 GEORGE        I am.  
 MARTHA        Yes. [...]  
 GEORGE        (*Long silence*) It will be better. [...]  
 MARTHA        Just ... us?  
 GEORGE        Yes.<sup>60</sup>

The liminal state of the two couples approaches its end at dawn with the self-confrontation and cleansing of lies and deception in the “cruel games” leading them to hope of a new existence and an emergence from the ruins of their former lives. From this it logically follows that the intermediate phase of their *rite of passage*, while deconstructing their identity through trials and cruelties, still has a positive impact, and it is in this context that we can see how the mechanism of effectivity of Albee and Artaud are related, since rebirth is at the center of both liminality and the cruelty of Artaud.

According to László F. Földényi, two metaphors applied to the Theater of Cruelty — the plague and alchemy — warn of transformation, in which the body realizes the latent possibilities without sacrificing itself. All this leads to the liberation of the individual, as all inner demons are abandoned and all

<sup>59</sup> Matthew C. Roudane: *Understanding Edward Albee*, South Carolina, University of South Carolina Press, 1987, 22–23.

<sup>60</sup> Albee: *Ibid.*, 239–241.

obstacles are abolished in order to enter into the true center of life.<sup>61</sup> Cruelty is thus not for its own sake, and despite its destructive nature, it also has the power of creation, “the rebirth [...] allows us to get to a pre-birth and post-death life.”<sup>62</sup> — the purpose of Artaud’s theater is not destruction but creation. Árpád Kun Kékesi also sees the question in a similar way: in his opinion, the theater of Artaud treats man as raw material, which is then deconstructed and taken to pieces to be re-built again; but this is not a reconstruction, but an overhaul in which the individual becomes capable of overcoming life’s obstacles.<sup>63</sup>

With this in mind, it can be said that the cruelty of liminality and Artaud’s cruelty can be defined in the act of destruction from which there is creation, the fulfillment of which is in the climax of the play: George’s elimination of their self-imposed deceptions separates them from their former roles but at the same time facilitates the hope of rebirth. As Bigsby notes, the third act is the finding of the path from inhumanity to humanity,<sup>64</sup> which, following the analysis so far, can be read as the moment of their *communitas*. As Turner points out, the disintegration of the social order that causes liminality often involves the possibility of *communitas* in which the participants can meet as true human beings as persons of integrity who consciously share the same humanity.<sup>65</sup> This is a transformative experience that penetrates the roots of human consciousness to create something essentially communal and shared.<sup>66</sup> The *communitas* is, therefore, an essential — derivative of ancient times — form of human contact, which speaks more directly to people because of its extremely powerful emotional components and, hence, is often identified with love.<sup>67</sup>

A passage through the purity of liminality is a prerequisite for the *communitas*, with all its suffering, pain, and cruelty. The “Cruel games” of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* represent this process, leading the characters to the moment of genuine understanding rooted in silence, which, according to Turner, is one of the main features of *communitas*.<sup>68</sup> In this sense, the linguistic shift that defines the end of the drama, much of which focuses on silence and the tenderness that can be observed between the couple — George puts his

<sup>61</sup> László F. Földényi: Antonin Artaud halálos színháza, in *A túlsó parton*, Pécs, Jelenkor Irodalmi és Művészeti Kiadó, 1990, 238.

<sup>62</sup> Jacques Derrida: A Kegyetlenség Színháza és a reprezentáció bezáródása, in *Theatron, Artaud ‘visszacatoljuk a szavakat a fizikai mozgásokhoz’*, trans. Anikó Farkas, Vol. VI., Autumn-Winter, (2007), 23.

<sup>63</sup> Árpád Kékesi Kun: “A színház is olyan válság, amely vagy halállal vagy teljes gyógyulással végződik” – Antonin Artaud és a Kegyetlenség Színháza, in *A rendezés színháza*, Budapest, Osiris, 2007, 237–238.

<sup>64</sup> Bigsby: *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>65</sup> Turner: *Mérföldkövek*, 692, 708.

<sup>66</sup> Turner: *A rituális folyamat*, 152.

<sup>67</sup> Turner: *Mérföldkövek*, 705.

<sup>68</sup> Turner: *A rituális folyamat*. *Ibid.*, 120.



arm around Martha, Martha rests her head on the arm — allows a reading of the play that shows a realization of a truly personal relationship in its closing, where George and Martha are no longer the couple with the aim of hurting each other but are instead George and Martha, who found the meaning of “us” in each other. The torment of liminality can thus be interpreted as purgatory, or as Turner puts it, it’s a womb and a grave pit at the same time,<sup>69</sup> thus linking Albee’s play to the fulfillment of Artaud’s ritual cleansing.

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<sup>69</sup> Turner: *Mérföldkövek*, 700.

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ON BEARING WITNESS TO A POETIC RITUAL.  
ROBERT WILSON'S *DEAFMAN GLANCE* AS SEEN BY  
JÁNOS PILINSZKY<sup>1</sup>

ENIKŐ SEPSI

*In various ways, France played an important part in sparking the aesthetic-poetic change which took place in the 1970s in the work of the Hungarian poet János Pilinszky. One of the main influences was a consequence of Pilinszky's access to Robert Wilson's theater, especially the Paris performance of Deafman Glance in 1971. This ritualistic theater, which I define as "poetic," inspired not only Conversations with Sheryl Sutton but also some poetic works of short "drama" and some poems. This essay examines the poetic implications of this theatrical approach to rituals in the poems and prose of Pilinszky, as well as his views on spectatorship and witnessing at a time when liturgy and ritual overlapped in Wilson's thinking theater. My inquiry is based primarily on two letters that I discovered in the early Robert Wilson Archives at Columbia University.*

INTRODUCTION

In various ways, France played an important part in sparking the aesthetic-poetic change which took place in the 1970s in the work of the Hungarian poet János Pilinszky (1921–1981). These influences lay initially in Pilinszky's discovery of the work of Simone Weil and in the liturgical renewal that served as a model for his concept of theater, but they were prompted perhaps most importantly by his access to Robert Wilson's theater, especially the Paris performance of *Deafman Glance* in 1971. This mute theater of images had switched to an unfamiliar tempo on stage, a kind of immobility in movement which inspired not only *Conversations with Sheryl Sutton*,<sup>2</sup> an imaginary dialogue written by Pilinszky, but also some poetic pieces of short "drama" and some poems. In this essay, I examine the poetic implications of this theatrical approach to rituals in the poems and prose of Pilinszky, as well as his views on spectatorship and bearing witness at a time when, in Wilson's thinking theater, liturgy and ritual overlapped.

<sup>1</sup> This text was first published in Jay Malarcher (ed.): *Text & Presentation*, 2017, The Comparative Drama Conference Series 14, Jefferson (N.C.), McFarland, 2018, 167–179.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Wilson's main and only professional actress at the time.



## ON POETIC RITUALITY

In order to describe the different connections between the poetic text and the ritual executed on stage, in addition to the remarks and insights of the well-known authors, I am going to use the relevant points of the Bielefeld-based researcher Saskia Fischer's PhD dissertation.<sup>3</sup> She introduces a simple but useful concept, that of "poetic rituality,"<sup>4</sup> and she claims that the ritual does not have to distance itself from art, as certain genres, like the oratorio, the tragedy, the requiem, and the mystery play, have ritual contexts. Aesthetic and dramatic theater becomes poetic (*poiesis*) due to their form and the manner of their construction, which broadens the possibilities of poetry. In reformulating Antonin Artaud, I would add that poetry within the confines of a space, i.e., the theater, uses the language of theater as we experience it in our dreams, substituting for ordinary meanings others which form the basis of a metaphor. As theorist, director, and playwright Richard Schechner emphasizes in his essay "From ritual to theater and back: the efficacy-entertainment braid," "So-called 'real events' are revealed as metaphors."<sup>5</sup> I would also reverse Fischer's observation by saying that poetry, i.e., the metaphorical construct, broadens the potentials of rituals toward the theater. In other words, poetry may appear as an organizational logic in ritual on stage, and, on the other hand, poetic texts can have ritualistic elements, such as repetition, performativity, etc.

Wilson's theater is often called a theater of images, the early period even a mute theater of images, but the secondary literature has touched very little on its ritual aspects. What Pilinszky found very interesting in *Deafman Glance* may very well have been the encounter of ritual and poetry in space.

In the Wilson Archives of Butler Library at Columbia University, I discovered that Wilson was also looking for a ritualistic theater in the process of the de-creation of the Self, a kind of ceremony which was equally important to Pilinszky and the author of his main reading, Simone Weil.

I wouldn't know what my liturgy is until I wrote it, or saw one that was very close to my own. Generally I think the modern liturgy, the one that comes closest to expressing modern intellectual consciousness consists of a constant flaying out of mind and body images from a receding and often disintegrating spiritual consciousness. My biggest problem concerning liturgy consists of modern man's

<sup>3</sup> Saskia Fischer: *Reflektierte Ritualität. Die Wiederaneignung ritueller Formen in der Dramatik nach 1945*, Bielefeld, 2016 (manuscript). See also Fischer: *Ritual und Ritualität im Drama nach 1945*, Paderborn, Fink, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Schechner: *From ritual to theater and back: the efficacy-entertainment braid*, in *Performance Theory*, London/New York, Routledge, 1988 [1977], 128.

divorcement and dislocation from his once central focal areas: birth, death, god, initiation, brotherhood. Modern man seems to be lost inside his own insanely personal hieroglyphics. How to relate these to a central focus? Of course, the power of art is now of great importance. To crystallize, to bring us back to our living center. But does it still exist? Have we already lost it? Are we in the process of trying to evolve a new one? Can liturgy help us in this process? Is art our enemy leading us further and further away, making it more and more difficult for us? The mind is too active, the spirit too still.<sup>6</sup>

Until I discovered this letter, there were no known traces of Wilson's interest in liturgy. Sheryl Sutton, who was the main and only professional actress in Wilson's early 1970s period, also observes that in the "Overture" to *Deafman Glance*, Byrdwoman is a mythological figure taking part in a ritual, more precisely, a mass; she may be the embodiment of a mother, Death's Angel, or even Medea: "I never thought of it as evil. No emotion was implied. No anguish. No suffering. It was more subliminal. I thought of it as a ritual, like a mass. Raising and lowering the knife was like raising and lowering a chalice."<sup>7</sup> In *From Ritual to Theatre*, Victor Turner mentions Schechner, who applies Winnicott's stages of child development (me, not-me, not not-me) to the actor's work (Turner quotes this border-crossing in his book). The role, the character to be played, means the not-me for the actor, and after he integrates a part of the role into himself, the not-me becomes the not not-me in him. In the process, described as "alchemy" and "mystic," Turner assigns only the catalyst's role to the director, and he considers this third self-state richer and deeper. Sheryl Sutton speaks about this altered state of consciousness as resulting from the inner timing required by the "overture." In his work *Performance Theory*, Schechner highlights performances which lead not only from one state to the other but also from one self-identity to the other. In addition, he emphasizes that the attention paid to the manner of theater-making is already an experiment in the ritualization of performance, to find the valid forms of action in the theater itself. He demonstrates that liturgy applied many "avant-garde" techniques by referring to a twelfth-century mass: "it was allegorical, it encouraged — no,

<sup>6</sup> Box 81: "Performing jobs" label. Letters of Robert Wilson to Antony Scully in September 1970 about Woodstock College program, Center for Religion and Worship, New York. These letters were first published in my book *Le "théâtre" immobile de János Pilinszky – lu dans l'optique de Mallarmé, Simone Weil et Robert Wilson*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2014, 146–147. (Pilinszky János mozdulatlan színháza Mallarmé, Simone Weil és Robert Wilson műveinek tükrében, Budapest, L'Harmattan, Károli Könyvek, 2015, 109–110.)

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Holmberg: *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, 7.

forced — audience participation, it treated time teleologically,” and “it extended the spatial field of the performance from the church to the roadways to the homes of the participants.”<sup>8</sup>

Another letter by Wilson dated August 23, 1970 states the following about the connection between ritual and theater:

I've always believed that ritual is the heart of things. Somehow plays seem to revolve furiously around ritualistic activity. The only hitch is, that artists usually stumble on it without knowing it. Those like Peter Brook, in his version of Seneca's Oedipus, who go directly after a ritualistic interpretation often botch it up. If too much of a scheme gets in the head of the participants the life can go out of the work. Genet is very interesting ritualistically with his inverted Catholicism, with his fascination with the Mass, with his need for good in order to spur on the evil he worships. Religion and drama just have to get together again. Grotowski's ideas about being a secular saint. After all, the roots of drama were religious, some people think. [...] We have to recover the tragic vision: that man is temporal, finite, doomed to death and oblivion. Seems that people are more interested in the Eslin Institute and the varied experiences of the Kama Sutra. Transcend the flesh. Burn out the flesh. Grotowski's idea. [...] Not in a pseudo-philosophical abstract way, but by really applying the hot tongs of drama to the participants. A little Artaud. Scald them. [...] A true and deep approach to and appreciation of life will, I'm sure, be ritualistic.<sup>9</sup>

This quotation highlights the main sources of inspiration for the creation of a ritual-based piece of work in *Deafman Gance* and in the early performances of productions by Wilson: Genet and the Mass and his inverted Catholicism, Jerzy Grotowski's ritualistic theater, the main goal of which is not to create a performance but to focus on the way the actor lives and trains through the preparation process (“being a secular saint”), and finally, Artaud's original “théâtre de la Cruauté.” Peter Brook appears here as a counter-example, potentially influenced by the Russian-Armenian mystic Gurdjieff, though his name is not mentioned in this text. (Gurdjieff, in turn, was strongly influenced by the whirling dervishes he encountered in Istanbul and the sufis of Central Asia at the turn of the century.) In the 1960s, Pilinszky also acquainted himself with Grotowski's laboratory theater, and he wrote articles about *The Constant Prince*. Grotowski can be considered a prefiguration of what Pilinszky later admired in Wilson's theater, especially in *Deafman Gance*: this *via negativa* making of theater, opposite in this sense to the intentionally ritualistic aspect of Peter Brook's *Oedipus*.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Schechner: *Performance Theory*, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004, 136–137 (see the chapter “Theater for Tourists”).

<sup>9</sup> See footnote 5.



While Schechner, for instance, actively used rites as elements (in the anthropological sense)<sup>10</sup> in his experimental theater, Wilson created a quasi-ritual in the *Overture to Deafman Gance* — a child sacrifice taken out of its original context and performed as theater. According to Schechner, the rite and the theater vary only in their context, not in their basic structure. It is also possible — and we can agree that the idea seems persuasive — that the rite originates in the theater, if, and only if, these rites are connected to real social structures outside the theater.<sup>11</sup>

#### WILSON'S MURDER SCENE AS SEEN BY JÁNOS PILINSZKY

The early Wilson Archives at Columbia contain only a non-professional recording of the Iowa production of *Deafman Gance*. Wilson's actor Stephan Brecht (Bertolt Brecht's son) wrote a book about the Brooklyn performance of *Deafman Gance*.<sup>12</sup> In this version, the ritual murder takes place as an overture to the performance, while at the Paris performance seen by the Hungarian poet Pilinszky, the murder was committed in the third act. This scene was sometimes performed by Wilson himself, sometimes together with Sheryl Sutton — Sutton in black and white — with black and white boys and girls. In his book *Conversations with Sheryl Sutton*, Pilinszky gives a poetic description of the performance, including a description of this scene in chapter eight:

<sup>10</sup> In the play *Dionysus in 69*, he borrows the birth rite from the West Iranian Asmat; The Living Theatre's *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces* and *Paradise Now* use elements of yoga and the Indian theater as well, while Philip Glass's music — the American composer has worked with Robert Wilson on a few projects — is inspired by the gamelan and the Indian raga. To the present day, these rites continue to travel around Europe, which generates a situation of theatrical reception (e.g., Whirling Dervishes).

<sup>11</sup> Schechner: *Performance Theory*, 138.

<sup>12</sup> Stephan Brecht: *L'Art de Robert Wilson (Le Regard du sourd)*, trans. Françoise Gaillard, Paris, Christian Bourgois, *Le Théâtre*, 1972/1; Brecht: *The Theatre of Visions: Robert Wilson*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 1978.



Figure 1. "Murder Scene" with Robert Wilson, *Expectation/Deafman Glance* (2004).  
 Photograph by Monika Rittershaus. Source: [www.robertwilson.com](http://www.robertwilson.com)

I should still like to repeat the whole act now, filled out with other, new motifs, as it also repeats itself again and again in me, if only because this scene was the play's obvious raw material.

The scene starts in a lit-up auditorium, indicating that we commit our most hidden acts out in the open, in the limelight; that is, in such a silence and loneliness as in the very center of an overcrowded arena.

The stage — for this period — is blocked with an enormous brick wall, as if shutting events off from itself from the very start. In front of the brick wall stands a small table: a bottle of milk on it. With his back to the spectators, a blond boy sits on his stool. Sheryl comes in from the left, rippling in her slowness like a nun possessed, and rigid as a seminarist preparing to commit the first sin of his priesthood. Sheryl's every step is aimed *for this* and *against this*. First she tenderly gives the child a drink, then replaces the empty bottle. How and what she performs is a rite rather than a sin, more precisely: the fulfilment, more burdensome and abstract than any duty, of the last phase of a sin. First of all she has to dress. She pulls her elbow-high black gloves onto both arms, hands. Then she has to take in her hand and open the razor laid ready on the table, and with it she then cuts the child's throat in a split second, while with her free left hand she has already covered him over.

In a few moments the sheet is blood-soaked from head to toe, but before Sheryl can go off she still has to close the razor and put it back. From then on one can sense that she has become weightless and steps unsteppingly, that all she would like to do is to sleep, that she is already asleep, but before that she still has to get out. And she does make an attempt to do so, when a black boy, the same age as the one she has killed, blocks her way. Like vomit a howl breaks out from the boy. Sheryl claps her

gloved hand over the boy's mouth, producing silence. Sheryl takes back her hand, when a deaf-mute characteristic howl breaks out again from the boy, a sound such as never has heard any kind of sound. Sheryl claps his mouth up for the second time until the child's body calms under her hand, and now they can stand facing each other soundlessly. Sheryl turns and steps backwards to the middle of the brick wall. The little boy rhythmically in her tracks. Sheryl stops, and the child too behind her. Sheryl turns and starts walking straight at the stone wall. Up runs the brick wall, and the house lights go out. On a snow-white piano a black girl plays Chopin. The moon-lit park full of unrecognizable invited guests. Sheryl and the boy in her tracks, as I've earlier described, enter the garden and disappear from our view.<sup>13</sup>

According to the Hungarian artist János Gát (Sheryl Sutton's future husband), János Pilinszky met Sutton after a Paris performance of *Deafman Glimpse* in Paul Wiener's apartment. Wiener was a Hungarian psychiatrist and Pilinszky's host,<sup>14</sup> and his oral testimony also reveals that Sheryl Sutton spoke a little French, as did Pilinszky, though he spoke no English. Thus, most of the dialogues written in *Conversations with Sheryl Sutton* are imaginary, as the subtitle "novel of a dialogue" suggests (i.e., it is a work of fiction).

The above "Murder scene" enters Pilinszky's personal mythology as the image of "The Murder" in general, witnessed in a concrete form by the poet during the Shoah: in the autumn of 1944, he was stationed as a soldier in Harbach and Ravensbrück, where he saw the horrors of the labor and concentration camps firsthand. In his first published poems and in his prose, Pilinszky explores the interrelating states of mind of the victim and the murderer in abstract images. As he bore witness to the Shoah, he also becomes a spectator of this "Murder Scene" on the stage in 1971. He was moved by Sheryl Sutton's portrayal of the murderer, and the performance — which lacked emotion and offered little in the way of catharsis — was also artistically provocative for him.

In this context, Pilinszky is the spectator *and* the witness to the rite, and we are involved in his experience through his text. The theater anthropologist Victor Turner's term "liminoid state"<sup>15</sup> offers a concise description of the

<sup>13</sup> János Pilinszky: *Conversations with Sheryl Sutton. The Novel of a Dialogue*, Manchester/Budapest, Carcanet – Corvina, 1992, 49–50.

<sup>14</sup> János Gát also performed a solo at the Nancy Festival in 1971 about one year and one day in the life of a person. He showed me the photos of this performance in his gallery on Madison Avenue in New York. After Wilson left Paris, a theatrical group called Laïla was founded there, and Sheryl Sutton, János Gát, and Paul Wiener became members of this group. Wiener also wrote an article on his and Gát's experiences with Laïla: *De la régression contrôlée à la transcendance*, *Art et Théâtre*, June 1990, 34–35.

<sup>15</sup> Victor Turner further develops van Gennep's scheme (Arnold van Gennep: *The Rites of Passage*, Routledge Library Editions Anthropology and Ethnography (Paperback Reprint ed.), Hove, East Sussex, UK, Psychology Press, 1977 [1960]) by revealing the attributes of the three phases (preliminal, liminal or threshold and postliminal) and their main features. In his by now classic work *From Ritual to Theatre*, Turner uses the word "liminoid" to describe



situation of the mother, who, after murdering the child, is banished from the body of the theater work and assigned the state of mere witness to what is happening on stage. Wilson seems to show the work to us through the eyes and defective ears of a deaf-mute witnessing the events. Pilinszky's text doubles this role of witness by adding him as a spectator. The tempo of this theatrical gesture, which has no external referee, is "lento," not "ritardando." It is Bergson's "durée" staged and inspired by Gertrude Stein's *Four Saints in Three Acts*, where composition carries the meaning, not the words.<sup>16</sup>

In Wilson's production, the scene evokes Daniel Stern's research published in *The First Relationship: Mother and Infant*,<sup>17</sup> which is mentioned in Wilson's notes in the early Robert Wilson Archives at Columbia University (box 181, labeled "Deafman Glance project," 1987. Notes for *Overture to the Fourth Act of Deafman Glance*):

In 1967 I met Dr. Daniel Stern, head of the Department of Psychology at Columbia University. He had made over 300 films of mothers and their babies in natural situations where the baby was crying and the mother would pick up and comfort the child. When these films were shown at normal speed, that was what we saw. But when they were shown frame by frame — normal speed is 24 frames per second — what one sees in 8 out of 10 cases is that the initial reaction of the mother in the first 3 frames — 3/24ths of a second — is to lunge at the child and that the infant is recoiling in terror. In the next 2 or 3 frames we see completely different pictures. In the next 2 or 3 frames again the pictures are completely different, and so on. So in one second of time we see that what is taking place between a mother and child is extremely complex. When the mother is shown the film she is horrified and responds, "But I love my child! I want to comfort the child."

Although this scene is created from a different perspective and on the basis of a different source from the scene captured by Pilinszky, the ritual form on stage (the Murder) involves the spectator poet, and it gives the act multiple meanings.

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a liminary state referring to art and religion: "I had distinguished 'liminal' from 'liminoid' by associating the first with obligatory, tribal participation in ritual and the second as characterizing artistic or religious forms voluntarily produced, usually with recognition of individual authorship, and often subversive in intention toward the prevailing structures." (Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre. The Human Seriousness of Play*, New York, Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982, 118.)

<sup>16</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Composition as explanation*, in *A Gertrude Stein Reader*, Illinois, Northwestern University, 1993, 493.

<sup>17</sup> Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1977.

POEMS BY PILINSZKY INSPIRED BY *DEAFMAN GLANCE*

Pilinszky also wrote some poems related to this theatrical experience that embodied the ideal theater and which Simone Weil termed “immobile theater.” Pilinszky, who was also inspired by Wilson, wrote his own “paper theater,” as he called it, which shares some affinities with Mallarmé’s “théâtre de la Pensée” (theater of Thought or Mind theater). The performance confirmed his instinctive sense that poetry, and especially *his* poetry, needed a new mode with which to address reality, and that Wilson’s emphasis on concentrated gesture and ritual was part of this new mode.<sup>18</sup>

*Seashore, shingle, noise of gulls.* Sheryl, as in an Edgar Allan Poe poem, is sitting in a throne-like armchair in the full light of noon with a black raven to her left. Her dress, cut from black taffeta, is ground-length and motionless.

Before I knew her, a few weeks after the performance, I even wrote a poem on this sitting-about. Ted Hughes made an English translation of it. Here is the original:

*Bűn és bűnhődés*

Sheryl Suttonnak

A befalazott képzelet  
még egyre ismétlgeti —

A pillanat villanyszék trónusán  
még ott az arc,  
sziklábamártott nyakszirt,  
gyönyörű kéz —  
pórusos jelenléted.

Még tart a nyár.

Ereszd le jogarod, Királynő

Ted Hughes’s translation, I feel, captures in English the same black American girl of whom I, a Hungarian, took my snapshot. Sheryl found the poem dedicated to her nice, though a bit overexposed.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Jay: Preface, in J. Pilinszky: *Conversations with Sheryl Sutton. The Novel of a Dialogue*, Manchester/Budapest, Carcanet – Corvina, 1992, 13.

*Crime and Punishment*  
To Sheryl Sutton

The walled-in imagination  
continues to repeat it —  
the face is still there  
throned in the electric chair of the moment  
the nape dipped in cliff  
the beautiful hand —  
the porous skin of your presence.

And still the summer goes on.

Let down your scepter, Queen.<sup>19</sup>

*Crime and punishment* creates the present tense of the liminal, banished state of the woman and the memory of the spectator keeping in mind and repeating the same scene over and over again. In Pilinszky's poems, this *praesens perfectum perpetuum* (compared to a *praesens perfectum continuum*) is the abstraction of an irredeemable past tense elevated to the level of poetry, where there is no time, there is only the reversible time of the Passion becoming the abstract image of the Shoah and all murders committed in the twentieth century. The poem also refers, in its title, to Pilinszky's favorite author, Dostoyevsky.



Figure 2. Deafman Glance with Alain Bertran and Sheryl Sutton (1971). Photograph by Martin Bough. Source: [www.robertwilson.com](http://www.robertwilson.com)

<sup>19</sup> Pilinszky: *Sheryl Sutton*, 40–41.





Figure 3. *Deafman Glance* with Bernie Rohret (topless woman), Sheryl Sutton (center), and Terry Chambers (veiled woman), 1971. Photograph by Rosine Nusimovici.  
Source: [www.robertwilson.com](http://www.robertwilson.com)

In Pilinszky's poem *Stone Wall and Fiesta*, Daniel Stern's research almost seems to have taken the form of a poem (without any reference to the experimentation): "What happens, what is it that really happens during the unhappy and horrendous time of every one of our actions?"

*Kőfal és ünnepély*

(Homage à Robert Wilson)

A késszurás mozdulata, s a kéz  
boldogtalan stációi után?

A félbeszakadt dallamok,  
a csapzott ünnepélyek és  
az összekuszált csillár fényeinek túl?

A fal előtt? A fal után?

Mi történik, mi is történik  
minden tettünk boldogtalan  
és irtóztató ideje alatt?

*Stone Wall and Fiesta*

(Homage to Robert Wilson)

Is it the motion of the stabbing knife, and  
after the unhappy stations of the hand?

Is it the interrupted melodies,  
the dishevelled fiestas and this beyond  
the lights of the confused chandelier?

Before the wall? Or behind the wall?

What happens, what is it that really happens  
during the unhappy and horrendous  
time of every one of our actions?<sup>19</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Ádám Makkai (ed.): *In Quest of the Miracle Stag*, Vol. 1, trans. Ádám Makkai, Chicago, Atlantis-Centaur, 2000, 959.

Another poem by Pilinszky, *Hommage à Sheryl Sutton I*, offers a good example of how a ritual act broadens its significations through Sheryl Sutton's acting in a manner that suggests that motivation and situation are not inherent to her. There is no sign of any kind of willingness, neither spontaneous nor pre-meditated. This *via negativa* of poetic creation forms the basis of Pilinszky's *ars poetica*.

A lehető legszűkebb térben	In the narrowest possible space
végrehajtottad, amit nem szabad.	you achieved the forbidden.
Csódláloztál a szertartáson,	You marvelled at the ceremony
mely vágóhíd, bár nincs kiterjedése,	which is a slaughter-house, though it has no dimension,
könyökig ér, bár nincsen ideje.	reaches to the elbow, though it is not in time.
Csak később hallottad, amit	Only later did you hear what
letakartál. Majd belépve a kertbe	you have withheld, then entering the garden
elámultál a telehold varázsán.	you were astonished by the magic of the full moon. <sup>20</sup>

*Hommage à Sheryl Sutton II* refers to a swimming movement which, according to Sheryl herself, was her strength and which made motion almost imperceptible.

The significance of Pilinszky's choice of poetry as a means of expressing his engagement with *Deafman Glance* leads us to the very center of Pilinszky's aesthetic. Pilinszky had insight into and experiences with the world of theater, without, however, having been in daily contact with the practice of the theater. His approach remained that of a poet. The poems written about *Deafman Glance* recycle the main subjects of Pilinszky's poetry: murder as a Passion, part of the Mass; witnessing as the ontological status of humankind, immobility as the proper movement of poetry, the present tense of poetry, which is a *praesens perfectum perpetuum*, i.e., a present which not only affects presence, but which is reproduced over and over again.

## CONCLUSION

In his lecture given at Collège de France,<sup>22</sup> Grotowski distinguishes two tendencies in theater. He terms the first one "artificial" (from *ars, artis*), in which all elements of the performance are precisely developed and, in a sense, the "montage" of these elements is not realized on stage but as an effect of the

<sup>21</sup> János Pilinszky: *The Desert of Love*. (Selected Poems translated by János Csokits and Ted Hughes), Anvil Press, 1989 (Carcanet Press, 1976), 71.

<sup>22</sup> Jerzy Grotowski: *Anthropologie théâtrale. La «lignée organique» au théâtre et dans le rituel*, Paris, Le livre qui parle, Collection Collège de France, 1997.

predetermined play in the mind of the spectator. This tendency is characteristic of Robert Wilson's theater and some Far Eastern forms of theater, such as the Beijing Opera or Noh. The other tendency is the organic one, in which the montage is created, in a sense, in the actor who is becoming a *vehiculum*, a word applied to Grotowski's theater by Peter Brook. My discussion of Pilinszky's prose and poetry based on the experience of having borne witness to the rituals in *Deafman Glance* affirms Grotowski's observation. Ritual, even if it is a quasi-ritual or a poetic ritual, does not allow the spectator to remain separate from the scene. In this sense, Pilinszky bears witness to *Deafman Glance*, and especially the murder scene, as an anthropologist. As a spectator, he is cognitively involved. There is a certain anamorphism in understanding ritual. In other words, the spectator must have the correct angle to see a comprehensible form or figure. On the other hand, there are multiple correct angles, due to the poetic, i.e., metaphorical, construction of meanings in poetic rituals.

In Pilinszky's case, the writer of this article saw the recording — so to speak, the relics of a performance — and analyzed the impact it made on a poet who was witness to this theatrical rite and who wrote of this memory in prose and poetry, writings which I have presented in this paper in the published English translations. Compared to the "liminoid" state of receptivity of the live theater performance, a double border-crossing takes place through the text that is both written and translated. Thus Pilinszky's relationship to *Deafman Glance* gives the English readership another perspective on Wilson's work: that of poetic rituality.

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A THEATER PLAY FROM A CONCERT PIECE;  
POETRY AND RITUAL IN THE GESAMTKUNSTWERK?  
ON ATTILA VIDNYÁNSZKY'S  
JOAN OF ARC AT THE STAKE (2013)

DÁNIEL TIBOR HEGYI

*This study analyzes Paul Claudel and Arthur Honegger's piece Joan of Arc at the Stake which premiered, in this version, in 2013 at the National Theater in Budapest. The study's main purpose is to analyze the story in the context of the director Attila Vidnyánszky's worldview and his creed of theater. Moreover, it reflects on the director's biography and on the synthesis of art through the figure of Joan of Arc, with an emphasis on the role of sacredness in the foundation and further development of social identity in our world of sparse rituality?*

Paul Claudel and Arthur Honegger's multiple genre piece is unique in the sense that it was not the product of a previously written text being put to music, but it was the outcome of a special authorial collaboration. It became known as an oratorio, but the authors describe it as a mystery play, even a dithyramb. Ida Rubinstein, the famous dancer and actress, who also attended medieval mystery drama classes at the Sorbonne in 1923, commissioned the play. An interesting fact regarding the genesis of the play is that poet-playwright Claudel was initially reluctant to write about the already frequently adapted Jeanne d'Arc subject, and also had reservations about collaborating with composer Honegger. Furthermore, one of his main problems was that he felt that "a real hero cannot be put into a fictional environment"<sup>1</sup> as Joan's words belong to the historical collective memory of the nation of France.<sup>2</sup> He actively pondered this issue and finally arrived at the solution in the form of a fine arts concept: anamorphosis, a perspective technique which means that certain works of art can only be observed from a specific angle or "point of view" in order to perceive their "real" or hidden message. This compositional principle helped Claudel to approach the short but eventful life of Joan of Arc effectively. Regarding the conception of the artwork Claudel said, "For the understanding of a life, as with a landscape, we need to choose a point of view, and there is no better locus for it than the summit. Joan of Arc's life's summit was her death, the Rouen-stake. [...] right on that summit, she took all the events into account

<sup>1</sup> András Szöllősy: Jeanne d'Arc a máglyán, alkalmi művek, Nocturne [Joan of Arc at the Stake, Occasional works, Nocturne], in *Honegger*, Budapest, Gondolat, 1960, 254–255.

<sup>2</sup> Szöllősy: *Honegger*, 258.

that led her to that stake. [...] from her end to the beginning of her calling and mission. It is said that dying people see every moment of their lives pass in front of their eyes, and the imminent ending gives all of it meaning.”<sup>3</sup> This is how the unique structure of *Joan of Arc at the Stake* was conceived. It starts with the heroine standing in front of the stake and then goes back in time, to her trial, then the enthronement of the French king, and then right back to the childhood of the “Maid of Orléans.” After the depiction of parts of Saint Joan’s childhood in her hometown, Domrémy, comes the grand finale, that, essentially, connects to the first scene of the play, the burning of Jeanne, later ordained as a French national heroine. With this technical method, Claudel could solve the problem of the text’s huge volume and its labyrinthian nature. It made the dramatization of the Joan of Arc stories extremely difficult, but with the help of a series of still images, the main aspects of Saint Joan’s life could, finally, be presented with ease. So, Claudel “captured one spectacularly selected moment’s brilliant poetry.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, by omitting elements such as the linear plot, the active heroine, and the contending parties as well as the dramatical conflict in the traditional sense, what results does not make so much for a drama, but rather for a staged epic.<sup>5</sup> Not only does the play contain tropes of subjective, inner emotions and visionary reminiscence but also dramatic and epical components, connecting not only different literary genres but also showing affiliations with other art forms. The harmony of text and music also participate in the elaboration of this complex piece.

Claudel’s intention, to look back at the most important parts of Joan of Arc’s life and thereby her function in the forming of the French national collective memory through the (fixed) optics of anamorphosis, was consistent with the artistic intentions of Honegger, who was receptive to musical theater and dramaturgy all his life. The composer had already looked into the matter of the connection of the individual and the community, and the individual and the world, in different ways from his oratorio *Judith*. But he was able to depict this binary opposition — in a Paul de Man sense as well — in his Jeanne play in the most perfect and complete way possible.<sup>6</sup> “Biblical and mythological heroes populated [Honegger’s] stages, a modern, yet impersonal hero flounders in *Cris du Monde*. Jeanne is his first historical heroine. It is safe to say that he shared the same worrying emotions as Claudel: a real heroine cannot be put into a fictional environment. The outlines of the world had to be specified: instead of imagined biblical and Greek stages, Joan’s environment had to be built up of musical twists resembling French traditions and historical ages.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 257–258.



The necessity of solving this problem shows in the musical dramaturgy that came to fruition on the commands and instructions of Claudel. Although an important characteristic of the play is that the text and the music are coequal, Claudel's personality still dominates. Honegger stated that he regarded himself as only a shadow of Claudel, and not a bona fide co-author of *Joan of Arc at the Stake*.<sup>8</sup> The poet tried to leave enough space for the musical components of the play, and reading its dramatic text makes it quite obvious: the choir, the numerous textual repetitions, and the injection of recitable Latin phrases in the normally French text all strengthen the inducing effect of the musical devices. The choice of music of eclectic styles and various epochs was justified dramaturgically by the play's still image-like structure.

The play exemplifies the process of Joan of Arc's becoming a French national heroine in one frozen moment, and for this purpose using the composer's usual imagined biblical or mythological scenes would not have worked as intended, so traditional French historical locations and scenes were used — with the corresponding musical inserts. Therefore, Honegger uses folk songs for the enthronement of Charles VII in Reims, medieval court music for the judgment of the temporal powers of Joan, children's songs for her early years in Domrémy, and finally jazz music for the trial. There are three scenes in particular that represent the fate, and the later social functions, of the Maid of Orléans: the cards scene, Reims, and childhood. These are “the scenes, where Joan becomes not only a national but a demotic heroine as well, related to her own historical environment; through these scenes the approach of the piece becomes unified.”<sup>9</sup>

All in all it is safe to state that despite the demands of both artists and Claudel's initial standoff, the collaboration had productive effects on the two different traditional background-bearing authors in that Claudel, who played an active role in Catholic renewal,<sup>10</sup> and Honegger, with his Swiss Protestant background, were able to forge this dramaturgically and narratively coherent creative work, culminating successfully in a dual Saint Joan personality

<sup>8</sup> “Claudel played such a big part, I do not even consider myself an author of the play, only a humble contributor.” Ibid., 254. This fact is interesting to ponder today, as the play is usually performed as a concert and this is how it was canonized. The reasoning for this is mostly known to concertgoers and musical society, who already considered the piece as part of basic arts knowledge, as opposed to the insanely detailed symbol system and huge authorial corpus of Claudel, whose works, according to Hungarian traditions at the very least, are mostly known by university students. This is why *Joan of Arc at the Stake* is principally known as Honegger's piece and not Claudel's, although Claudel is also well-known for his prosaic pieces, such as *The Tidings Brought to Mary* and *The Satin Slipper*.

<sup>9</sup> Szöllösy: Ibid., 258. Honegger only uses Gregorian or folk-music when it is justified: only when he wants to further strengthen the connectedness of the communities (religious or laical). Ibid., 259–266.

<sup>10</sup> Kristóf Rechtenwald: *Johanna újra a máglyán* [Joan at the Stake again], <https://www.vivala-musical.hu/johanna-ujra-a-maglyan/>, accessed 28 August 2020.

picture. The oratorio introduces the Maid of Orléans in different forms: once as a saint, a sacral icon, then in the role of the French historical, demotic-national heroine. Besides all this, the play, written in 1934, and its final musical version, premiered in 1935, took into account contemporary politics, and used the figure of Saint Joan to forewarn Europe of the ever-menacing, looming spectre of World War II.<sup>11</sup> It also depicted the solidary power that, with the help of devotion and selflessness, could create a unity from the diverging ideological battlegrounds present in the first half of the twentieth century. This intention of the two authors is greatly supported by the fact that during the German occupation of France, Claudel added a prologue to the play, titled “Darkness, darkness, darkness”, that “sings the complaints of France with the words of The Book of Genesis.”<sup>12</sup>

Attila Vidnyánszky, the director of the Hungarian National Theater, used the bases of Claudel’s updates for his 2013 staging of *Joan of Arc at the Stake*, which also drew parallels between the 100 years’ war and the German occupation of France during World War II, like Claudel’s drama. The opening scene uses Honegger’s retrospective music, which starts with the psalm “De profundis,” then on the dark-toned stage appears Joan, saying goodbyes to the world and life, meanwhile “around her scraps of paper float in the air like ashes [...] from giant metal bars, covered in sheets.”<sup>13</sup> Rampaging, amorphous masses tear, rip, and burn the European cultural heritage, holding onto the enormous wall of books, looming above the stage.<sup>14</sup> Vidnyánszky uses devices of the poetical theater and numerous spatial metaphors to picture the many different layers of meaning of Saint Joan: the iron traverse, filled with torn and burning pages, represents the stake. As the symbol of innocence and of France, the doom of Joan represents the dying of European culture itself.<sup>15</sup>

The director put emphasis on the intention of Claudel and Honegger to express the correlation of the figure of the Maid of Orléans and the oratorio’s demotic-national and sacral projections in general. While doing so, Vidnyánszky also wanted to present a different Joan character to the capital’s audience than the one portrayed by the National Theater’s former director Róbert Alföldi a few months earlier in his adaptation of G. B. Shaw’s *Saint Joan*. One of the reviews written of *Joan of Arc at the Stake* compared Shaw’s and Claudel’s pieces — and, unfortunately, the two performances as well, “While G.

<sup>11</sup> Szöllősy: *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>13</sup> Tibor Pethő: *Nemzeti: Johanna, a szent és törékeny áldozat* [National: Joan, the saint and fragile victim], <https://magyarnemzet.hu/archivum/kulturgrund/nemzeti-johanna-a-szent-es-torekeny-aldozat-4068229/>, accessed 28 August 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Rechtenwald: *Johanna újra a máglyán*.

<sup>15</sup> Attila Vidnyánszky: *Látomások láncá* [The Chain of Visions], in *Nemzeti* [National Theater Magazine], October 2013, 8–9. The issue can be read (in Hungarian) on the internet: [https://nemzetiszinhas.hu/uploads/files/folyoirat/nm\\_1\\_2.pdf](https://nemzetiszinhas.hu/uploads/files/folyoirat/nm_1_2.pdf), accessed 28 August 2020.



B. Shaw, in his own skeptic style, showed us an infinitely profane and human Joan, the Girl's character was devoid of every mythical aspect that she had collected throughout the centuries [...], while at the end of the play, Claudel and Honegger's heroine goes to heaven."<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that this review incorrectly draws conclusions about both Shaw's and Claudel-Honegger's Joan-portrayal, solely based on the two plays' different approaches. Shaw's work definitely depicts a natural, naïve, and innocent, yet determined and layered Joan, although this depiction cannot in any way be called either "religious" or "profane," especially as the drama gives a new perspective of Saint Joan's connection with sacrality: on a textual level, the work refers to the bishop of Beauvais' (Cauchon's) attempts at condemning Joan of Arc, as he recognizes signs of an antitype of "Protestantism" in the pious girl, as she contacts God based on her impulses, without the involvement of a priest.<sup>17</sup> So Vidnyánszky did not distance himself and his play from Shaw's play but rather from the National Theater's approach in the earlier Alföldi version. He wanted to present to Budapest theatergoers a Joan that embodied both the saint and the demotic-national heroine. When approaching the topic on a literary or a theatrical level it is generally important to decide whether each particular author wants to interpret Joan of Arc's sacrifice within a sacral setting or not: Claudel chose the former, so he and Honegger distanced themselves from the approach that demystifies the figure of Saint Joan, similarly to Voltaire and Anatole France in their treatments of the theme.<sup>18</sup>

Like Claudel, Vidnyánszky knew the importance of emphasizing the presence of the supernatural and miraculous in the Saint Joan story — that the Maid of Orléans acted through divine inspiration via Archangel Michael, Saint Katherine, and Saint Margaret — and this principle shows in the complex symbol system of his staging of *Joan of Arc at the Stake*. However, in order to fully understand the play's complex theatrical language, and through this its connection to the issues of rite, the impacts that shaped the author's mindset and worldview (leading up to his *Joan* premiere as well) need to be examined.<sup>19</sup>

Attila Vidnyánszky graduated as a Hungarian History teacher in Ungvár, after which he graduated as a theatrical director in the Kiev National I. K.

<sup>16</sup> Rechtenwald: Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> George Bernard Shaw: Szent Johanna [Saint Joan], trans. Géza Ottlik, in *XX. Századi angol drámák* [Twentieth-Century British Drama], Budapest, Európa, 1985, 419.

<sup>18</sup> Released in Hungarian, the comprehensive Claudel volume includes a study by Albert Gyergyai, finding an opposition between Anatole France's and Claudel's art from a literary historical point of view, as while — so he says — the former is the most famous representative of the "macerated French prose of the Eighteenth century," the latter is the exact opposite due to his linguistic richness and complexity. Albert Gyergyai: Paul Claudel, in Andor Gúthy (ed.): *Válogatás Paul Claudel műveiből* [Selection of Paul Claudel's works], Budapest, Szent István Társulat, 1982, 13.

<sup>19</sup> "Vidnyánszky's world concept and habitus is a pack of experiences based on his minority situation, Ukrainian-Russian theatrical training, Slavic knowledge-system, stronger self-identity



Karpenko-Kary Theater, Cinema, and Television University. The early, fruitful years he spent in Kiev had a great impact on his later life, as he did not only get to know the Ukrainian and Russian theater, he also became acquainted with the major Russian classics (Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Chekhov) and with the works of the Polish innovators, representing the newest theatrical aspirations: Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor, and Włodzimierz Staniewski. Besides all this, as a don in Kiev he had the unique opportunity to start up two fully Hungarian acting classes, with students who later became members of his drama group in Beregszász.<sup>20</sup>

Vidnyánszky always wanted to do Hungarian theater, “especially exploring the possibilities for a renewal of the Hungarian theatrical language, [...] the inclusion and further shaping of the important Slavic theater traditions and achievements, together with the peculiar Hungarian mentality created a special and unique theatrical language.”<sup>21</sup> This aim, the “new, universally accepted Hungarian theatrical language” could only come into existence from the synthesis of Hungarian and foreign traditions, according to Vidnyánszky,<sup>22</sup> and he was already trying to get this concept to work while he was working in Beregszász, at the Illyés Gyula Hungarian National Theater.<sup>23</sup> His biggest, even internationally acclaimed, premiere during his years in Beregszász, was Mihály Csokonai Vitéz’s play *Dorottya* which was performed in Hungarian in the third Theatre Olympics in 2001, in Moscow, and was a huge success. Despite the language barrier, Vidnyánszky’s theater still received a great reception and “after the show, the praising crowd was talking about how the ancient powers of theater had torn down the barriers of language and culture, there and then the Hungarian theater won the heart of the Russian audience.”<sup>24</sup> Comparing this favorable criticism in 2001 with Vidnyánszky’s views on theatrical aesthetics, that he expressed in relation to the premiere of *Joan of Arc at the Stake* in 2013, his authorial concepts become as crystal clear as ever:

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as a Hungarian, and Christianity.” Gábor Turi: Költészet a színpadon. A Vidnyánszky-korszak mérlege. [Poetry on Stage. An account of the Vidnyánszky era], *Hitel*, Vol. 28, August 2015, 112.

<sup>20</sup> András Kozma: Szláv alkotók a Csokonai Színházban. Előzmények [Slavic authors in the Csokonai Theater. Preludes], in István Kornya (ed.): *A költői színház. Hét évad a Csokonai Színházban: 2006–2013*. [The Poetic theater. Seven seasons in the Csokonai Theater: 2006–2013], Debrecen, Csokonai Színház, 2013, 70.

<sup>21</sup> Kozma: *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Edit Kulcsár: Purcărete, a színpad mágusa. Egy román színházi mester a debreceni Csokonai Színházban. [Purcărete, magus of the theater. A Romanian master of theaters in the Csokonai Theater, Debrecen], in István Kornya (ed.): *A költői színház*, 74.

<sup>23</sup> Kulcsár: *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Kozma: *Ibid.*

It is a frequent question: how does an oratorio fit into the repertoire of a fundamentally lyrical theater, like the National Theater? I would like to answer this question using two perspectives.

Our aim is the elimination of the consciously drawn borders between theatrical genres. So, the free metaphors, independent from certain artistic categories, the coequal motives and gestures can associate with each other, while the often-disputed story is reborn in the accordance of thoughts, scenery, and musicality. Claudel and Honegger's creation is not only music — although it is presentable as a musical composition, a concert — it is THEATER.

On the other hand what bothers me and what I am thinking about is that poetic texts often become lyricized and get to stage without any music. I have already been experimenting with the usage of a new method for bringing plays and shows to the stage: combining the musicality and the idea. The Joan piece initially includes this: the beautiful synthesis of the work of a poet and a composer. Here I found everything that I myself tried to make work in my own stagings: trying to have a dialogue with music, constructing some scenes with the intention to correlate with the music, the scenery, the movements, the gestures, and the words.<sup>25</sup>

Meanwhile, Vidnyánszky tries to break down all barriers between the theatrical genres, also working on using different artforms' components together, in order to collect them all to enrich the theater's tools and skill sets. As such, he created a piece of Gesamtkunstwerk, in which the scenery does not only serve a decorative purpose, it has become an independent, semiotic component, one that opens the gates for the theatrical arts. The director's Gesamtkunstwerk-esque intentions are tightly related to poetic and total theater: this director typology characterizes its theatrical language. As with Claudel and Honegger's piece, Vidnyánszky's shows are characterized by the basic criteria of the poetic theater: the consistent presence of music, the choir, the oratorio form, the word as an acoustic element in a prosaic environment, the usage of metaphors, the visionary, ballad-like storytelling, and above all: the sacral motives and the liturgical elements. This orientation of the director becomes obvious, considering the fact that Gesamtkunstwerk pieces had already been created for strengthening religious bonds and religious identity. In order to have even more effect on the audience they were incorporated in the play itself.

<sup>25</sup> Vidnyánszky: *Ibid.*, 9. A few years earlier, in 2007, Edmond Rostand's drama *L'Aiglon* was premiered in Debrecen, Vidnyánszky talked about his views on the Gesamtkunstwerk [total work of art]: "I have always been studying just how poetry can become theater, and *vice versa*, how music can become a part of a theater performance's structure, how a gesture can be on the same level as a word and how the music of the space, [music of] the text, and the connection of musicality to music can form a new synthesis, that is only possible in a theater." *Előadásvilágok [Worlds of Performances]: 'L'Aiglon,'* in István Kornya (ed.): *A költői színház [The poetic theater]*, 42.



The exceptionally complex theatrical language of the poetic theater that Vidnyánszky had been trying to realize in Beregszász and later in Debrecen and Budapest, requires significant abstraction on the part of the audience. Vidnyánszky's authorial career has come a long way: from the directorial position of the — minority positioned — Illyés Gyula Hungarian National Theater to being the executive of the National Theater in Budapest. Between these two positions, he also headed up the Csokonai Theater in Debrecen, and for a shorter period of time he was the main director of the Hungarian National Opera. Although he had been working on the shaping of a unique Hungarian theatrical language from the early years of his career, the planning of the repertoire and the issue of staying in touch with the audience had led to discrete difficulties in all three cases (Beregszász, Debrecen, and Budapest) as the audience can be addressed quite differently in a Hungarian minority theater, in a rural Hungarian theater, and differently again at the National Theater in the capital city. At the same time, Vidnyánszky paid a lot of attention to giving the audience more than simple entertainment, while taking care of the national theatrical status — unlike other for-profit theaters that wanted to appeal to the general taste.<sup>26</sup> He made it his own business to educate the audience — while maintaining conventions — and he was also willing to go through troubled times in order to spread the importance of culture. While working in Debrecen from 2006, he had already faced the problem of alienating sections of audiences through his idiosyncratic theatrical language.

This theatrical language inherited from Debrecen sheds light on the circumstances and hardships of the premiere of *Joan of Arc at the Stake*, as it was Vidnyánszky's second direction on the stage of the National Theatre (in Budapest) as the newly elected director. The Joan piece was a pioneer of sorts of the still — at least in this form — unknown theatrical language of the executive director/art director in the capital. Staging *Joan of Arc at the Stake* as a second premiere was as brave an attempt as the aspiration of renewal in Debrecen, especially when taking into account the receptibility of an oratory. But what could Vidnyánszky have meant by transcending the function of entertainment

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Attila Vidnyánszky's views on theater aesthetics on pages 157, 159–161. Here, he also draws attention to the connection of theater, rite, and tradition and to the power that rite and the ritual theater had on the innovative pursuit of the great theater makers in the twentieth century. Even though he did not include him on his list, it is evidential that there is a connection between him and Richard Schechner (a father of performance art) through the entertainment versus usefulness-effectiveness dichotomy in question. The inherently sacral nature of theater and the connection of these two components, as well as its artificial disconnection, are closely examined by Schechner in his work: Richard Schechner: *A rítustól a színházig – és vissza: a hatékonyság és szórakoztatás kettősségének struktúrája és folyamata*, in János Regös (ed.): *A performansz. A színházi előadás elméletéről 1970–1976*, Budapest, Múzsák Közművelődési Kiadó, 1984, 91–138.



in connection with an oratory about Joan of Arc? To understand this, it might be enough to cite a part from his application for the role of director in Debrecen, titled *Community of Art*:

Theater, one of human culture's most ancient forms of expression, is based on rite and tradition... According to the most influential reformers of twentieth-century theater (including Craig, Meyerhold, Artaud, Grotowski, Brook, Kantor, Mnouchkine, Wilson, Vasziliev, Suzuki etc.), modern times must transcend the function of entertainment of civil theater and must create a sacral space for coming times. On one side a world that is old, rich in values, close to our hearts, very human, but somehow very archaic and maybe non-viable exists, and opposite it is a much colder, sometimes cynical, almost inhuman, but elegant and very viable new order, and these two are fighting irreconcilably. In this tragic situation, the only potential answer to NO — the theater of denial — is a positive message, the theater of YES...<sup>27</sup>

Apart from the usual characteristics of Vidnyánszky's poetical, total theater such as spectacular visuals, complex use of metaphors, and plenty of simultaneous action onstage, Honegger's expressionist music might have been challenging for the audience that is not used to that style and normally attends concerts rather than theater.<sup>28</sup> This might raise a question regarding the choice of venue for the play, as Vidnyánszky, who is an experienced operetta and musical director — see his successful operas *The Power of Fate*, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, and *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*, in Debrecen — could have, as an opera director, premiered it in the Opera House or in the Erkel Theater. It is necessary to refer to Vidnyánszky's orientation toward the synthesis of arts and his statement about consciously trying to eliminate the borders between the genres of theater. Instead of a staged, music-oriented performance,

<sup>27</sup> Citing the excerpt from his directorial application: Ibid., 110–111. Similarly, Vidnyánszky expressed strong opposition to the prevailing approach in theater, regarding particularly the play *Joan of Arc at the Stake*: "Attila Vidnyánszky has emphasized several times already that he wishes to establish the 'theater of hope' on the banks of the Danube, opposing the former 'theater based on provocation.' Paul Claudel and Arthur Honegger's oratory titled *Joan of Arc at the Stake* was an excellent choice for this work. [...] The script of Claudel and the music of Honegger raise the character of Joan to sacral heights again. Attila Vidnyánszky, using lyric words and classical music, made G. B. Shaw's *Joan of Arc* obsolete as a part of the theater's repertoire, which the new director might have considered too profane." Rechtenwald: Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> "Powerful, sometimes bombastic series of visions can be seen on the stage, as if a river of paintings was flowing [...] in front of our eyes, as if we were haunted by a surreal dream, from which waking up is impossible. Vidnyánszky bombards our senses [...] there is no opera house on Earth that would not be envious of these visuals, in which Vidnyánszky's constant colleague, Olexandr Bilozub plays a huge part. The musicians in the elevated orchestra pit are important components of the show, all of them can be seen, their faces lit by small lamps, intensely concentrated on their challenging task." Gábor Bóta: *Erődemonstráció a máglyán* [Demonstration of Power at the Stake], [https://nepszava.hu/1004483\\_erodemonstracio-a-maglyan](https://nepszava.hu/1004483_erodemonstracio-a-maglyan), accessed 28 August 2020.

he wanted to create a synthesis of arts based in a sacral space, in which every element is equal in every aspect and which can, at the same time, widen the horizons of the audiences who are generally used to prose-based plays.

Aside from the artistic angle, the intention to be more than simply entertaining is highlighted when considering the premiere of *Joan of Arc at the Stake* at the National Theater, the reason being Attila Vidnyánszky's push for a ritual theater. As already established, the staging that created the liminal dimensions defined by Fischer-Lichte, together with the usage of the other art-forms, "caused" the possibility for the crossing of a border and the importance of celebrational community in theater — and an identity-creator role is also well articulated.<sup>29</sup> Fischer-Lichte also said that one of the main intentions of the ritual theater is easier to understand by using the definition of festivity: the drawing-away from the usual, accustomed-to, everyday life, thereof the transubstantiation of the community within the transformative dimension that is inseparable from liminality.<sup>30</sup>

This second dimension strongly articulates the need of becoming a community and developing an identity for a community, which is one of the central questions of *Joan of Arc at the Stake*, particularly if we consider Claudel and Honegger's "authorial intentions" — mentioned in the introduction — by which the possibility of unity and reconciliation is shown through the figure of Saint Joan in the midst of the divergent political conflicts of the 1930s.

The figure of Joan of Arc approached by ritual theater can be evidential because of this so-called cathartic dimension, since its two features are the depiction of violence and sacrifice. These can be seen as the trademarks of the dramatized Joan of Arc story adaptations.<sup>31</sup> Foreshadowing the self-sacrifice of Joan of Arc to come, the staging highlighted the martyr's death with the usage of suggestive spatial metaphors to show the importance of the survival of the community. Of all these, the most conspicuous might be the crossing projection of the sword and the cross: at one point in the performance, the actress playing Saint Joan forms a cross, signaling that the Maid of Orléans is identifying with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.<sup>32</sup> At the other end of the stage, a big, human-sized white sword emerges, in the clothes of Jeanne d'Arc, and

<sup>29</sup> "The special ritual-like form of the festivity and the theater is the viewer's perception of [...] the four dimensions and the way they perceive it. [...] This ritual-nature is powered by the festivity's and the theater's strong symbiotic bond, which had already been present in the antique Greek culture and the medieval European culture." Erika Fischer-Lichte: *Színház és rítus* [Theater and Ritual], trans. Gabriella Kiss, *Theatron*, 2007/1–2, 1–13, 5. Looking at the former statement, *Joan of Arc at the Stake* offers so many more possibilities for maintaining the point of view of ritual theater, if we are looking at the mystery-play-like, visionary, and balladist features coming from Claudel's work.

<sup>30</sup> Fischer-Lichte: *Színház és rítus*, 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Pethő: *Johanna, a szent.*



the allusions of the heroine become clear: the sword symbolizes the power acquired by God, which helps Joan to retrieve France for France; under traditional circumstances, though, it would be a symbol of war and violence. Joan's last sentences exemplify the duality of the power of self-sacrifice and the power of community,<sup>33</sup> as does the closing scene: "It is a real catharsis as Joan — played by Kátya Tompos — simply walks along the edge of the orchestra pit in her torn white clothes, as if she is walking on the border of damnation and salvation, spreading the importance and power of love through her glowing eyes. Joan, the 'chosen virgin's' mystic, clear figure is the message herself: there is hope. There is love."<sup>34</sup> Attila Vidnyánszky broadened the figure of Saint Joan with this naïve but determined gesture into a universal symbol, quoting Pierre Nora, famous French historian of the twentieth century, the site of memory [*lieu de mémoire*] of the converging power for the French nation.<sup>35</sup> In doing so he made the act of visiting theaters into a celebration, while paying close attention to the ritual theater's liminal, transformative, and cathartic dimensions, giving the theaters their [inherently] sacral functions back.

## APPENDIX

Attila Vidnyánszky talked about the difficulties and the circumstances of working in the Csokonai Theater in Debrecen.

Excerpts from an interview with István Kornya, editor-in-chief of *Nemzeti Magazin*, the magazine of the National Theatre:

ISTVÁN KORNYA: Working in a stone theater is a very special 'way of life': new plays have to be premiered all the time, a rehearsal season lasts for only six weeks, the repertoire has to always offer something new, [...] The lifestyle of the drama group in Beregszász is the exact opposite of this practice. [...] You still decided to do it. [...] Why?

ATTILA VIDNYÁNSZKY: Because it has been clear to me for quite some time, then and now, that theaters offer a lot more than solely aesthetical pleasure. In relation to the theater, the group, and the community this thing has become something like a service and duty, and this is what became important for me over the pure aesthetical realm. The revelation came in Beregszász, in '97. The premiere of the play called *Murder in the Cathedral* took place in the church

<sup>33</sup> "Saint Michael himself gave me this sword, this giant, shining sword. It is not called Hatred — it is called: Love." Vidnyánszky: *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Rechtenwald: *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Pierre Nora: *Entre Mémoire et Histoire. La problématique des lieux*, in P. Nora (ed.): *Les lieux de mémoire – I. La République*, Paris, Gallimard, 1984; [Emlékezet és történelem között. A helyek problematikája], trans. Zsolt K. Horváth, <http://epa.oszk.hu/00800/00861/00012/99-3-10.html>, accessed 28 August 2020.



of Nagyszőlős. When the actor playing Thomas Becket, Trill [Zsolt] started praying, I was shocked to see that the audience sitting there had been praying with him, and when he said the words: 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen!', the audience made the sign of the cross and bowed their heads. That was such a cathartic experience I have only felt a few times in my life.

There and then I realized that the stuck-up elitist approach to the world we lived and live in is just so dumb and narrow-minded. Back then Vasiliev was my role model, with his theater in Moscow. They had been working like monks in a monastery, opening their doors only ever so seldom. [...] When the show ended, their community closed again, [...] I had had these thoughts and emotions of this spastic huffiness and I obviously did not take into account that I cannot do the same things in a small minority community with 150.000 people as Vasiliev could in a big city of 10 million people. [...]

ISTVÁN KORNIA: What does it mean for Debrecen?

ATTILA VIDNYÁNSZKY: Looking at the substantial cultural decay surrounding us, I think it is a lot more important to serve a hundred thousand spectators than to walk untrodden paths. I feel like many hundreds of thousands of people cannot cope with the conflicts of their own lives. If a theater, which deals with these questions, can only address a few thousand individuals then what happens to the rest?

ISTVÁN KORNIA: The start was very strong in the autumn of 2006 at the Jel Festival. One of the greatest figures of world theater, Josef Nadj, was the partner-director of Europe's most prestigious festival, the Festival d'Avignon, in the summer of that year. After this he celebrated the twentieth anniversary of his drama group in Debrecen.

ATTILA VIDNYÁNSZKY: We wanted to make a statement of intent in Debrecen. That is why we invited Jóska Nadj, to show the direction the Csokonai Theater wanted to take. He is the author who could make a modern theater with Hungarian-Kanizsai roots well known in the whole world. We wanted to signal that we bring the best of the best here. As we had very few performers in the beginning, we packed the show with the plays from Beregszász that had already been played in festivals as well. [...]

ISTVÁN KORNIA: When did you feel like you got the audience in Debrecen?

ATTILA VIDNYÁNSZKY: In the case of the *Úri muri* I could already very confidently feel that we have a community that does not only follow through the three-and-a-half-hour-long show, but something happens with, or beneath them, something very important. [...] I have already quoted Stanislavski, who

said that making a show is like forging an alliance. This is what I have been feeling during the showing of *Úri muri*. The connection between the actors and the audience. [...]

Having something new, strange, accepted is a long process. [...] Encouraging signs were present during the second season. The number of people with season tickets were slowly but steadily increasing. Strangely enough, the first real turnabout happened in the world of the opera. [...]

ISTVÁN KORNYA: Looking back at these data justifies your initial hopes, but supposedly the community was not easy to convince.

ATTILA VIDNYÁNSZKY: I would not say that my spirits sank, but I had such an anxiety within myself, when in the first year [...] the number of people with season tickets [...] decreased by 50%. There was a possibility that the decrease might continue. But it did not. Meanwhile we also made some concessions to our spectators with rather traditional tastes.

ISTVÁN KORNYA: Can we say that the audience changed quite fast?

ATTILA VIDNYÁNSZKY: Exactly two thirds of it changed. I was sad about the people we lost, but at the same time we noticed that more people who were interested in our conception started coming to the theater, specifically. This proves that there is a wide margin in the audience in rural towns who expect more from theater than mere entertainment.”<sup>36</sup>

*Translation: Milán Szabó and Eszter Őri*

<sup>36</sup> *Pátosz, nagyság, költőiség. Vidnyánszky Attila a Csokonai Színház hét évadjáról (Kornya István interjúja)* [Pathos, greatness, and poetry. Vidnyánszky Attila on the seven seasons of the Csokonai Theater (Interview by István Kornya)], in Kornya: *A költői színház*, 13–16. Gábor Turi’s connection of Vidnyánszky’s approach to the synthesis of arts to the change in the audience: “The performances that can be emblematically connected to him [...] are the embodiments of the total understanding of theater, in which words, sounds, noises, movement, gestures, dancing, visuals, substance, and music are simultaneously and equivalently on stage. The attention-dividing, simultaneous events onstage, the verbal and audiovisual impulses move the act of reception from the territory of concepts to the territory of the senses, which proves to be a challenge to the audiences used to realist, psychological, linear, script-based theater.

This was apparent in the changes in box-office numbers. The aspiration of art theater and the intensive, attention-demanding, complexly worded plays modified the composition of the audiences in an extraordinary way after the change in directors. Two thirds of season ticket holders looking for relaxation and entertainment in the theater left, and their space was taken up by more open, generally younger intellectuals, looking for values.” Gábor Turi: *Poetry on Stage. An account of the Vidnyánszky era, Hitel*, Vol. 28, August 2015, 117–118.

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## TRANSFORMATION RITUALS IN THE PERFORMANCES OF JUDIT KELE

KARINA KOPPÁNY

*Judit Kele is a Hungarian artist who decided to move to France in the 1980s. Unable to do so without a visa, she posted an advertisement in a French newspaper, Libération, in which she offered her hand to any French man, in return for a visa. Troubles arose not only because she was already married in her home country, but also because of the suspicion her attempt raised in immigration offices. For Kele it was not just a marriage, rather a performance: she had men participating in an auction, where she was bidden for. As Arnold van Gennep's "The Rites of Passage" suggests, this sort of auction and marriage can be considered as a transitional rite. In my paper, I am going to talk about her marriage and how living as a piece of art resulted in identity disorders. This performance was the second sequence of the series "I am a Work of Art", which began in the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest in 1979.*

"Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh."<sup>1</sup>

Mt 19:6.

It is 1980 when Judit Kele, a Hungarian artist, realises that she cannot remain in Hungary. Frustrated with the status of women in Post-Cold War Eastern-Europe, she wants to move abroad and will do all it takes to reach her goal. She decides to seek a better life in France. Moving to France,<sup>2</sup> however, proved even harder than she had expected, as in the 1980s it was not as straightforward a move to make as it is nowadays, to settle in another European country as a foreigner. She also needed something else: a French husband! In this chapter, I will therefore elaborate on the circumstances of her unconventional wedding.

Judit Kele started her performance series *I am a Work of Art* in 1979. For the first sequence she sat in the space of a loaned out El Greco painting at the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest as an installation. She also traveled abroad with several artworks and performances. In Paris, at Studio Théâtre d'en Face,

<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Mt 19,6. <https://www.lds.org/scriptures/nt/matt/19?lang=eng>

<sup>2</sup> Beata Hock: *Moving across Europe: Three Case Studies on Sex-Appeal*, in Katarzyna Kosmala (ed.): *Sexing the Border: Gender, Art and New Media in Central and Eastern Europe*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014, 33.



she presented *Időtapéta*.<sup>3</sup> Georges Boudaille, a French Art critic, historian, and journalist, saw the performance and was so impressed by it that he invited Kele to feature in the Biennale de Paris. After she had showed him her previous work, he asked her to reproduce *I am a Work of Art* and exhibit herself again. Kele saw his invitation as a great opportunity to be able to remain in France. She decided that she was not going to just re-perform and exhibit herself, but also *sell* herself. In order to achieve this, she placed an ad in a French newspaper, *Libération*, (“Young and successful Eastern European female artist seeks gentleman for marriage. This marriage would enable her to move around freely and accompany her exhibitions in the West.”)<sup>4</sup> She was going to auction herself off as an art object. She personally selected the men who could bid for her from amongst those who replied to her ad. Later on, the “collector” and the “art piece” did indeed marry, and this allowed Kele to stay in France.

In her performances, Kele relied on three specific tropes: the power of female seduction, the female body, and marriage as an institution.<sup>5</sup> According to Jacques Lacan’s theory, the functional body “must be strictly separated from the imaginary body scheme of the mirror stage.”<sup>6</sup> This “separation between *body* and *symbolic language* is a bridgeless difference, and key to rethinking the relationship of the female body and the female libido.”<sup>7</sup> Feminist writers usually take issue with the theatrical representation of the female. In it they analyse not only the relationship between theatrical language and the body, but also the feminist concepts within the dramaturgy and the evolution of feminist characters in theater. In a performance without text the focus is still on the

<sup>3</sup> “*Időtapéta* is actually a performance combined with a film screening. The film was made by Judit Kele’s friends from the University of Theater and Film Arts in Budapest. On screen, Kele is doing the butterfly stroke in a pool. For her it means freedom. When she is underwater she talks, but nobody hears. In the performance, while the film is playing on screen, Kele is in front of the audience. When, in the movie, her head is out of the water, an assistant in the performance lifts her head up from a bowl. Then when she is underwater in the movie, the assistant pushes her head down into the bowl full of water, in time with the rhythm of the film. While this is happening, she also wants to talk to the audience, but she cannot because she also needs to breathe. In the performance in Hungary, the person in the role of the helper was Miklós Erdély. In the course of the production run, his *part* was taken by several people who Kele called “godfathers.” In the performance in the Théâtre d’en Face, the godfather was so nervous that, without realizing, he accidentally hit Kele’s head on the bowl. Her dripping blood made the water red. She was not aware that this was happening, the only thing she perceived was that the audience was stock still, and that the photographer was no longer taking pictures. This was the very performance that Boudaille saw, and which got her invited to the Biennale.” Hedvig Turai: Beszélgetés egy műalkotással. *Balkon*. 2011/5, 15, [https://issuu.com/elntfree/docs/balkon\\_2011\\_05/17](https://issuu.com/elntfree/docs/balkon_2011_05/17) accessed 28 August 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Turai: *Balkon*.

<sup>5</sup> Hock: *Moving across Europe*, 33.

<sup>6</sup> [szigorúan el kell különíteni a tükörstádium képzetes testsémájától.] Gabriella Schuller: *Tükkörképrombolók* Veszprém, Pannon Egyetem Kiadó, 2006, 9.

<sup>7</sup> [test és a szimbolikus nyelv közötti elkülönülés áthidalhatatlan, a női írás részint ezt a viszonyt kívánja újragondolni, a női test és női libidó kapcsán.] Schuller: *Ibid*.

female body. Although there are no explicit texts here, the role of the female body is decisive in both cases. Referencing Michel Foucault's *sexuality* concept Judith Butler defines "gendered society as the repetition of the performative expressions."<sup>8</sup> The gendered society can be interpreted as a "script" that is born as a "realization", in which "the body is not a passive, neutral recipient," completed by the gendered society itself, nor is it one that can exist without it or be separated from it. They do not exist without each other, because "the body embodies the gendered society." Among other things, it is the cause of "gendered society's category" being under political leverage and the reason why "duality and uniformity is forced on bodies." This uses sexuality as a political device to make procreation the main goal.<sup>9</sup> According to the psychoanalyst feminist's interpretation, theatrical representation is entirely *male-centered*. They believe that the female body is only present on stage as a male support, which, "connoting castration in the visual field," forces the female gender into a dependant position. Feminist critics see this, optimistically, as a transformable field in the cultural sphere, that can be changed for the better, however Lacan and Freud document this as a finalized situation in which modification is not possible.<sup>10</sup> Kele "appropriated the institution of marriage as an artistic strategy and a means of social mobility with different connotations and subtext"<sup>11</sup> and used it in her body-centered performance.

Quoting Walter Benjamin in her thesis for a doctor's degree Gabriella Schuller writes that in certain theatrical performances the actresses' bodies have an auratic aspect. This sexual seduction differentiates between male and female shapes. With modernisation the aura changes, it loses its old power. Some feminist theater productions "temporalize" the viewer perception, thereby changing the passive nature of the female body's aura; it will not then be subjected to consumer culture and audience enjoyment, but will become the mainstay of criticism of the gendered society.<sup>12</sup>

The profane and the sacred world are so incompatible that it takes a ritual ceremony to cross over from one to another.<sup>13</sup> The institution of marriage is one of the seven holy sacraments, which happens with God's blessing. The initiating parties move from one particular social situation to another, articulates

<sup>8</sup> Judith Butler: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York, Routledge, 1990, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler: Esetleges alapok: a feminizmus és a "posztmodern" kérdés, in Márta Csabai – Ferenc Erős (eds.): *Freud titokzatos tárgya. Pszichoanalízis és női sexualitás*, Új Mandátum, Budapest, 1997, 271.

<sup>10</sup> Gabriella Schuller: *Tükörképrombolók. A tekintet eltérése a poszt/feminista színházban és performanszokban*, <https://pea.lib.pte.hu/bitstream/handle/pea/14771/schuller-gabriella-tesis-hun-2005.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Hock: 2014, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Schuller: *Poszt/feminista színházban*.

<sup>13</sup> Arnold van Gennep: *The Rites of Passage*. Budapest, L'Harmattan, 2007, 41.



Arnold van Gennep in *The Rites of Passage*. An individual's life is constantly going through transitional rituals, from birth, through his or her "social puberty," not just marriage, but becoming a parent, moving up the social hierarchy, and death are all kinds of rituals. These ongoing transformations occur as a consequence of "influences and counter-effects between the profane and the sacred world," which must be closely monitored so as not to cause harm to general society, as these events interact with both nature and the universe. In order to maintain balance, it is important to associate rituals related to cosmic transitions with human transitional ceremonies.<sup>14</sup> Every marriage changes the social order, by the fact that when two people connect their lives it not only affects their existence, but also other social elements. This upsets the balance, which is not so noticeable in big cities, but more so in small villages.<sup>15</sup> Judit Kele's first intention with the auction was to sell herself as an exhibited work of art, to get a pay check and to take off. "I wanted it to end here," Kele told Turai in an interview in 2011. At this point, it wasn't really about a real marriage on her part. Taking into account the social avalanche that was set in motion, Kele could — at least, temporarily — expect the cosmic balance to be disturbed, given that it was the result of an unconventional advertisement, upsetting the social norm, but she didn't think at the time that it would have an impact on the social balance.

Judit Kele's ad appears as a theatrical element, a kind of written unit that becomes an act as soon as anyone responds to it.<sup>16</sup> The *Libération*<sup>17</sup> ad was published as follows:

Young and successful Eastern European female artist seeks a gentleman for marriage. This marriage would enable her to freely move around and accompany her exhibitions in the West.  
In exchange, accommodation in her home country and local art contacts are offered. Respond to the following address...  
Meetings possible after the 10<sup>th</sup> of July.<sup>18</sup>

In her 2011 interview with Turai, the artist recalls the ad as something that was hard to formulate. She had to be careful, on the one hand, because the target audience was from a culture completely foreign to her, and she had to choose her words carefully, as she could not use the word "buy" because it would legally constitute human trafficking, even if she was the one attempting

<sup>14</sup> Gennep: *Rites of Passage*, 42.

<sup>15</sup> Gennep: *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>16</sup> Turai: *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Libération*, known as *Libé*, is a French newspaper, founded by Jean-Paul Sartre and Serge July in 1973, in Paris, to give the opportunity to the May 1968 movements to have a voice and spread their message.

<sup>18</sup> Hock: *Ibid.*, 37.



to sell herself, and this is severely punishable by law. Thus, the marriage announcement took on a political hue because Kele wanted more than anything to be convincing, as if it were real. “And it was this reality that became risky, projecting her into the real unknown world, among unknown people.” And aside from certain cultures, it is just not customary to marry absolute strangers or sell yourself to someone. Then, additionally, when the encounters with the so-called candidates took place, would it be possible to tell them what this was really about: “I will not marry you, but come and buy me.”<sup>19</sup> By doing so, she was, in practice, excluding the fertilizing and protective rituals of marriage, since she did not intend to properly marry the chosen applicant, but — instead — to sacrifice herself on the altar of art.<sup>20</sup> Not only did Kele receive a response from candidates to the advertisement, but many people also expressed their sympathy for the artist:

Marriage can be about a lot of things, but this one would be a marriage of convenience above all, securing [your] liberty.

I very much understand your problem.

I am 33 and ready to get involved in a marriage of convenience with you. This formality is without consequences and obligations for me, and if it enables me to get acquainted with new people, that is satisfactory. I give my consent on the condition that I will be charged with no extra expenses on account of this unselfish gesture.

Please, accept my application, but it might cause problems if you have a high income. Besides, a potential divorce has legal consequences in case one of the two parties demands their freedom back.<sup>21</sup>

If we take van Gennep’s interpretation, we can define the auction as a kind of specific proposal. According to him, the “mergence” is a “union” in a “socially recognized way,” preceded by a “frontier stage,” an engagement that in many cultures is considered a sovereign event from the institution of marriage itself, with its own distinct, preliminary, and border (frontier) rituals and traditions.<sup>22</sup>

A woman proposing to a man is already a really modern action but done in this manner it really makes it extraordinary. Kele, moreover, was already married at the time, but her partner was supportive of her and her art. So the proposal happened as a kind of auction. On September 27, 1980, Judit Kele, who is about to get married, sits on a podium in the exhibition hall of the

<sup>19</sup> Turai: *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Gennep: *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>21</sup> Hock: *Ibid.*, 39–40.

<sup>22</sup> Gennep: *Ibid.*, 127.

Musée d'Art Moderne. The auctioneer is holding his gavel (hammer) and the potential buyers' hopes are high. It was important for the creator of the performance not to present this event as a theatrical performance, but exactly as a real auction — just with an out-of-the-ordinary item to bid for. The price someone was willing to pay for Kele reached 3250 Swiss francs, which would be worth about one million forints today or 3,250 US dollars.<sup>23</sup> The winner, her “fiancé”, Christian Tamet, was an artist himself, and a member of the Parisian dance world, also a homosexual, meaning he only wanted to *marry* Kele on the altar of art. Accordingly, for Tamet to marry an Eastern European artist was a move that fitted well with the bohemian milieu he belonged to, not to mention the tax reduction he would benefit from by marrying. However, the whole procedure took place in the most profane way possible, as the artist also stated: “I will not marry you, but come and buy me,” and the wedding finally took place near the Octogon in Budapest.<sup>24</sup> Although the *artwork*, Judit Kele, would have liked the conceptualization to end after the auction - and after she was paid for - the narrative didn't stop there. Initially, the symbolic duration of the marriage should have lasted a minute. Judit Kele became the property of the French man, so he had to pay: this is what Kele, Tamet and Boudaille discussed after the auction. However, things started to get complicated because the buyer of the artwork, the artwork being Judit Kele, started to consider what this event really meant. Then the situation became so serious that they felt they had to go through with it and complete it. Furthermore, Kele not only wanted to sell herself for the purpose of moving country or getting married, but she also wanted to know how much she was worth as an artist, and then reevaluate her life in the light of this.<sup>25</sup>

The economic aspect of the marriage was taken into consideration not only by Judit Kele but also by Christian Tamet. The marriage candidate would be entitled to a tax reduction, a marital allowance, and the future bride was interested not only in a visa, but also in the substantial amount of money she had earned for being an artwork. However, in reality, these monetary advantages are not the only benefits within the institution of marriage. When two people connect their lives, it usually brings some kind of return, which is usually reciprocated by both parties, and in this case, the purchase price of the woman was represented by a real sum. This kind of economic element is so significant even in the case of a normal marriage that the ritual that concludes the covenant can only be considered completed when the entire “bridal privilege” has been paid. This is also significant because in some cultures where polygamy is

<sup>23</sup> Agents & Provocateurs, <http://www.agentsandprovocateurs.net/index.php?lang=hu>.

<sup>24</sup> Turai: *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Hock: *Ibid.*, 37.

allowed, marriages are already determined in childhood, so these economic negotiations can take place until the parties reach the age of marriage and actually carry out the life-long bond.<sup>26</sup>

By putting her own body on the market, Judit Kele not only raised the interest of the representatives of the visa system of the time, but also drew attention to the focus on the human body in the thinking of that time, which is still dominant in the life of the theater of today. It is about a series of events in which the importance of the body takes over the significance of the text. This is especially true for the performance genre — even if it is also experienced in some plays — where the omnipresence of the acting body has a strong impact on the audience.<sup>27</sup>

During the so-called proposal made by the woman, the customary, necessary, event-appropriate lines were not uttered, the occasion did not take place in the way that would have been the social norm, as it would not tie in with the auction format in any way. With the wedding, then, an irrevocable change of status occurs, as in any transitional ritual.<sup>28</sup> Contrary to tradition, the man did not go down on bended knee, did not offer a ring to the woman after proposing or exchanging vows, nor did he ask the question with which the whole ritual begins: “Will you marry me?” The exceptional nature of the event is fully reinforced by the fact that the parties preparing to marry each other were strangers, and their purpose was not to get to know each other. If we treat Judit Kele’s two marriages — the one before Tamet and the one with Tamet — as two different realities, the transition was a “light” divorce for her, as she broke her oath with her previous husband for the sake of a new marriage. For many people, divorce rituals unfold in a simple way: all that is needed is for “the wife to leave the marital home,” or it is enough for “the husband to dump the woman.” According to the sources of ethnographic literature, divorce seems to be such an effortless move, but van Gennep thinks that the sources of ethnographic literature only examine the legal and economic side of divorce, overlooking the very serious detrimental psychological and/or spiritual fallout. Just as with marriage, divorce has its own traditions, and in break-ups there can be the same repercussions on the individual and on society as when people make their initial vows.<sup>29</sup>

The news of the auction also reached Hungary, where it was not well regarded, furthermore the artist’s visa had expired, so she would have to leave Paris and go home to hold the wedding ceremony. The new venue was the Octogon wedding hall in Budapest, where the ceremony, too, did not go smoothly.

<sup>26</sup> Gennep: *Ibid.*, 129–130.

<sup>27</sup> Erving Goffman: *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York, Doubleday, 1959, 22.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Schechner: *A performance. Esszék a színházi előadás elméletéről*. trans. János Regős, Budapest, Múzsák, 1989, 104.

<sup>29</sup> Gennep: *Ibid.*, 147.



Tamet arrived in Budapest with his friends and many journalists to marry Judit Kele, the art object. Although she remarked that neither the divorce nor the new marriage were actually real, Tamet was very much into the role and behaved as if Kele really belonged to him.

Only Tamet and Kele and their witnesses were allowed to enter the Octogon wedding hall, and the place was guarded by civilian police officers. Traditionally, the wedding group that appears when the initiating parties get married is made up of several communities, all of whom are involved in the event: first category, the female and male gendered society (such as bridesmaids or groomsmen); second, the spouses' relatives (first and foremost the father of one of the people to be married and the maternal relatives). In the third group, van Gennep classifies kinship, both in a narrow and a broad sense. Special societies (e.g., religious communities) form the fourth category, while the fifth category represents the local group, i.e., in Kele's case, citizens of Terézváros, the district where Octogon is located.<sup>30</sup>

Although there is no drama in a wedding, the plot of the wedding is the customary civil process of a given wedding; of course, the specific text remains, the "I do" part, which must be spoken, but the underlying purpose for which two people connect their lives forever and marry, lies beneath. The pattern, which would show expectations for further events, does not appear in the life of the artist and Tamet together, only on a level of rehearsal. After the marriage became an actual reality and Kele received her French visa, they moved to France in May 1981. Nothing could be undone<sup>31</sup> that is, the parties made an attempt to live together after the wedding.<sup>32</sup>

Kele's mind was irrevocably disturbed by this dual consciousness, of being a work of art and a human being. She began to think oddly about herself, the whole scenario - the way it had changed her life. It is customary for a person's life to change when they go through such a ritual event, marrying, connecting her life with someone else's, even in the most profane sense of the word. Kele recalls disturbed thoughts: "I came to Paris and didn't know who I was. Complete schizophrenia. And after a while, I didn't want to live life as a piece of art in reality anymore."<sup>33</sup> However, this madness in her mind was probably not caused by the betrothal, but rather by the plethora of accelerated events, the abandonment of her previous love, a sudden new bond, and then life as art. In other words, considering that Kele's case was not only a new marriage, a wedding, but also a divorce which provoked several transitional rituals. She developed a kind of identity disorder, she explained in her 2011 interview with Balkon. As Arnold van Gennep writes in *Transitional Rites*, each culture has

<sup>30</sup> Gennep: *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>31</sup> Turai: *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Richard Schechner: *A performance. Esszék a színházi előadás elméletéről*, 67.

<sup>33</sup> Turai: *Ibid.*

its own types of cultural performances that, due to their transitional nature, result in a kind of identity change.<sup>34</sup> On the one hand, she started behaving like an artwork, “had to be fed well” or just “pampered”, and on the other hand, she had to realize that this was no longer a game.

According to Van Gennep’s research, the whole “piece” can be classified as a temporary, direct ritual. These are the kinds of rituals performed for conscious purposes that directly effect and do not require the involvement of an external agent. Transferring the character to a state which, after exiting the ceremony, will be accepted as a new person, the event creates a new person.<sup>35</sup>

In this case, can this performance be considered a religious ritual? William A. Haviland sees religious rituals as a kind of “tool” which humans can use to interact with the sacred. So at the auction, since the event did not include the usual customs, “Will you marry me?” - the utterance of the customary words, a large or family-sized number of guests, something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue... so that this event itself is “religion in action” itself, is not fulfilled.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, at the formally organized Octogon wedding, these were realized, albeit without the conventional traditions, not as a religious rite, but in a much more profane sense.

However, as it turned out and was experienced, this adventure was not built to last beyond the initial phase. They soon realized that this would only work as a project within the framework of an artistic performance, as the wife and (both) husbands would soon not be satisfied with the circumstances. The wild marriage came unstuck even before the life contract expired. As the marital contract ended sooner than the date in the agreement, Judit Kele had to repay the remaining amount of the purchase price to Christian Tamet.<sup>37</sup>

To bring a close to the whole *artwork-being* experience, Judit Kele created another performance piece in 1985, which was called *Csókolom*,<sup>38</sup> which refers to saying goodbye as such. An end to the past which did not turn out as expected. It is the processing of (a) failure. Although the marriage was dissolved and to this day Judit Kele has still not moved back to Hungary, in 2009, she reflected on her experience. She was invited by *Agents and Provocateurs*<sup>39</sup> to partake in

<sup>34</sup> Andrea György: *Színházteremtés, Textualitás és teatralitás feszültségében*. ELTE Doktori disszertáció, Budapest, 2007, 44–45, <http://doktori.btk.elte.hu/phil/gyorgyandrea/diss.pdf>, accessed 28 August 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Gennep: *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>36</sup> Lajos Boglár – Richárd Papp: *A tükör két oldala, Bevezetés a kulturális antropológiába*, Budapest, Nyitott Könyvműhely, 2008, 117.

<sup>37</sup> *Agents & Provocateurs*: *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Csókolom*, performance Roberto Martinez took part in, Music: Katja Saariaho, Nouvelle Biennale de Paris, Théâtre de la Villette (Paris, France), 1985, [https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kele\\_Judit](https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kele_Judit), accessed 28 August 2020.

<sup>39</sup> *Agents & Provocateurs* is an art project, the name of which is borrowed from Miklós Erdély. The project works together with Hungarian and foreign artists. It involves not only research, but also exhibitions and workshops. They have a film program, too, and also an archive of

their project and series of events whence she recorded a video of the same title (*I am a Work of Art*), in which she answered questions about the performance-event of thirty years before.<sup>40</sup> The short film lasts only 14 minutes.<sup>41</sup>

The performance series includes the important events of Judit Kele's life, from which she holds a kind of distorted mirror up to art. Cultural historians and gender researchers have written notable studies of how the social situation of women has changed over time, the functioning of the marriage market, and the social background of the partner selection process. Personality rights are a particularly sensitive point in contemporary Western society, and in this case the most concerning point for them was that the marriage was not between two lovers. She expresses her views on the violation of social expectations, mocking the institution of marriage, using it as a kind of art object, since she has constantly re-created / re-invented herself, be it as a work of art, an auction item, a petitioner, a bride, a divorced woman or just a married woman. Moreover, the self-reflection is still not over, as a few decades later, but under a new title, Judit Kele came up with a subversive performance: in a new chapter, the artist married herself as part of the *KontrAKTus* exhibition in Berlin.

According to a feminist study of Kele's projects and performances, the interpretive horizon of the works continues to expand. The use of the institution of marriage is related to, on the one hand, obtaining a visa, and on the other to the gender struggle in Central and Eastern Europe where these types of actions were necessitated, despite the sacrifice of identity and freedom it entailed for the women.

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and about the different works they have given a platform to. It is based in the Contemporary Art Institute in Dunaújváros, where they also host the exhibitions. All of it can be found on their website, <http://www.agentsandprovocateurs.net/index.php?lang=hu>

<sup>40</sup> By choosing the title she was targeting the socio-cultural mechanism of value assignment. It reflects not only on marriage at that time but on being a work of art, and the passage of time through aging which affects both art and feminine beauty. In the movie women from three different generations are floating in the pool of youth. The story is about compulsive relationships of which participants have the possibility to feel free to connect with the same gender, to make a potential offer, that may lead out of the hetero-normative matrix.

<sup>41</sup> Hock: *Ibid.*



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## GENDER AS RITUAL AND 'POETIC RITUALITY' IN CONTEMPORARY 'BIOSCIENCE DRAMA'

BIRTE GIESLER

*The following article explores the relationship between social and aesthetic drama in regard to the interaction of gendered bodies, rituals, and "poetic rituality" in contemporary plays addressing topical issues of human biotechnology development such as fertility medicine and human cloning. After an introduction to the newly coined term "bioscience drama" and a selection of relevant dramas, Saskia Fischer's concept of "poetic rituality" will be applied to a sample German-language "bioscience drama." In doing so, not only will the strong connection between ritual, drama, and social norms become apparent, but also this new dramatic subgenre will turn out to be an aesthetic vehicle of a multi-layered critique of ritualized gender norms.*

### GENDER AS RITUALIZED SOCIAL DRAMA

From the perspective of a praxeological theory of culture, both sex and gender identity are hardly a manifestation of biologically determined essence but rather embodied cultural knowledge materialized in the body. As Andreas Reckwitz points out in his theory of social practices, it is in the bodily techniques of "gender management" that gender identity is produced.<sup>1</sup> However, according to the influential gender theorist Judith Butler: "the materiality of sex is constructed through a ritualized repetition of norms."<sup>2</sup> Gender identity can not only be perceived as a physical embodiment of cultural routines and everyday practices but also as a product of constant and ritualized performance. Gender identity can thus also be considered a prime example of our ongoing "doing culture" and both the theatricality as well as the rituality of everyday culture. However, although hitherto there has been no coherent theory of ritual and rituality, current research in studies on drama, ritual, and performance agree

<sup>1</sup> Andreas Reckwitz: *Kreativität und soziale Praxis. Studien zur Sozial- und Gesellschaftstheorie*, Bielefeld, transcript Verlag, 2016, 70.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler: *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, London, Routledge, 1993, X.



in stating that it is quite impossible to discriminate exactly between ritual and drama.<sup>3</sup> German drama researcher Hans-Thies Lehmann refers to Victor Turner's differentiation between "social" and "aesthetic" drama in arguing:

Victor Turner made the important distinction between 'social drama', which takes place in social reality, and what he called 'aesthetic' drama, primarily in order to show how the latter 'reflects' hidden structures of the former. He emphasized, however, that, conversely, the aesthetic articulations of social conflicts in turn offer models for their perception and are partially responsible for the modes of ritualization in real social life. He argued that aesthetically formed drama produces images, structured forms of development, and ideological patterns that give order to the social, its organization and perception.<sup>4</sup>

Aesthetic drama thus mirrors social drama, while at the same time taking part in the shaping of ritualized forms of social interaction, human perception, and the social order in general.<sup>5</sup>

Current human biotechnology, with its cultural practices in human genetic engineering and reproductive medicine, challenges heteronormative sex and gender identities and hence fundamentally contests traditional family forms. Thus, theater plays dealing with reproductive technology and human genetic engineering prove to be particularly useful in investigating gender as ritual in literary drama. This is because drama and dramatic literature very much deal with, and reflect on, "implicit knowledge" and the tension between language and the body as the two major tools of human cognition. Lehmann points out: "No other form of art but theater focuses that strongly on the human body, on its vulnerable, violent, erotic, or 'holy' substantiality. [...] As is generally known everything starts with a bodily act [...]"<sup>6</sup> However, in the age of human biotechnology "everything" no longer starts with a bodily act but with a mechanical procedure of technical devices. Lehmann further argues: "Cultural notions of what 'the' body is are subject to 'dramatic' changes, and theater articulates

<sup>3</sup> Matthias Warstat: Ritual, in E. Fischer-Lichte – D. Kolesch – M. Warstat (eds.): *Metzler Lexikon Theatertheorie*, Stuttgart/Weimar, Metzler, 2005, 274–278, 274. See also Uri Rapp: *Rolle Interaktion Spiel. Eine Einführung in die Theatersoziologie*, Wien/Köln/Weimar, Böhlau, 1993, 15.

<sup>4</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann: *Postdramatic theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby, London/New York, Routledge, 2006, 37.

<sup>5</sup> On the fundamental relation between ritual and aesthetic drama see Bernhard Jahn: *Grundkurs Drama*, Stuttgart, Klett, 2009, 74–82.

<sup>6</sup> Lehmann: *Postdramatisches Theater*, Frankfurt a. M., Verlag der Autoren, 1999, 361f. [In keiner anderen Kunstform steht der menschliche Körper, seine verletzbare, gewalttätige, erotische oder 'heilige' Wirklichkeit so sehr im Zentrum wie im Theater. [...] Mit einem körperlichen Akt fängt bekanntlich alles an [...].] (Translation by the author of this article as this section is not part of the published translation.)

and reflects these ideas."<sup>7</sup> For this reason the interrelation between biomedical inventions on the one hand and gendered, ritualized cultural routines on the other hand is particularly noticeable in the theatrical adaptation of human biomedical technologies. Hereinafter, plays reflecting the ritualistic and mythological background of aesthetic drama while making human biotechnology their subject matter will be addressed as "bioscience drama." The term "bioscience drama" is a heuristic neologism coined within the framework of a larger research project on biomedical issues in contemporary literary drama.<sup>8</sup>

#### WHAT IS 'BIOSCIENCE DRAMA'?

Drama, plays, and theater, are cultural practices that structure the order of knowledge while being linked to other cultural and historical discourses. Following Erika Fischer-Lichte, theater in general can be considered an "anthropological laboratory" and a cultural mirror through which society repeats its own behavior and observes itself while different possibilities of personhood and human life are played through.<sup>9</sup> Drama and theatrical performances are thus ritualized components of cultural life and specific sites of ritualized human self-reflection and self-assurance. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that test-tube babies and human clones are being seen in drama and on stage, while the public debates issues such as artificial fertilization, social freezing, surrogacy, genetics, and bioethics.

Due to the "incredible power that emerges when current technologies in reproductive biology and genetics are brought together in the form of *reprogenetics*,"<sup>10</sup> human biomedical technologies, reproductive medicine, and related bioethical discussion are key issues in current everyday culture and thought. While the issue first arose in 1978, when Louise Joy Brown (the world's first test-tube baby) was born, the ongoing reprogenetics debate was triggered in the United States in the mid-eighties, when for the first time ever a child was born of a woman who was not the genetic mother; and the famous legal case of Baby M. circulated around the globe.<sup>11</sup> As a consequence, the issues of

<sup>7</sup> Lehmann: *Postdramatic Theatre*, 162.

<sup>8</sup> I wish to express my gratitude to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for the generous support for this research. The term 'bioscience drama' was firstly coined in Birte Giesler: *Zur Performativität des Materials: Biomedizin und Identität in aktuellen Theaterstücken*, *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur Neueren Germanistik* 78 (2010), 141–159.

<sup>9</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte: *Geschichte des Dramas*, 2 Vols., revised and enlarged edition, Tübingen/Basel, Francke, 1999; Erika Fischer-Lichte (ed.): *Theatralität und die Krisen der Repräsentation*, Stuttgart/Weimar, Metzler, 2001, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Lee. M. Silver: *Remaking Eden. Cloning and Beyond in a Brave New World*, New York, Avon Books, 1997, 8.

<sup>11</sup> H. Patricia Hynes: *Reconstructing Babylon. Essays on Women and Technology*, London, Earthscan, 1989, 103–113.



surrogate motherhood as well as egg and embryo donation even became key topics at the German Legal Association's Annual Meeting in 1986.<sup>12</sup> However, it was not until 1991 — after an altercation that went somewhat under the radar amidst the public turbulences involving German reunification — that German authorities passed the Act on Embryo Protection comprising legislation (which in this case means prohibition) of surrogacy.<sup>13</sup> Also, as a reaction to the hype around the first case of non-genetic surrogacy, the long-established Berlin Schiller Theater asked the primary representative of contemporary German playwrights, Rolf Hochhuth, to write a play on the topic. Hochhuth's play *Unbefleckte Empfängnis. Ein Kreidekreis* [Immaculate Conception. A Chalk Circle] premiered on April 8, 1989 as the outcome of that assignment.<sup>14</sup> As the title and subtitle indicate, Hochhuth's play is infused with references to the Bible and focuses on the ethical, religio-ethical, and legal questions regarding an IVF baby's parentage. The title "Immaculate Conception," of course, refers to the story of Mary of Nazareth, to whom the angel Gabriel announces her impending pregnancy by the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:5–25).<sup>15</sup> The "chalk circle" in the play's subtitle refers to the Old Testament and the judgment of Solomon on the dispute of two women arguing over a child (1Kings 3:16–28). Hochhuth's *Unbefleckte Empfängnis* lends itself to situating the new subgenre in literary historiography, as the Solomonic judgment and the motif of the chalk circle are prominent motifs in the history of German-language drama, e.g., in Bertolt Brecht's *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* (*The Caucasian Chalk Circle*).<sup>16</sup> Hochhuth's surrogacy play can be considered the earliest example and pathfinder piece of "bioscience drama." Since this innovative work, playwrights have produced a range of bioscience dramas — for example, Irène Bourquin: *Klone, erhebt euch!* [Raise a protest, clones!], first produced in 1999, was the first German-language drama to make reproductive cloning a subject matter, using drama as a ritualized communications system reflecting the interrelation between ritual, theatricality, and concepts of individual and collective

<sup>12</sup> Staatliche Schauspielbühnen Berlin (ed.): *Unbefleckte Empfängnis. Von Rolf Hochhuth. Uraufführung. Schiller Theater*, Vol. 82, season 1988/89, unpaginated.

<sup>13</sup> On the German legal situation concerning surrogacy see Sandra Hotz: *Selbstbestimmung im Vertragsrecht*, Bern, Stämpfli, 2017, 346–360.

<sup>14</sup> Staatliche Schauspielbühnen Berlin (ed.): *Unbefleckte Empfängnis*. See also Rolf Hochhuth: *Unbefleckte Empfängnis. Ein Kreidekreis*, Reinbek bei Hamburg, Rowohlt, 1988. Hochhuth's play on surrogacy is one of the rare cases where a drama is published as a book prior to its release on stage, which also strongly hints at the topicality of the play.

<sup>15</sup> For a critical discussion of Pope Pius IX's dogma of the immaculate conception from a protestant theological perspective, see Gerd Lüdemann: *Jungfrauengeburt? Die wirkliche Geschichte von Maria und ihrem Sohn Jesus*, Stuttgart, Radius, 1997.

<sup>16</sup> Bertolt Brecht: *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis* [1949, 1954], in W. Hecht – J. Knopf – W. Mitzenwei – K.-D. Müller (eds.): *Bertolt Brecht, Werke. Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 1992, 7–191; Bertolt Brecht: *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, trans. Eric Bentley, Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press, 1999.



identities.<sup>17</sup> Stanford chemistry professor and birth control pill inventor Carl Djerassi, who was also successful as a novelist and playwright, came forward with two bioscience dramas. The first one is titled *An Immaculate Misconception. Sex in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction* and was first performed in 1999.<sup>18</sup> It is a comedy of mistaken identity about the biomedical invention of the “intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI),” a revolutionary new reproductive technology allowing men who suffer from low sperm production to genetically *father* their own children.<sup>19</sup> Djerassi’s first bioscience drama reveals the enduring impact of ritualized gender norms on biomedicine as cultural practice while referring to the same religio-ethical questions as Hochhuth’s IVF play.<sup>20</sup> Djerassi’s second bioscience drama, *Taboos*, premiered in 2006 and was the story of a lesbian couple starting a family by means of IVF, thereby challenging (but not only that) their relatives’ ritualised family and gender identity patterns.<sup>21</sup> *KENNNUMMER 10/12/2007* [ID – IDENTIFICATIONNUMBER 10/12/2007] by German screen playwright Martin Lüttge, premiered in 2000. This youth theater play is the first German-language drama to combine IVF, genetic engineering, and reproductive cloning in the framework of a family drama in order to critically reflect on the potential effects of future developments in IVF — such as the artificial uterus — on ritualised family patterns and gender imagery.<sup>22</sup> Other examples of bioscience drama are two plays on human cloning which both premiered in 2002 as a repercussion of the birth of clone sheep “Dolly”: firstly Caryl Churchill’s celebrated *A number*,<sup>23</sup> and secondly Igor Bauersima’s *futur de luxe*, which will be further investigated in this paper.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Rainer Lewandowski’s *Ich [Me]*,<sup>25</sup> and Tanja Rese’s *Blueprint — Duett für einen Zwilling* [*Blueprint – duet for one twin*],<sup>26</sup> both feature

<sup>17</sup> Giesler: *Zur Performativität des Materials*, 144–147. Playbook courtesy of the playwright.

<sup>18</sup> Carl Djerassi: *An Immaculate Misconception – Sex in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, London, Imperial College Press, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Factually speaking, the ICSI technology was actually developed by four Belgian scientists who announced their invention to the scientific community in 1992, see Gianpiero Palermo – Hubert Joris – Paul Devroey – André C. Van Steirteghem: Pregnancies after intracytoplasmic injection of single spermatozoon into an oocyte, *The Lancet – a journal of British and foreign medicine, surgery, obstetrics, physiology, chemistry, pharmacology, public health and news* 340.8810 (1992), 17–18.

<sup>20</sup> Birte Giesler: Inszenierungen des ‘Doing Family’ in einer biotechnisierten Kultur: Reproduktionstechnologien, Generativität und Verwandtschaft im ‘Biowissenschaftsdrama’ seit Rolf Hochhuths *Unbefleckte Empfängnis*, *Feministische Studien* 37.1 (2019), 29–47.

<sup>21</sup> Carl Djerassi: *Sex in an Age of Technological Reproduction: ICSI and Taboos*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Textbook courtesy of ‘Theaterhof Priessenthal’ theater.

<sup>23</sup> Caryl Churchill: *A number*, London, Royal Court Theatre, 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Igor Bauersima: *futur de luxe*, in *norway.today. 3 Theaterstücke*, Frankfurt a. M., Fischer, 2003, 63–120.

<sup>25</sup> The play premiered in 2003. Playbook orderable online at <http://www.rainer-lewandowski.de/>, <http://www.rainerlewandowski.de>

<sup>26</sup> The play premiered in 2006. Playbook courtesy of the playwright.

bioscience drama on human cloning and ritualised identities. Juli Zeh's *Corpus Delicti* premiered in 2007 and approaches biomedicine from a slightly different angle as it portrays German society in the year 2057 in the form of a "health dictatorship" where sexual partnerships and family systems have turned out to be highly ritualised cultural practices dictated by German authorities, relying purely on DNA criteria.<sup>27</sup> Felicia Zeller's *Wunsch und Wunder* [Desire and Miracle] is a grotesque play about the actual reproductive medicine business, poetically mirroring the topic of reproduction and the sarcastic criticism of some current tendencies in reprogenetics. Part of the play's "poetic rituality" relies on linguistically repetitive patterns and extremely self-reflecting and self-referring intertextuality and intermediality, such as quoting the hard rock band "Black Sabbath" (named — famously — after a satanic ritual).<sup>28</sup> "Bioscience drama" lends itself to the researching of the inner connection between ritual, drama, and gender. Drama per se is an artistic genre where the physical body is particularly relevant as drama carries the intention to be performed inherently: the characters emerge physically in front of the "reader" who himself is a "co-reader" as part of the audience that is physically present. The physical human body, however, has long been recognized as an intersection between "nature" and "culture" whereat current biomedical developments lead to an increased blurring at this intersection.<sup>29</sup> Literary drama deals with and reflects on language and the body as the two major tools of human cognition whilst also being the tools of ritual. Bioscience drama reflects on up-to-date praxeologist cultural theories conceiving of personal and collective identities as embodied products of ritualized repetition of social enactment. On an aesthetic level, "bioscience drama" features various aspects of "poetic rituality."

#### WHAT IS 'POETIC RITUALITY'?

As Saskia Fischer points out in her comprehensive study on *Ritual und Ritualität im Drama nach 1945* [Ritual and Rituality in post-1945 Drama], the main attributes of rituals are repetition, a formally structured and standardized process, performativity, significance, self-referentiality, an elaborated aesthetic and symbolic presentation, and a deliberated staging, as well as the social

<sup>27</sup> Juli Zeh: *CORPUS DELICTI*, Hamburg, 2007. Playbook courtesy of Rowohlt Theater Verlag.

<sup>28</sup> Klaus Miehling: *Gewaltmusik Musikgewalt. Populäre Musik und die Folgen*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2006, 39; Felicia Zeller: *Wunsch und Wunder*, Theater heute 3 (2015). Particularly on Zeller's criticism of technology see Birte Giesler: "Eine Komödie liegt auf der Hand." Friedrich Dürrenmatts Theatertheorie und Technikkritik in Felicia Zellers *Wunsch und Wunder*, in K. Dreckmann – M. Butte – E. Vomberg (eds.): *Technologien des Performativen. Technologien des Performativen*, Bielefeld, transcript Verlag, 2020, 317–327.

<sup>29</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte – Anne Fleig (eds.): *Körper-Inszenierungen. Präsenz und kultureller Wandel*, Tübingen, Attempto, 2000, 9–10.



impact of rituals as symbolic and communicative actions, all of which are also constitutive for drama and theater.<sup>30</sup> Fischer's categories show the fundamental relation between theater, drama, and ritual practice in general.<sup>31</sup> However, "poetic rituality," as she conceptualizes it, means that the artwork itself showcases ritual practice by (either) describing a specific literary and dramatic adaptation of ritual patterns, types, genres, and ways of language usage, and/or it features a particularly ritualised structure. Hence, "poetic rituality" in the "Fischerian" sense also arises when a particular ritual or ritual practice fundamentally shapes the aesthetic construction and the concept of a drama or a piece of literature.

RITUALISTIC THEATER AS GENDERED LIMINAL PROCESS  
IN IGOR BAUERSIMA'S *FUTUR DE LUXE*

Written in 2002 by German-language Swiss playwright Igor Bauersima, *futur de luxe* extensively uses ritual and self-reflecting theatricality by addressing biomedical issues and religious rituality at the same time. However, while ritualized cultural practices and all the more sacral rituals anthropologically serve as coping strategies for the existential challenges of illness and death, *futur de luxe* addresses the age of biotechnology as a liminal phase for humankind. While Victor Turner considered the adaptation of ritual in drama and theater as an artistic and innovative liminal process in itself, Bauersima's *futur de luxe* is, on various levels, explicitly playing with aesthetical liminality in order to explore the ethical liminality of current biomedical sciences. *Futur de luxe* achieves dramatic and theatrical irony by unmasking the inherent self-destructiveness of a binary gender concept, setting the disembodied male subject position as a rationalistic and fundamentally atheistic result of abjection of the "Other."<sup>32</sup>

The play recounts the story of a shared dinner of the Jewish Klein family on a Friday night in the year 2020. The father, Theo, mother Ulla, the 25-year-old daughter Uschi, and the 24-year-old twin sons Felix and Rudi, meet at the parents' house to celebrate Shabbat. While the family argues that they have never been particularly religious, the daughter insists on the sacral background of the meal, so that at the beginning of the play the religious ritual of lighting

<sup>30</sup> Saskia Fischer: *Ritual und Ritualität im Drama nach 1945*, Paderborn, Fink, 2019, 28–30, 79–80.

<sup>31</sup> See connections between literature and ritual / theater, drama, and ritual in Wolfgang Braungart: *Ritual und Literatur*, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 1996; Erika Fischer-Lichte: *Das Theater der Rituale*, in A. Michaelis (ed.): *Die neue Kraft der Rituale*, Heidelberg, Winter, 2007, 117–139.

<sup>32</sup> On the concept of 'Othering' in the context of human cloning see Solveig Lena Hansen: *Alterität als kulturelle Herausforderung des Klonens. Eine Rekonstruktion bioethischer und literarischer Verhandlungen*, Münster, Mentis, 2016.



Sabbath candles is staged. However, in the course of the shared meal the sacral rituality gets successively destroyed as Felix answers the telephone. Not only does the family have an argument, but since picking up the phone on the Sabbath is against the ritualistic rules, the situation gradually escalates because, starting with the telephone call, the family members learn things about each other and about themselves they had not previously known or were not allowed to talk about. The conversation develops into a forum characterised by the search for truth when the father, who is a biochemist of international reputation, tells his family about a unique experiment he conducted 24 years before. As a scientist he had aimed to answer the question of whether human good and evil is determined genetically or by other factors. For this reason he produced their twin sons by cloning, albeit illegally and without informing his wife. He claims that he grew one embryo from his own DNA whilst producing the second one by cloning the DNA of Adolf Hitler. Thereby, Theo's grotesque narration of how he supposedly acquired Hitler's DNA then plays a major role within the play. On top of his story about the clone experiment, Theo claims that Uschi suffered lethal genetic damage as an embryo which he had been able to remedy by means of genetic engineering. Having learned this crude news, mother and daughter start an aggressive argument which leads Ulla to disclose to Uschi that in fact Theo is not her biological father; a fact that she claims Theo had also known since the pregnancy. During the various horrendous revelations, the identities of the characters, as well as the image they used to have of themselves and their family members, get progressively destroyed, while the events turn increasingly verbally and finally physically violent. The dramatic plot plays through two alternative versions of the course of the evening. The first version leads the family members to kill one another until nobody except for the daughter is left. In the second version, which is much more extensively designed, the whole family survives except for Uschi who quietly commits suicide whilst Rudi, by armed force, makes Theo swear to renounce science. The play ends with a scene that obviously takes place before the family reunion starts. The mother is standing on the terrace in the dawn; obviously unsuspecting, she proudly holds a monologue about her famous husband and her talented children.

Igor Bauersima produced and stage directed his play with the Hanover State Theater in 2002, combining traditional forms of theater making with cinematic and new media elements.<sup>33</sup> As most of the actual story of *futur de luxe* takes place inside one room, Bauersima's set was designed as a box on the stage, accessible from two sides. Each side has a terrace. On the walls are movable blinds and curtains to be opened and closed in different variations.

<sup>33</sup> Special thanks to Igor Bauersima and the Hanover State Theater (Germany) for providing me with a video recording of Bauersima's production for research purposes.

The blinds and curtains double as video screens in some scenes. The spectators are separated into two halves sitting respectively in front and behind the "box-room." Thus, the audience is not only watching the action on stage but is also observing itself watching *futur de luxe*. The stage box/room resembles a glass case, as if a laboratory experiment is taking place, with the actors as "laboratory animals."

Wolfgang Braungart has argued that aesthetic rituality in the form of a ritualised repetition of various aesthetic norms such as certain metaphors, topics, and genre patterns is a fundamental aspect of literature.<sup>34</sup> As a highly intertextual play, *futur de luxe* features strong aesthetic rituality. As we will see, its aesthetic construction and concept is determined by ritual, thus featuring "poetic rituality" in the sense Saskia Fischer intends. Knowledge and ignorance, truth, and fate play significant roles in the drama. While circling around the crucial question of the meaning of knowledge as in Sophocles' *Oedipus*, Bauersima's play toys with the Aristotelian categories of drama. The play stringently features the three Aristotelian "unities" of place, time, and unity of action. Spanning just a couple of hours, most of the play's action takes place inside a single room, whereas some scenes are shown as video projections while the room (stage) is masked by blinds. Aesthetic liminality lies open when one of the characters opens the blind and turns toward the audience. However, Bauersima's play does not only feature aesthetical liminality but also challenges ethical liminality. The grotesque plot of *futur de luxe* as a whole follows the structure of a gendered ritual of passage demonstrating the constitution of the male subject in the process of signification. As Lacanian philosopher Luce Irigaray points out in her key work *Speculum of the Other Woman*, the Occidental concept of the subject in principle creates a male subject. This is because this subject is constituted by the neglect and abjection of the female as "the Other." Following Irigaray, the neglect of the self-origin in the body of the mother is a major aspect of the cultural abjection of the female. The result is the image of a self-created and autonomous male subject:

The point being that man is *the* procreator, that sexual *production-reproduction* is referable to his "activity" alone, to his "pro-ject" alone. Woman is nothing but the receptacle that passively receives his *product*, even if sometimes, by the display of her passively aimed instincts, she has pleaded, facilitated, even demanded that it be placed within her. Matrix — womb, earth, factory, bank — to which the seed capital is entrusted so that it may germinate, produce, grow fruitful, without woman being able to lay claim to either capital or interest since she has only submitted "passively" to reproduction. Herself held in receivership as a certified means of (re)production.

<sup>34</sup> Braungart: *Ritual und Literatur*, 24.



[...] *The same re-marking itself* — more or less — would thus produce the other, whose function in the differentiation would be neglected, forgotten.<sup>35</sup>

Following Irigaray, the idea of a male subject is a tautological and self-referring illusory concept. The vision of male self-(re)production is precisely the over-tone of the idea of reproductive cloning and it is exactly what *futur de luxe* plays through. Male self-procreation is exactly what happens in the Klein family according to Theo's bizarre story. Theo claims that he had made his wife deliver his own genetic copy to prove that "good" is not genetically determined. Pretending that she was suffering from a genetic illness is a way of trying to sever the link between mother and offspring. While the characters simply believe what the father says, the clones/sons seem to come to terms with the situation by the end of the second version of the plot. Opposite to the male figures are the mother and the daughter. The daughter explicitly hints at the abysses of life:

USCHI: You are not willing to look into the abysses making up life! [...] We have to learn what we are [...] Even if it is that difficult. [...] We must learn to confine. Yes. We also must learn that we have to die one day.<sup>36</sup>

Hinting at death being its negation but part of life, Uschi stands for the abyss, "the Other." Shortly after pleading for respect of these abysses, she disappears by killing herself. In the meantime Rudi forces Theo to finish with science, and it seems that the remaining family is going to recover and come to terms with the given conditions. In the end, after having been radically ridiculed and questioned, the male subject of the father is reconfirmed.

Building on Victor Turner, Bauersima's treatment of human cloning can be interpreted as a satiric parable of a gendered social drama, namely the rite of passage of the Western concept of subject. Being identified as a clone, the subject is left bereft of his genetic family bonds, thus stepping into the phase of separation. He enters the margin or the liminal, the phase of liminality, from which point onwards co-existence of the male and female seems no longer to be possible. After the phase of liminality, the daughter vanishes. The plot suggests that the mother, who has basically already spirited herself away, and the male characters, will overcome their difficulties and go on. The sons return to a new and relatively stable situation, the phase of reintegration. In

<sup>35</sup> Luce Irigaray: *Speculum of the other woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill, Ithaca/New York, Cornell University Press, 1985, 18, 21, original emphases.

<sup>36</sup> [USCHI: Ihr seid nicht bereit, in die Abgründe zu schauen, die das Leben ausmachen! Wir müssen lernen zu sein, was wir sind... Auch wenn es so schwierig ist. Wir müssen lernen, uns zu beschränken. Ja. Auch sterben müssen wir lernen]. Bauersima: *futur de luxe*, 97, trans. Birte Giesler.



this final phase of aggregation the sons have the power to eliminate the father as a scientist. From the perspective of a critical gender reading, it can thus be said that by means of its poetic rituality, Bauersima's *futur de luxe* traces the construction of the subject in the process of signification by ironically exposing the idea of the human clone as the most recent remake of the dream of male self-creation through abjecting the "Other".<sup>37</sup> Interestingly enough, the origin of the whole ado is a *gender-specific* change of the religious ritual which is not only physically performed on stage but also — as part of the fictitious story — frames the dramatic plot:

USCHI: I am visiting my parents. My brothers are coming, too. [...] Soon it will be night and Sabbath begins. I am sure my father is laying the table right now. Some time ago, we changed the Sabbath ritual at ours. My mother got fed up with playing the servant all the time. She made Dad lay the table on the Sabbath. It's not exactly orthodox, but I find it's quite okay actually. It keeps my father moving. [...] And Mum is dressing herself up.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> On the cultural history of imaginings of the artificial human and male (self-)procreation without sexuality and insemination see Rudolf Drux (ed.): *Frankenstein oder der Mythos vom künstlichen Menschen und seinem Schöpfer*, in *Der Frankenstein-Komplex: Kulturgeschichtliche Aspekte des Traums vom künstlichen Menschen*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 1999, 26–47.

<sup>38</sup> [Ich geh zu meinen Eltern. Meine Brüder kommen auch. [...] Bald ist Abend, und der Schabbath beginnt. Mein Vater deckt bestimmt gerade den Tisch. Wir haben das Schabbathritual geändert, irgendwann, bei uns zu Hause. Meine Mutter hatte es satt, immer das Dienstmädchen machen zu müssen. Sie hat Vater dazu gebracht, dass am Schabbath immer er den Tisch deckt. Das ist zwar nicht sehr orthodox, aber ich finde es ganz okay, wenn mein Vater ein wenig in Bewegung bleibt. [...] Und Mutter macht sich schön.] Bauersima: *Ibid.*, 65–66, trans. Birte Giesler.

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MYTH, INTERCULTURALITY, AND RELIGION IN  
ELFRIEDE JELINEK'S AND FALK RICHTER'S WORK:  
A REVIEW OF *AM KÖNIGSWEG*<sup>1</sup>

ANNA LENZ

*Elfriede Jelinek's plays are some of the most complex, insightful, and innovative works in present day German-speaking theater. Am Königsweg, first performed at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus, Hamburg in 2017 and published in print in 2020, is no exception. This article will show how Jelinek's work uses methods of the so-called "postdramatic theater" to form a multi-layered social study that aspires to analyze the political present and its roots within a collective social unconsciousness in a text that fuses pop culture, psychoanalysis, religious and political discourses, as well as Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, in a melting pot, while also reflecting on the possibility of implied meaning through the artist's words.*

Der Mann spricht, er ist seine eigene Religion, die die Sie haben, können Sie jetzt wegschmeißen. Gott ist da. Unterschätzen Sie ihn nicht. Sie werden ihn noch brauchen, und dann sollte er doch bitte mächtig sein. Sonst sind Sie verloren. Bedenken Sie das ganze Kapital, nein, nicht das, das können Sie sich nicht vorstellen und auch nicht bedenken, bedenken Sie lieber das aufgestaute Haßpotential, das aufgestaute Mißtrauen, und wenn die Menschen daraus schöpfen, entsteht ein neues Geschöpf, entsteht der König, der auf Gewalttätigkeit seiner Nachbarn jederzeit vorbereitet ist und die Nachbarn zu den Nachbarn daher wieder zurückschicken wird.<sup>2</sup>

With this quote so begins a performative debate in a choir of voices in Elfriede Jelinek's *Am Königsweg* [On the King's Road].<sup>3</sup> This metaphor of the *via regia*, the "silver bullet," an optimal solution — widely used in politics, journalism,

<sup>1</sup> First and foremost, I have to thank the Deutsches Schauspielhaus Hamburg for making a recording of the play available to me. I also want to thank Johanna Domokos for the opportunity, and Wolfgang Braungart for all the fruitful discussions and encouragement, and Patricia Bollschweiler, Lukas Gutfeld and Emily Brouggy for helpful comments when composing this text.

<sup>2</sup> Elfriede Jelinek: *Schwarzwasser. Am Königsweg. Zwei Theaterstücke*, Hamburg, Rowohlt, 2020, 15.

<sup>3</sup> Play translated and published in English as Elfriede Jelinek: *On the Royal Road. The Burgher King*, trans. Gitta Honegger, Calcutta, Seagull Books, Chicago University Press, 2020. Gitta Honegger's translation was not yet available when I wrote this article. Therefore all quoted translations are my own, except one short segment (see footnote 45).

and philosophy<sup>4</sup> — becomes almost cynical within the text as it addresses themes such as xenophobia and war. It echoes a popular metaphor, deforming it, emptying it through the text: the *via regia*, by the end of the play, is no longer that, but, rather, the path of an egotistical racist and a society that supports him. On the other hand, *via regia* links to Freud's famous quote which states that the interpretation of dreams is "the *via regia* to the knowledge of the unconscious."<sup>5</sup> An attempt to read Elfriede Jelinek's play through the same prism might profitably be made. *Am Königsweg* is exemplary in the popular understanding of so-called "postdramatic theater" — a theater that gets by without character or plot, without dialogue or fable<sup>6</sup> — in some ways, but it does not give up on an aim to root society's core, to study a "collective unconscious," not through dreams but through theater that might explain things such as newly awakened xenophobic tendencies within a political mainstream.<sup>7</sup> In this attempt to walk a cracked *via regia*, *Am Königsweg* shows the loss of a notion of one unifying meaning that would offer itself to a hermeneutic interpretation. But it does maintain the idea of a normative horizon, values, a social model, a narrative, a religion, or even art that would if not reunite at least fight against a social separation of people. Here, questions of subjectivity, religion, economy, and self are interwoven in her unique rag rug of philosophical, literary, and pop-cultural quotes. The result is a 150-page text, which was published in February, 2020. The play was first produced three years earlier, in 2017, and staged at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus Hamburg by the German director and author Falk Richter. As this article discusses both the staging and the text, I will briefly introduce both.

In 2004, Austrian author Elfriede Jelinek was the first of her country to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. (Peter Handke has since become the second.) The jury praised Jelinek "for her musical flow of voices and counter-voices in novels and plays that with extraordinary linguistic zeal reveal the absurdity of society's clichés and their subjugating power."<sup>8</sup> Her most famous novel is *Die Klavierspielerin* (*The Piano Teacher*)<sup>9</sup> which, in 2001, was adapted into an award-winning film by Austrian director and screenwriter Michael Haneke, starring Isabelle Huppert as the failed pianist Erika Kohut. The novel addresses themes such as the mother-daughter relationship and sexuality and violence as well as female repression, all of which have been canonical in Jelinek's oeuvre from the beginning. *Die Kinder der Toten* [*The Children of*

<sup>4</sup> The full metaphor of the *via regia*, of course, is much more complex than stated here.

<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud: *Die Traumdeutung. Urheberrechtsfreie Ausgabe*, 612, ebook. Freud, as we will see, is one of the main references in *Am Königsweg*.

<sup>6</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann: *Postdramatisches Theater*, Frankfurt a. M., Verlag der Autoren, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> I will speak of the political in rather literal terms: political institutions, personnel, and direct socio-political debates within the media.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/lists/all-nobel-prizes-in-literature>.

<sup>9</sup> Elfriede Jelinek: *Die Klavierspielerin*, Hamburg, Rowohlt, 1983.



*the Dead*]<sup>10</sup> is widely regarded as her magnum opus, as it brings together her interest in the concepts of “Heimat,” history, violence, feminism, and obscurity in a multilayered writing style, rich in comedy and intertextuality. This article, however, will discuss Jelinek as a playwright: she has written over thirty plays that have challenged stage conventions of theater production since the late 1970s. In Einar Schlee’s production of *Ein Sportstück* [*Sports Play*],<sup>11</sup> for instance, which premiered at the Vienna Burgtheater in 1998, more than 100 actors were on stage: a gigantic choir spoke and performed workout moves for four and a half hours.

Falk Richter is less renowned. The Hamburg-born playwright and director has become successful with his long, ornate stage productions, that are often multilingual and use different forms of media. He is thus in good company with other Jelinek directors, such as Einar Schlee, Nicolas Stemann or Christoph Schlingensiefel. His production of *Am Königsweg* has been critically acclaimed and was awarded the “Play of the Year” by the festival *Mühlheimer Theatertage* and the journal *Theater Heute* in 2018. His texts frequently focus on (homo)sexuality’s perception within society and aim to challenge socio-sexual conventions on stage.<sup>12</sup>

*Am Königsweg* centers on a caricature of Donald Trump: a childish, self-ish, and pantless king, who dances around with a blow-up globe, mimicking Charlie Chaplin in the *Great Dictator*, and wears a Kermit-colored Ku Klux Klan hood while the Muppet Show’s favorite frog himself dances in the background. The play is strongly linked to contemporaneous socio-political events. This Trump-king stands in opposition to the choir that often, as a collective, performs as the voice of the blind poet. In this directorial decision, Richter picks up on Jelinek’s montage-style writing. Her texts are accumulations of quotes — in the case of *Am Königsweg*: René Girard, Sophocles, Martin Heidegger, Sigmund Freud, David Cay Johnston, and David Graeber along with, as Jelinek herself states at the end of her play, “other stuff” [noch so Zeug], such as newspaper articles etc.<sup>13</sup> The choir’s speech is closest to Jelinek’s original text, while other characters, such as the King and a woman are added by Richter and his production team. This woman enters the stage from time to time to, in an almost Brechtian fashion, comment on and even explain the meaning of Jelinek’s text. She appears as an interpretive voice and is, as we will see, at times more choir-like than the choir itself.

<sup>10</sup> Jelinek: *Die Kinder der Toten*, Hamburg, Rowohlt, 1985.

<sup>11</sup> Jelinek: *Ein Sportstück*, Hamburg, Rowohlt, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Falk Richter: *Small Town Boy und andere Stücke*, Berlin, Theater der Zeit, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Jelinek: *Am Königsweg*, 147.

The question of “who speaks”<sup>14</sup> is thus difficult enough when merely looking at the text, but even more so when seeing it performed on stage: speech is attributed rather ambiguously and the question of who it is that aims to speak and how to make sense of current and historical events in speech is never let go of: this is a consistent technique throughout Jelinek’s oeuvre and is probably what she is most famous for as a postdramatic playwright. That said, I would like to circle back to the main focus of this article: the discussion of religious performance and construction of meaning within Jelinek’s play and to the quote that led into the discussion:

The man speaks, he is his own religion, you may throw away the one you have. God is here. Don’t underestimate him. You will need him and when you do, he’d better be powerful. Otherwise, you’re lost. Consider the entire capital [assets], no, don’t, you cannot imagine it and not think of it either, better consider the piled-up potential of hate, of the piled-up mistrust, and if people draw from it, there derives a new creature, derives a king, who is always prepared for the violence of his neighbors and thus sends his neighbors back to the neighbors.<sup>15</sup>

Speaking, in Jelinek’s play, *is* performing, since nothing beyond speech exists — at least within the printed text. The only notion that summons the text to the stage happens when the viewers are addressed as a collective: “Sagen Sies schon”<sup>16</sup> [Say it]: the speaker herself — a collective choir in one moment, a singular “seer” [Seherin]<sup>17</sup> in another — commands the audience to enter the discussion. They do not speak, of course, since they cannot do so within the text, as they merely exist as an imagined readership,<sup>18</sup> and also since they will not do so within the set conventions of Mid-European theater.<sup>19</sup> It is also never clear *what* they’re asked to say. There is no collective, practiced, even ritual speech that would include the audience within the performance as something

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault: What Is an Author?, in D. F. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, New York, Cornell University Press, 1977, 113–38.

<sup>15</sup> Translation Anna Lenz.

<sup>16</sup> Jelinek: *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Wolfgang Iser: *Der implizite Leser*, Paderborn, Fink, 1972. A detailed insight on the discussion that has followed Iser into the present day among renowned researchers such as Wolf Schmid, Carlos Spoerhase, and Sabine Kuhangel, among others, can be found in Marcus Willand: *Lesermodelle und Lesetheorien. Historische und systematische Perspektiven*, Berlin/Boston, De Gruyter, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Even though there are puppets on stage, that would open the play up to being perceived as a Punch and Judy show, the dignified, freshly renovated neo-baroque halls of the Hamburg Schauspielhaus surely limit the aspirations to align oneself within any other conventions than that of the classicist German Theater.



more than receptive viewers. "Say it" thus leads to an interrupted call and response, where the audience is being yelled at: a longed-for actor that (unfortunately) stays silent.

Instead, it is the King that speaks. And in this king's speech, the speaker states, the King becomes his own religion. This is a performative contradiction, since, at least within the text, the King will never speak, he is merely spoken *about* and accused of depriving the world of meaningful structures, such as religion.<sup>20</sup> "You" may give up on your own beliefs, it is merely the belief system of the King that counts. And the King's God, in whose word he and thus *you* as well should believe, is no one but the King himself. He is then associated with economic structures. If you do not consider capital, do not consider the King, *you* will be lost. "Consider the economy" is a phrase that rather haunts us these days while we are trapped by a global pandemic that tethers people to their homes and slows down the markets: self-isolation is important, we hear, but what will these weeks, months even, do to our economy? "Consider the economy!" But, luckily, for most people it is much easier to consider the lives of their grandparents than it is to consider an abstract entity such as the economy. This is why the economy is immediately identified as unimaginable, inconceivable — one cannot make an image of it, which is why, of course, we need models and metaphors to understand it by.<sup>21</sup> But here, the economy is thus linked to the aniconism debate, that has been and is still discussed in Christianity, Islam, and Judaism alike. "Capital" becomes too big, too omnipotent to be imagined in anything but metaphors. That also means one would have to believe in capital rather than it being perceptible to the senses,<sup>22</sup> thus echoing the conflict that apostle Thomas had when asking Jesus to show him his wounds: *Believing* is not *seeing*.<sup>23</sup> A capitalist *belief* system though, is not explored further here. What is imaginable and conceivable are the new far-right tendencies Jelinek is eager to call into the consciousness of the audience in all their liminal<sup>24</sup> varieties in her play. At the forefront of the new far-right movement stands the King, who is identified as a xenophobic hate speaker. Capital, as well as the King, in his monotheistic worldview, which accepts no

<sup>20</sup> It is a different matter on stage, where the King, brilliantly portrayed by Benny Claessens, of course does speak.

<sup>21</sup> I refer, of course, to William Lakoff – Mark Johnson: *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1980 and Wolfgang Braungart's addition to the concept: Wolfgang Braungart: *Ästhetik der Politik, Ästhetik des Politischen. Ein Versuch in Thesen*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Sigmund Freud: *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion*, Frankfurt a. M., Fischer, 1975.

<sup>23</sup> Jn. 25:29.

<sup>24</sup> I refer to the concept of liminality in current performative studies that itself has its origins in Victor Turner's study of rituality. Matthias Warstadt: Liminalität, in E. Fischer-Lichte – D. Kolesch – M. Warstat (eds.): *Metzler Lexikon Theatertheorie*, Stuttgart/Weimar, Metzler, 2005, 186–187.



metaphysical being beyond himself, discards “love thy neighbor” and instead sends him back where he comes from; and “violence” only exists in the King’s head and speech — he is always ready for violence that never eventuates.

This topic is taken up by the aforementioned woman, the moderator of the layered text that, within the context of the performance, is difficult to decipher. It is of the utmost importance to *read* Jelinek’s plays as well as see them performed, since her texts require patience and need to be read and re-read to be truly appreciated for their complexity. They have an undeniable impact on stage, of course, but if *Am Königsweg* is to be interpreted as a political play that aims to raise awareness of social wrongs, trivially speaking, it is rather helpful to have an interpreter of the intricate text appearing on stage. Enter a woman wearing a Louis Vuitton gold sequined tracksuit — wealth and “tackiness” align here. Idil Baydar as Jilet Ayşe (Baydar’s habitual fictional character) is a fairly well-known German-Turkish comedian. In her attire and sociolect, she takes up social stereotypes of the Turkish immigrant minority. Her hair is put up in a half beehive, such as Elfriede Jelinek usually wears.<sup>25</sup> She therefore enters the stage as both the poet, who interprets her own work, and a voice that speaks as the deputy of a group that is hegemonically discriminated against. Her speech and behavior on stage mimic those of a stand-up comedian, which, of course, she is. This is emblematic for current times, since, increasingly, younger people especially seem to get their news from late-night stand-up and similar media formats rather than regular news reports. The play performs this shift to “politainment”<sup>26</sup> as well as bringing some “light” relief to the three-and-a-half-hour long theater night. What follows is an excerpt transcript of a stage appearance that rhetorically mimics a form of German stand-up comedy:

Es sind neue da, das sind auch Migranten, aber die hatten einen viel längeren Weg als ich, ich sag ganz ehrlich. Mein Weg war kurz, der war genau so lang wie deiner [zeigt auf einen Zuschauenden in der ersten Reihe]. Gebärmutter, raus. Was kann man machen? Ja, ist überall Panik. Also ich bin auch Flüchtlingswelle und ich bin auch Nafri, nordafrikanischer Intensivtäter und — ähm —, aber was macht man jetzt? Alle haben Angst. Also, ich hab mir gedacht: Guck mal, ihr Deutschen, ihr macht Entwicklungshilfe auf der ganzen Welt. Überall helft ihr. Ihr seid sogar in Mali. Ich wusste nicht mal, was Mali ist. Und deshalb habe ich gedacht: Wer hilft eigentlich *euch* bei *eurer* Entwicklung? Wer macht eigentlich Entwicklungshilfe für euch? Niemand! Und deshalb bin ich hier. [Publikum lacht und klatscht] Wir machen das zusammen, wir schaffen das! Aber, ja... ok... aber was kann man ... Ich muss ja auch erstmal rausfinden... Die Sache ist so. Ich musste erstmal rausfin-

<sup>25</sup> This hairdo of course is not unique to Jelinek, and Baydar has performed with the same updo several times. In the context of the play however, the link is undeniable.

<sup>26</sup> Andreas Dörner: *Politainment. Politik in der medialen Erlebnisgesellschaft*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 2001.

den, was stimmt eigentlich mit euch nicht? Verstehste, was ich meine? Man muss erstmal Analyse machen. Ist ganz wichtig. Was ist los mit euch? Verstehste, was ich mein? Es ist gar nicht so einfach! Weil, weil guck mal, auch diese' Konzept von ein' Migranten — ähm. Du musst ja auch so sehen, ein Migrant, also von Konzept jetzt, ähm, das ist alles das, was Du kein Bock hast zu sein. [Publikum lacht] Wirklich, überleg doch mal! Gumma [Guckma] Wir sind... wir sind laut! Ihr seid leise. Wir sind primitiv, ihr seid kultiviert. Wir sind Diktatur! Ihr seid Demokratie! Wir sind gewalttätig, ihr seid voll friedlich. [Publikum lacht] Wir sind frauenfeindlich, ihr seid frauenfreundlich. Verstehste? Immer so hin, her, hin, her. Aber ich dachte auch, guckma jetzt ist ja, guck mal, dings, Hochkultur und so und weil ihr ja, ich sag's jetzt, ich muss es euch sagen, ihr sterbt's aus. Das is' ein' harte Sache. Verstehste? Ihr werdet immer weniger. Ich bin jetzt der Prototyp: Kann Kanacke mit Hochkultur? Klappt das? [Publikum lacht] Verstehste, wir werden uns öfter sehen, auf jeden Fall. [Publikum lacht] Und deshalb, ich hab gesagt, googel mal, Jilet, guck mal, ob Du irgendwas findest, womit du irgendwie den Deutschen auch 'n bisschen helfen kannst. Weißte so: Hilfe, Hilfe is' wichtig. Und dann, ich bin auf eine Seite gekommen, ich so: Jackpot! Kennst du siggi.com? [Zeigt auf Zuschauenden] Das is' Sigmund Freud und so? Siggicom is' so ein' geile Seite! Ey, ich schwöre auf alles! Der hat was gesagt von Projektion. Also Projektion, das is', ähm, guckma du gehst raus in die Welt und du siehst Menschen und den magst du und den magst du gar nicht und... Aber eigentlich, was du siehst, ist immer nur du selbst. Immer nur dich. Und diese Projektion... ähm... Weil, guck mal, jetzt mal ganz ehrlich, weil ich hab' gedacht, also wenn: Bei uns is' ja immer gleiche Vorwurf. Wir sind... äh... [zählt an den Fingern ab] wir machen ein Mischvolk aus euch, wir nehmen eure Land weg, wir zerstören eure Sprache — also, ich geb' mir Mühe, ich hoffe, du merkst! [Publikum lacht] Ich versuch, dem Anspruch gerecht zu werden. Verstehst du? — wir sind, wir schänden eure Frauen, verstehste, wir islamisieren euch... Es ist, es is' so! Und dann, ich hab nachgedacht: Warum, woher kommt das alles? Und dann is' mir eingefallen: Namibia! Kannst Du dich erinnern? Namibia, es war so, die haben euch jetzt nicht angerufen und haben gesagt: Kommt mal bitte her! Ähm... es war so: Ihr seid da eingeritten, [zählt an den Fingern ab] ihr habt das Land weggenommen, ihr habt die Frauen geschändet, ihr habt kein Herero gelernt, habt ihr nicht. Und dann, was habt ihr noch gemacht? Dann habt ihr sie christianisiert. Ich bin ziemlich sicher, ihr wart auch laut und kriminell dabei! [Publikum lacht] Und deshalb hat man so viel Angst vor Islamisierung. [Im Hintergrund beginnen die anderen Schauspieler Kerzen und Kreuze in den Bühnenraum zu tragen]. Verstehst du, weil meine Oma, die hat immer gesagt, was du selber machst, das traust du auch allen anderen zu. Stimmt oder stimmt? [Zeigt auf Zuschauenden] Ich glaube, sagst du auch, oder, wa'? Es is' so! Dankeschön! [Publikum lacht] Es is' so: Wenn du selber klaust, du hast immer Angst, jemand beklaut dich. Wenn du deine Frau betrügst [Musik beginnt zu spielen] und davonkommst, hast du immer Angst, dass deine Frau dich auch



betrügt und davonkommt, weil du weißt ja, wie das geht. Aber macht euch keine Sorgen, Almanis, wir schaffen das zusammen! [Verlässt die Bühne].<sup>27</sup>

Jilet identifies herself as a second-generation Migrant (“My journey was short, truly. Just as short as yours [points to an audience member sitting in first row] Uterus, out!”). But she also acknowledges that in the perception of many, she does not differ from current refugees. That would be less of a problem if they — especially since 2015 and the so-called “Flüchtlingswelle” [wave of refugees] (in itself an old metaphor that, considering the horrors one can witness frequently in the Mediterranean Sea has become at best “rather problematic”) — were not the victims of systemic discrimination: “Yes, there is panic everywhere. I’m ‘Flüchtlingswelle’ as well, I’m ‘Nafri’ as well, North-African-multiple offender”. ‘Nafri’ is an abbreviation used by the Police in North Rhine-Westphalia and this was controversially discussed after the police tweeted about frisking several people after incidents of mass sexual assaults in Cologne, New Year’s Eve 2017, when the police were accused of racial profiling.<sup>28</sup> She therefore establishes herself as a spokesperson of an imagined community<sup>29</sup> that is constituted of what was previously called “the piled-up potential of hate, [...] the piled-up mistrust.” As an “othered”<sup>30</sup> voice she analyzes the Germans (“Almanis”) and their behavior: a sociological perspective from the outside so to speak, and on the other hand, as I previously mentioned, to give context and explanations to the first thirty minutes of the performed play, as her words are more approachable and less ambivalent than Jelinek’s text. She puts herself into the position that is usually held by a (Caucasian) wealthy “First World” power, that comes *to* another country. She sets herself the goal to provide the Germans she’s addressing — the audience, the “you,” placed on the receiving end of the play — with development aid. She wants to help them develop and uses the phrase probably most commonly associated with Germany’s chancellor Angela Merkel and her approach to the “refugee crisis”: “Wir schaffen das!” [We’ll make it!]. The crisis here is not the migrant culture but an (underdeveloped) xenophobic society. This modus is not a new one but one that has become increasingly popular in German comedy with comedians such as Kaya Yanar and Bülent Ceylan — though, in the context of the play and Baydar’s uptake on Jelinek’s discourses, it is rather more compound than the work of Yanar and Ceylan. Baydar’s alter ego, Jilet, explains that a migrant is only a construct of

<sup>27</sup> See Falk Richter’s production of the play (from 39:50 to 44:17).

<sup>28</sup> Deutsche Presse-Agentur (dpa): Grünen Chefin kritisiert Kölner Polizei, *Stuttgarter Nachrichten* February 2, 2017, <https://www.stuttgarter-nachrichten.de/inhalt.silvester-in-koeln-gruenen-chefin-peter-kritisiert-polizei-nach-einsatz.e2e51f6f-1b93-4217-b230-1b943216c-c1c.html>, accessed 28 August, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Benedict Anderson: *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London/New York, Verso, 1983.

<sup>30</sup> Edward W. Said: *Orientalism*, London, Penguin, 2003.



everything one does not want to be and establishes social oppositions from the viewpoint of the hegemonial German to the "other": "We are loud! You are quiet. We are primitive, you are cultivated. We are a dictatorship! You are a democracy! We are violent, you are, like, so peaceful. We are anti-women, you are pro-women." She establishes the migrant as a projection<sup>31</sup> of the unconscious self, as Freud, who is then identified as a source to Jelinek's text, described in his letters to Wilhelm Fließ,<sup>32</sup> or here, as Carl Gustav Jung would probably be an even more suitable reference point, the "collective unconscious": "[...] weshalb die Mythen der Völker die eigentlichen Exponenten des kollektiven Unbewußten sind. Die gesamte Mythologie wäre eine Art Projektion des kollektiven Unbewußten."<sup>33</sup> Thus the fear of the German population becoming a "mixed people," the "German language being destroyed," German women being "dishonored," and the general fear of "Islamization" is diagnosed as being a result of self-experience and the Herero Wars. The root of mythology, says Jung, is the projection of a collective unconsciousness into "legends, fairytales, and historical persons."<sup>34</sup> The migrant in *Am Königsweg* is constructed as a projection, as a character in mythology, just like Oedipus or Creon. His narrative constructs — and conceals — meaning and truth. Jelinek thus apposes Freud's and Jung's theories in replacing the dream analysis as the *via regia* to the unconscious of the individual with the analysis of myth (we will return to this later) to access the foundations of the collective unconsciousness. The narrative of the migrant gives one an easier understanding of the world if, to analyze it, one needs nothing but oneself. And the construction of meaning through myth is done by the unconscious, therefore no fault can be attached to it, but the horizon might be broadened, so that a sense of self gives meaning to more than a "piled-up potential of hate".

This is probably, emphatically put, one of the essential "missions" of art. Or at least it is one way to see it. Art, in its various forms, gives the opportunity for a broader experience and even understanding of oneself and the world we live in. This not only applies to so-called "high-culture" [Hochkultur], where Jilet locates her argument, but also for pop-cultural phenomena such as comedy and pop music. In ending her argument on the opposition of the Christianization of Namibia against the much feared Islamization of the West, Jilet returns the debate to multiculturalism and to the question of religious powers.

<sup>31</sup> The play itself, as we will see later, uses a number of projections, in a broader sense, images, as well. These give an additional discursive dimension to the play. The text's references are thus included in the production of the play.

<sup>32</sup> Sigmund Freud: *Briefe an Wilhelm Fließ. 1887–1904*, ed. J. Moussaieff Masson, trans. Michael Schröter, Frankfurt a. M., Fischer 1999, 108–109.

<sup>33</sup> Carl Gustav Jung: *Die Wirklichkeit der Seele*, München, Deutscher Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1990, § 325.

<sup>34</sup> In my future dissertation, I will address the historiographical aspects of Jelinek's work.

It is the king, wearing a mask, who then sings a song about his, or God's, inclusion in everyday life.<sup>35</sup> A cover of Joan Osborne's "One of us" is used and deformed to create a religious (more specifically Catholic) space that is morally depraved. The lyrics link back to the aniconist debate as well as the story of Thomas, who asked Jesus to "show his wounds":

VERSE 1:

If God had a name what would it be?  
And would you call it to his face?  
If you were faced with Him in all His glory  
What would you ask if you had just one question?

BRIDGE:

And yeah, yeah, God is great  
Yeah, yeah, God is good  
And yeah, yeah, yeah yeah yeah

CHORUS:

What if God was one of us?  
Just a slob like one of us  
Just a stranger on the bus  
Tryin' to make his way home?

VERSE 2:

If God had a face what would it look like?  
And would you want to see if seeing meant  
That you would have to believe in things like heaven  
And in Jesus and the saints and all the prophets?

BRIDGE

CHORUS (extended):

Just tryin' to make his way home  
Back up to heaven all alone  
Nobody callin' on the phone  
'Cept for the Pope maybe in Rome

BRIDGE

CHORUS (extended)<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> See Falk Richter's production of the play (from 44:17 to 49:25).

<sup>36</sup> Eric Bazilian: One of Us [performed by Joan Osborne], *Relish*, BMG Direct Marketing, 1995.

Eric Bazilian wrote the song that was recorded for Osborne's debut album *Relish*, and *One of us* has become her most successful track. It is, at first glance, a simple proclamation of faith: "Yeah, God is great!" But now imagine mimicking the words, slurring the "yeah", like a teenager being asked to clean their room. It becomes dismissive. Even more obviously in the second verse. If "you" could see God, would you want to, if it "meant that you would have to believe." It's an approach to faith similar to Thomas' — seeing is believing — but in opposition to Jesus':

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples therefore said unto him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said unto them, 'Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.' And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, 'Peace be unto you.' Then saith he to Thomas, 'Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands'; and 'reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing'. And Thomas answered and said unto him, 'My Lord and my God.' Jesus saith unto him, 'Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.'<sup>37</sup>

You are blessed if you do *not* have to see. But in Bazilian's/Osborne's text, seeing seems to be the foundation of a newfound faith of an otherwise unbelieving "you." The song is critical of a society that has lost its faith. God, who is "one of us", is lonely. Nobody calls him, except "maybe" the Pope. In a secular society, God has a very low phone bill.

While this song is being sung, with the slurred "yeahs," by a masked king (a tone of voice that makes the song sound even threatening), the stage is transformed. Like altar servers, carrying crosses to the sanctuary, the choir (that had been blinded before and is now seeing once more) creates a sacral stage. The video clips projected behind the actors and actresses show religious art as well as images of current and historical events. The video collage mimics the intertextual construction of quotes within Jelinek's text: it now seems to show the "other stuff" Jelinek refers to at the end of her play. One could try sorting through the clips — from religious monuments and art to videos of pilgrims and newsreaders, televangelists, and text, communions, and the American flag, that from time to time dissolve into psychedelic colors — but it is questionable if the research would have the longed-for interpretive benefits. It is

<sup>37</sup> Jn 20:24–29. See also Braungart: *Ästhetik der Politik*, 39–50.



a multi-discursive stage, that interweaves religious and fundamental debates with questions of American politics such as gun control and the so-called “Alt Right.”

Just when the word “Jesus” is projected to the back of the stage, the gunshots commence, and the music diffuses more and more into “just noise.” In the end, there are three distinguishable voices left and bells ringing in the distance, as if the service were now to start. One voice is the re-read of a 2017 CBN report (The Christian Broadcasting Network) on the Trump administration’s take on the “War on Terror” (“to the shores of Africa to Asia to here at home, a new study shows the U.S. has already spent nearly five trillion dollars trying to defeat terrorism”).<sup>38</sup> It is not read by the original news reporter but by an actor, who seems to try to mimic Trump’s tone of voice. This Trump impersonator is then overtaken by Richard Spencer, who, when Trump got elected in 2016, urged people to “party like it’s 1933.”<sup>39</sup> He addresses the supposed authority of the white race, all while more and more crosses are carried on stage:

To be white is to be a striver, a crusader, an explorer, and a conqueror. We build, we produce, we go upward ... For us, it is conquer or die. This is a unique burden for the white man, that our fate is entirely in our hands. And it is appropriate because within us, within the very blood in our veins as children of the sun, lies the potential for greatness.<sup>40</sup>

The church here is not one of sanctuary but a frightening, dark one, a masked one, a church that has silenced the subject looking for a system that can help them interpret the world. Instead, it climaxes with a final call of aggression in the words of Charlton Heston. Heston, an actor and former spokesperson of the NRA, had become renowned for his phrase “from my cold, dead hands”<sup>41</sup> after Michael Moore’s “Bowling for Columbine.”<sup>42</sup> He had, after the Columbine Massacre of 2000, threatened the democratic presidential nominee Al Gore by saying that he would let him take his guns only after his demise. The sacral

<sup>38</sup> George Thomas: Get Ready for Trump’s War on Terror, Radical Islam, *CBN News*, July 2, 2017, <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/2017/january/get-ready-for-trumps-war-on-terror-radical-islam>, accessed 28 August, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> John Woodrow Cox: ‘Let’s party like it’s 1933’: Inside the alt-right world of Richard Spencer, *The Washington Post*, November 22, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/lets-party-like-its-1933-inside-the-disturbing-alt-right-world-of-richard-spencer/2016/11/22/cf81dc74-aff7-11e6-840f-e3ebab6bcd3\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/lets-party-like-its-1933-inside-the-disturbing-alt-right-world-of-richard-spencer/2016/11/22/cf81dc74-aff7-11e6-840f-e3ebab6bcd3_story.html), accessed 28 August, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Graeme Wood: His Kampf. Richard Spencer is a troll and an icon for white supremacists. He was also my high school classmate. *The Atlantic*, June 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/06/his-kampf/524505/>, accessed 28 August, 2020.

<sup>41</sup> James Dao: N.R.A. leaders cast Gore as Archenemy, *The New York Times*, May 21, 2000, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/national/052100nra-gore.html>, accessed 28 August, 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Moore (dir.): *Bowling for Columbine*, Los Angeles, MGM, 2002.

room, that has been constructed on stage, leaves its final words to a priest that preaches violence and fear. It is in this church of darkness and hate that an actress, wearing a skull as a mask crowned with a wreath of twigs, speaks Jelinek's text. In this part of the play, the text has recourse to the Oedipus myth, that is a central theme from the beginning. At the end of Sophocles' play, Oedipus blinds himself and leaves the world. He punishes himself by removing his own eyes, relinquishing vision, and thus symbolically taking away his means of understanding — at least an understanding that is linked to the concept of "logos." The speaker in *Am Königsweg* is his own triple deity — as stated in the first quote of this article: he is poet, king, and Teiresias, the seer, all in one — or all in many, since in the staging of the play, the text is spoken by different actors in different costumes, as seen before. The King thus does not truly show his face, as it is masked behind collective — and intertextual — speech; and actual, physical masks, taking up the conventions of an Antique theater, which Hans-Thies Lehmann in his dissertation called "pre-dramatic," thus linking the stages of "non-dramatic theater."<sup>43</sup> While we see pictures of floods in the background, an apocalyptic scene transported to our "modern Thebes," the speakers try to understand the current events themselves:

Der König zeigt jetzt sein Gesicht, echt, das ist er?, wahr ist es nicht, will sagen, es ist nicht sein wahres Gesicht. Nichts ist wahr, was er zeigt, [...] und hier stehe ich, nein, keine Jungfrau, aber mit gekrümmten Klauen, ich Sprüchesängerin, Sprücheklopperin, [...] war es ein Gott, [...] d]er gewollt hat, daß dieser Herrscher [...] über Theben herrscht, ausgerechnet!, eben. Aber Theben ist es nicht, vielleicht ein modernes Theben?, macht nichts, kein Gott, an den ich eh nicht glauben würde, hat das gewollt. Das können Sie mir ruhig glauben!<sup>44</sup>

[The King shows his face now, really, that's him?, true is it not, I'm saying, it is not his true face. Nothing he shows is true, [...] and here I stand, no, not a virgin, but with arched claw, I, singer of sooth, banging out bogus, [...] was it a God, [...] who wanted this ruler [...] to rule Thebes, of all places! But it is not Thebes, maybe a modern Thebes? Doesn't matter. No God, who I would not have believed in anyway, would have wanted this. You can believe me.]<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann: *Theater und Mythos*, Stuttgart/Weimar, 1991.

<sup>44</sup> See Falk Richter's production of the play (from 49:25 to 50:15), within the printed text: 47 (Der König ... zeigt,), 60 (und hier stehe ich ... end). The orthography is quoted as in the printed text.

<sup>45</sup> Trans. Anna Lenz, except for "arched claw, I, singer of sooth, banging out bogus" which is kindly contributed by one of Elfriede Jelinek's official translators, Gitta Honegger, who also shared insights into the complexity of translating Jelinek's play with all its wordplay and multilayered meanings. I thank her very much for her quick and open responses. Jelinek: *On the Royal Road*, 42.

Jelinek's work is unquestionably political, which links her to a long tradition of Austrian playwrights, such as Johann Nestroy or Thomas Bernhard. She herself often appeared as a political figure, especially in her earlier career, when she was a member of the KPÖ, the Austrian Communist party. But even after having given up her membership, Jelinek took part in several events and demonstrations against an escalating xenophobia in her home country. Since winning the Nobel Prize, her public appearances have diminished. But she took up the debate again recently within Susanne Teutsch's anthology "*Was zu fürchten vorgegeben wird.*" *Alterität und Xenophobie*.<sup>46</sup> As early as 1994, Jelinek proclaimed the artist's purpose as being to speak for those for whom no other person will speak in terms that, after the last few sentences, should sound familiar:

Wenn wir Künstlerinnen und Künstler in unseren Arbeiten die Moral vergessen, die Verpflichtung, die wir den Fremden gegenüber haben, die sich zu uns geflüchtet haben, dann wird sich unser scharfer Blick letztlich trüben und wir werden überhaupt nichts mehr sagen können, was wahr ist. [...] Es ist unsere Aufgabe, für diejenigen zu sprechen, für die kein anderer spricht.<sup>47</sup>

[If we artists abandon morality in our work, the duty we have toward foreigners, who have sought refuge amongst us, our keen vision will finally be clouded, and we will no longer be able to say what is true. [...] It is our duty to speak for those for whom no one else will speak.]<sup>48</sup>

We have seen this in the play. Maybe the poet has forgotten this duty Jelinek spoke of more than 20 years ago. Has his sight become clouded? No! One notices a paralleling of words here: nothing he says is true, nothing we say will be true, if we forget. The artist in his blindness still sees more clearly than the murky-eyed King, who is unable to even show his true face. In referring to the Oedipal myth, what leads to "truth" is less analytics and more based on faith — "blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed."

But faith in what? A benevolent God, who as a concept is immediately discredited, could not have intended this king to rule, so says our dead poet, attired with the crown of thorns. But there is no longer a need for a God beyond the one king that has constructed himself to be godlike. In the apocalyptic room a future is dismissed as well as a metaphysical belief system. The King, the God, as horrid as he now may be, is not to be found, and instead a differently masked king from the one before takes center stage and tries

<sup>46</sup> Susanne Teutsch (ed.): "*Was zu fürchten vorgegeben wird.*" *Alterität und Xenophobie*, Wien, Praesens, 2006.

<sup>47</sup> After Pia Janke – Stefanie Kaplan: Politisches und feministisches Engagement, in P. Janke (ed.): *Jelinek Handbuch*, Stuttgart/Weimar, Metzler, 2013, 9–20, 9.

<sup>48</sup> Trans. Anna Lenz.



justifying xenophobic tendencies within societies before he crucifies himself. He therefore sacrifices himself — a narrative that will conclude Jelinek's play later — for the supposed good of the many. Then, his words are repeated in American English by an actor dressed up as an orientalist icon — in glittery harem pants, with a huge black moustache and a turban — and thus performing hate speech as a globalized affair, as a universal threat that is constructed within a hegemonistic system.

To understand Jelinek's debate of myth, belief, history, and xenophobia, one has to consider one of the most distinguished poetical principles of her oeuvre: the work on (at times called "deconstruction" or even "destruction" of) myths.<sup>49</sup> Jelinek first revealed her fascination with Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*<sup>50</sup> in her 1980 essay *Die endlose Unschuldigkeit* [*The endless innocence*]. Alongside the psychoanalytical notion of myth, to understand Jelinek's use of the phenomenon, one needs to reflect on what Barthes defines as myths: Myth, he says, is a means of conversation, is meaning, thus not objective language but rather form. As a result, everything can become myth, which is why Barthes in the first part of *Mythologies* analyzes and dissects so-called "trivial myths": from beefsteak and French fries, to advertisements, sexuality, sport events, and actors: Myths are identified as a secondary system of semiology, a metalinguistic system. In doing this, Barthes asks the mythologist to deconstruct the myth as form and therefore expose its implied ideologies that appear innocent and are normalized in society: "myth transforms history into nature."<sup>51</sup> Myth, Barthes continues, "steals from language" as it deforms it and makes use of it to maintain ideologies. Jelinek, in turn, steals from myth, deforms it, and makes use of it: not to politick, Uta Degner observes, but to use it as a poetic principle, seen in her montage-style writing.<sup>52</sup> *Am Königsweg* plays with myths in even narrower terms than Barthes uses and is obvious in her referencing of the Oedipal myth. The text exposes nationalism and (mythical) icons such as Trump, or, with the help of Falk Richter's production, the "Alt Right", links them to pop-cultural and religious discourses and finds, in its last words of hopefulness, a rather optimistic tone.

Jelinek's play ends in a state of failed communication, in paragraphs that, due to their word play, are especially difficult to translate:

Sollen wir dem König Opfer bringen, weil Gott sie nicht haben will? [...] Aller Groll, aller Haß, alles, was sich eigentlich schön auf Sie alle verteilen sollte, all das richtet

<sup>49</sup> Ulrike Degner: Mythenkonstruktion, in P. Janke (ed.): *Jelinek Handbuch*, 41–46; Marlies Janz: *Elfriede Jelinek*, Stuttgart/Weimar, Metzler, 1995, and Christa Gürtler (ed.): *Gegen den schönen Schein. Texte zu Elfriede Jelinek*, Frankfurt a. M., Neue Kritik, 1990.

<sup>50</sup> Roland Barthes: *Mythologies*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1957.

<sup>51</sup> Barthes: *Mythologies*, 237.

<sup>52</sup> Degner: Mythenkonstruktion, 45.

sich, sagt dieser Mann hier, den ich Ihnen leider nicht persönlich herbeischaffen kann, damit er es Ihnen selber sagt, all diese negativen Gefühle richten sich auf ein einziges Individuum, auf den König, der jeder sein könnte, aber es nicht ist, das haben Sie nicht gewußt, was? Der König ist er, der König ist nun mal er, und jetzt müßte er eigentlich der sein, in den alles mündet, die Hoffnungen als erstes, die werden schon bald abgehakt sein, aber die Haßgefühle, der Groll, wie wärs' mit denen? Richten sich auf ihn, auf den König, auf den Einzigen, auf das versöhnende Opfer. Passen Sie gut auf das Wort versöhnend auf. Es ist zwar nicht jenes, das sich vorhin von mir losgerissen hat, denn mit Versöhnung hatte ich nie etwas am Hut, es ist ein ganz neues Wort, das zu mir gekommen ist, weil mein altes Wort es mit mir nicht mehr aushalten kann. Bitte komm zu mir zurück liebes Wort oder muss ich erst einen Engel rufen? Da ist er ja schon, ich mußte nicht einmal rufen, er war die ganze Zeit da! Da ruft der Engel des HERRN vom Himmel irgendwen an, verflucht seinen Provider, weil der dort keinen Mast, oder womit er uns halt versorgen möchte, hingestellt und dahingestellt hat sein lassen [...]; der Engel hat die Nummer gewählt, damit das Wort sich verbreiten kann, er schaut auf das Display, ob er auch die richtige Nummer gewählt hat, weil keiner abhebt. Also bitte, wie lang will er noch warten, bis er eine Verbindung kriegt? Es will sich hier wohl breitmachen, denn höher kommt es nicht hinauf, das Wort, das bei Gott ist, nein eben nicht, das Wort hat eine Panne, es kommt nirgendwohin, es bleibt und es ist auch wieder weg. Keine Ahnung.

Skypen geht in diesem Fall nicht, was sollte man da auch sehen? Da ist ja nichts, nur Ödnis. Keine Fabriken, keine Bergwerke, überhaupt keine Werke. Irgendwer hat gesprochen, wir haben es nicht gehört, aber einer muß es gesagt haben: Weg mit ihm, weg mit dem Wort, mit jedem Wort, wir wählen lieber ein andres Wort, damit wir auch das verlieren, wir haben alles verloren, jetzt gehen uns auch die Worte aus und dorthin, wo noch Platz für Unterhaltung ist. Bitte, nehmen Sie schon mal auf dem Opferstein Platz, machen Sie sich's bequem ich hole nur das Messer: Abraham! Abraham! Und der antwortet, wie bereits gesagt, nicht von mir, deswegen stimmt es auch: Hier bin ich. Moment, ich kann nicht genau sehen, wer das überhaupt ist, er scheint aber da zu sein. Mein Wort ist verrückt geworden, wahrscheinlich weil es glaubte, mich verloren zu haben, aber ich verliere keine Worte, und das Wort, es spricht: Lege deine Hand nicht an den Knaben, denn nun weiß ich, daß du Gott fürchtest und hast deines einzigen Sohnes nicht verschont um meinetwillen. Bitte seien Sie mir nicht böse, und hören Sie lieber nicht auf mich!<sup>53</sup>

In these final paragraphs the discourses of the play merge: religion, politics, and myth as well as the question: where is the poet's voice in this multi-voiced text of quotes and allusions? Jelinek challenges the author-bound literary voice by "stealing" the words of others. But she does not as a premise give up on it.

<sup>53</sup> Jelinek: *Ibid.*, 145–147.



Her plays struggle with concepts of meaning, interpretation, and originality: a struggle she has maintained but varied in her forty-year career as a playwright. It is a struggle that she also continues in *Am Königsweg* and concludes in a borrowing of biblical speech. But before, we shall see how the arguments established on the previous pages accumulate here, in the last pages of the play.

Should we make sacrifice to the King, since God is no longer interested? [...] All resentments, all hate, all that should be equally distributed amongst you all, all that is directed toward one individual, the King, says this man, who, unfortunately I cannot bring here, the King, who could be anyone, but is not, you did not know that, did you? He is the King, that's just the way it is, and now he should be the one everything leads into, hopes first, they will soon be forgotten, but the feelings of hate, the resentment, what about those?

The King all hope might have led to, the one who, emphatically speaking, has “killed” the hopes of “a better world” should, as the text argues, become the one who accumulates the resentments that previously originated in him: it is incumbent upon us, it seems, to turn the tables. Anyone could be king, could be sacrificed therefore, but not anyone *is*. No need to discuss it. “The man”, i.e., Trump, is King. Trump, who famously defies his own resentments and instead continuously complains of the hate he himself claims to have experienced, from “the left-wing media” for example. He thus is to — or in his view even might already have — become the “sacrifice” that could reconcile the people. But beware of the word “reconcile”, the speaker says. It was not the word that had been used earlier by her, in a passage excluded from this analysis. There, it was an undefined word, that slipped out of the poet’s grasp, but then she was able to take it away.<sup>54</sup> A word it was, that could be mastered, be formed [Wortführen],<sup>55</sup> that does, however, not have a secondary meaning attached to it. By now differentiating it from the word “reconcile”, of course, this meaning is attached to the “empty word”: if you tell someone not to think of a pink elephant, he will most definitely think of a pink elephant. Is this poet’s pink elephant reconciliation? Is that the aim of this play? So far, the text seems to suggest this rather simple, one-dimensional political appeal: People, reconcile! At the very least, “reconciliation” is the next best word, since the ambitious, mysterious one from before has “torn itself away” from the poet: the poet’s idea of being able to “form” or “master” was illusive. She is left merely with “reconciliation.” But the speaker longs for this lost ambiguity. Barthes’ “utopian” thought that art could reunite society by “destroying” the myths (he emphasizes literature in this way), by “reaching the meaning

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.



of things themselves instead of the meaning of words,"<sup>56</sup> that it could directly improve upon injustices in society, is not one supported by Jelinek: "Diese Illusion kann ich mir eigentlich nicht mehr erlauben"<sup>57</sup> — she cannot permit herself this illusion any longer.

"Please come back to me, dear word, or do I need to call an angel?" The angel was there all along, tries calling God on the phone (a familiar lyric), but he does not answer. The word, Jelinek says, was always with God — no, *is* God: she is referring to John 1:1, of course: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." From a piece of postdramatic theater in a postmodern time, we have now returned to a notion of art that resembles an emphatic, romantic notion of "Kunstreligion" more than it does one of a deconstructive postmodernism: the poet, even in quoting "strange tongues," becomes the priest of that art. But alas, it is not that simple: God does not answer the phone,<sup>58</sup> the word thus is "stuck" — somewhere between God and the poet. The mediator of speech, angel or telephone, is defected: no use in "skyping", since there is nothing to *see* but wasteland [Ödnis]. This "Tohuwabohu" has been cleared of economy ["Fabriken" und "Bergwerke"] and literary works [Werke] alike, a phrase that is especially telling, since Jelinek has been accredited with writing prototypical postdramatic theater,<sup>59</sup> a theater where the written text has become marginalized, where the "Werkgedanke" is no longer said to be essential. As more and more of the text's complexity becomes evident it shows: Jelinek's plays must be *read* as well as seen. What resonates with us does show tendencies of the traditional "Werk" as poetic concept. And this work of literature struggles with its own ability to speak; speak in words that do carry meaning beyond what seems to be trivial.

Therefore, the next phrase could be read as one that reviews a long held poetic principle: "away with the word, all the words, we will elect another one, just to lose that one as well, we have lost everything, now we have run out of words, which run to where there is room for entertainment." And entertainment: that might just be the King, who loses his place upon the "sacrificial stone." It is instead taken by you, the recipient. And so the speaker, the poet, goes to "fetch the knife", as they are asked to do in a familiar way: "Abraham! Abraham!", thus begins — and ends — the sacrifice of Isaak.<sup>60</sup> The speaker

<sup>56</sup> Barthes: *Ibid.*, 241

<sup>57</sup> Gunna Wendt: "Es geht immer alles prekär aus – wie in der Wirklichkeit." Ein Gespräch mit der Schriftstellerin Elfriede Jelinek über die Unmündigkeit der Gesellschaft und den Autismus des Schreibens, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, April 14, 1992, (as quoted in Degner: *Ibid.*, 42).

<sup>58</sup> This part is performed in the play by having the King pick up a crucifix as a phone shortly after the part where the skull-headed poet speaks and tries to speak to Jesus himself — unsuccessfully.

<sup>59</sup> Ingrid Hentschel: *Dionysos kann nicht sterben. Theater in der Gegenwart*, Berlin, Lit Verlag, 2007, 71.

<sup>60</sup> Gen. 1, 22:1 and 22:11.

clearly marks those words including Abraham's "Here am I." as strange ones, and as true ones as well, because they are not hers: "as I said, not mine, which is why it's true." The originator of the call in the Bible is either God, when asking Abraham to sacrifice his son, or the (here resurrected) angel, delivering God's message. In *Am Königsweg*, it is the word itself that speaks the familiar words: "And he said, 'Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.'" The sacrifice of the people, the child, has been stopped. The word does not need the sacrifice, not even that of the king, which had only been so briefly considered, as it does not need faith. On the contrary: "hören Sie lieber nicht auf mich!", [you'd better not listen to me]. Those are the last words of a play that has failed to find a solution but also, does not want to find a solution.

What it does find instead, what it does perform, is the need for artistic speech, for art and ambivalence, for play and literature, and theater. The word does not want your faith or your sacrifice, it doesn't even want to be listened to, but nevertheless, you have to listen, if you *have* come this far, you already have. You have heard the word and seen ideas performed. You have not received an ideology but have been challenged in your beliefs by a text that makes statements and defies them just a moment later. You have thus received a piece of art that tests and plays with modes of speech, from politics to "politainment," from the entertainment industry to the clerical voice to ancient myths. It shows that what we esteem as deconstructive, postmodern, or postdramatic does not leave you with a morally coreless society, but rather fights for a re-discussion of our means of understanding and therefore, yes, reconciling toward a multivocal, varied society that, however, is not without unifying moral values. *Am Königsweg* tries on discourses that provide meaning like one tries on clothes in a dressing room. It "tries on" also the voice of the other, and leaves you with this: consider collective hate. Consider it from all sides. Reconsider everything you might know. Consider it in context. And challenge your beliefs as well as your longing to *see*.

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PART 3:  
*ARTISTIC PRACTICES*

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## ANAMNESIS OF ART: VOICE / MEMORY / IDENTITY

JAROSŁAW FRET

*ANAMNESIS* (written with capital letters) is the title of a triptych — a three-part performance “on the road to the theater,” which is not so much “only” a reading of past records, or also a voice of the present but rather an attempt to build up fields of memory thanks to the shared presence of actors and spectators. Its stage *hic et nunc* is to combine all of our effort together — anamnesis, recollection, an attempt to represent but also be part of the performance, as well as creating layers of active humanity, which we subconsciously pass to each other with and without cultural identity or belonging.

Witnessing does not only mean to communicate issues based on facts, registers, records, but also having the power of incorporation, opposing the passivity of modern times, the passivity of voyeurism. In the case of being a spectator/witness, it means having the power to oppose the universal, widespread derelict pornography of the media. The three-part performance, which comprises the following sections: “Medeas. On Getting Across”, then “Armine, Sister” (the second part of the triptych, which we devoted to the now fully EU recognized Genocide of the Armenians of 1915), and “Moirai” (the third part, dedicated to the *Desaparecidos*), explores the subject of witness-action, trying to restore to theater art its ethical dimension, not just constituting a new aesthetic form.

### ORIGINS

Teatr ZAR came into being as a project of a group of people associated with the Grotowski Center, long after theater practice had moved out of the venue and even long after Grotowski’s death. The group actually began life in Brzezinka, the former forest center of the Laboratory Theater, which we relaunched as a workshop venue in the mid-1990s. Our first production, created in the years when the ensemble was coming into existence, was inspired, among other things, by the place where Jerzy Grotowski once worked. Its studio version was later moved to the space of the Laboratory Theater in Wrocław. There, in the same space on which *Apocalypsis cum figuris* has left its unique mark, permeating it to the last brick and transforming it into a space with a unique presence, we created our subsequent productions.

When I study the history of the masters' achievements, I attempt to discover the questions they asked themselves. To understand what they worked on and what directions they followed is to understand what questions drove them. The crucial thing in referencing their practice is not the ability to quote their answers but to translate into one's own language and time the questions that motivated them; and also, to decipher their personal metaphors, to place a double question mark, like a child, "What if all they wrote should be understood literally, without inverted commas?" This perspective required us to be attentive. At the same time, it gave us the tools to create our piece — we found all we needed in Brzezinka. When we arranged the songs and created a musical dramaturgy from the material gathered during our expeditions, with all its dynamics of revealing and concealing various musical energies, we had no foundation until we got to know the space in Brzezinka. We heard its soundscape throughout our work and we needed, like when you sculpt, to take off layer after layer until what was left was silence — not just the absence of sound, a digital zero, but the silence of the profound presence of the world. This is how Brzezinka affected us, giving us further direction for our work — the revealing through sound. This was the genesis of Teatr ZAR — the theater born of the spirit of song. The theater that wants, at once, to remain song and to release from it a visible, airborne particle — a movement, a gesture; to put song on like a mask, to let oneself be led by it into the most intimate dimension, to the merest flicker of an eyelid.

We work in the belief that we are not even able to transfer to the stage our own experience of the journey, of our singing together with the Armenians, Georgians, and Sardinians, without slipping into stylization; and this isn't something we want to do. A more important aspect is the practical transposition of our experience based on completely different principles that will not diminish its value but create a new quality. We use sources through documents, traces, ethnomusical research — joint singing, liturgy, even singing at funerals. This changes our understanding of art, and we change our skin. The musical material is subject to the same processes. Yet we stay close. We practice four-part singing in groups of four. The Sardinian tradition that interests us most is a *cuncordu*; we keep in touch with the Santa Croce Confraternity from Castelsardo and the confraternity from Orosei; our production incorporates material from these two traditions; it is as endemic as *zar* from Svaneti, from Latalia, or *kwiria* sung only by the Pilpani family in Svaneti. Yet we do not treat everything as material — our expeditions are a part of our life. When something is to become material for theater, we try to process it at a high temperature. Sometimes, like in our performance piece "Anhelli", we run two parallel processes. What is enacted — the movement, the gestures — becomes a parallel layer, independent of the vocal component and its energy. A field of voltages, of potentials, is generated between the two layers, and we hope that



some sparks of meaning pass between them. The same is the case with our first production: the line of text of the apocryphal gospels is juxtaposed with the line of song. A strong non-musical counterpoint can occur — an opposition, a mutual betrayal, but a faithfulness too.

From the start, our explorations were directed toward Eastern Christianity: the Armenian and Georgian Churches are among the oldest in the world. Many remarkable music forms survive there, but when we first headed to the Caucasus Mountains we had no idea how rich the Svan tradition was. The pre-Christian funeral songs of the Svans have served the community for over two thousand years as a means of seeing off the soul of a dead person; a form of spiritual practice. In Svaneti we came into contact with a living community that maintained a unique song practice. Only there did I realize that when I had gone to the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin and to Vienna's Albertina to prepare for our expedition, I had come across recordings of *zar*. I was even able to copy them partly and learn them, but nothing happened. I had the documents, but without personal experience I wasn't even able to recognize the uniqueness of this phenomenon which soon, and for many years too, would define the area I wanted to explore.

What are the elements of this definition? It is difficult to describe in words; I can only index my intuitions. The full definition is the sung *zar*. The column of sound. The column of breaths. The column of past and future generations. The shared sounds, extraordinarily adjacent in vibration, which concentrically bond the community at many levels, like the circles of expanding human presence — from the singers to the mountain summits. The tradition is so ancient it is practiced in the language of glossolalia, the “gift of tongues” — it involves no articulation of meaning.

*Zar* presents us with a challenge: to bring out the energy of sound. With adjacent sounds and its vibratory qualities, the music has a very strong effect on our perception, even our sight. In theater, I believe, music can change the color of a candle's flame and the sharpness of an actor's shadow — *zar* makes this experience possible. If all this is taken as a definition of theater, this is the definition I subscribe to.

#### PNEUMATICS OF AN ACTOR

Voice constitutes our presence. An attempt to understand its essence brings us closer to knowing the essence of humanity and the phenomenon of being a person. In our work, the Pneumatics of an Actor is a way of understanding life-in-ourselves which is a breath. There are thousands of techniques to discover the pneumatic center in our bodies, but the Voice as medium for the Word will always remain the most sensitive instrument of this discovery. The Pneumatics

of an Actor is a fundamental biomechanics of the body and the memory path that lives in us. It is impossible to perfect the “state of remembering” without viewing life as a musical vibration. How can we perceive a person as sound? What is the transmission of sound over generations and over space? What is voice among different domains of human experience? These questions are fundamental in our Teatr ZAR work, bringing new paths for anthropological research through and in theater practice. These questions are present in many ancient traditions, one among them being the *Sama Veda*. So, let’s start from the beginning:

1. Om. Verily, he who knows the eldest and the best, surely becomes the eldest and the best. Prana is indeed the eldest and the best (of the organs).
2. Verily, he who knows the richest, becomes the richest among his own people. Speech is indeed the richest.
3. Verily, he who knows the stable basis, becomes stabilized in this world and in the next. The eye is indeed the stable basis.
4. Verily, he who knows prosperity, attains all desires, both divine and human. The ear is indeed prosperity.
5. Verily, he who knows the abode, becomes the abode of his people. The mind is indeed the abode.
6. Now once, the five senses disputed among themselves about their personal superiority, saying, ‘I am superior’, ‘I am superior.’
7. Those five senses approached the father Prajapati and said to him, ‘Revered sir, who is the best amongst us?’ He replied, ‘He amongst you is the best on whose departure the body would appear its worst, as it were.’
8. Speech departed. Staying a year out, it came back and asked, ‘How have you been able to live without me?’ The others replied, ‘Just like the dumb: though not speaking, yet living with the breath, seeing with the eye, hearing with the ear, and thinking with the mind.’ At this speech entered the body.
9. The eye departed. Staying a year out, it came back and asked, ‘How have you been able to live without me?’ ‘Just like the blind, though not seeing, yet living with the breath, speaking with the organ of speech, hearing with the ear, and thinking with the mind.’ At this the eye entered the body.
10. The ear departed. Staying a year out, it came back and asked, ‘How have you been able to live without me?’ ‘Just like the deaf, though not hearing, yet living with the breath, speaking with the organ of speech, seeing with the eye, and thinking with the mind.’ At this the ear entered the body.
11. The mind departed. Staying a year out, it came back and asked, ‘How have you been able to live without me?’ ‘Just like infants without developed

- minds, yet living with the breath, speaking with the organ of speech, hearing with the ear.' At this the mind entered the body.
12. Then, as the Prana was about to depart, it uprooted the other senses just as a horse of mettle would uproot the pegs to which it is tethered. They all then came to it and said, 'O revered sir, be our lord, you are the best amongst us; do not depart from the body.'
  13. Then speech said to that one, 'Just as I am the richest, in the same manner are you also the richest.' Then the eye said to that one, 'Just as I am the stable basis, in the same manner are you also the stable basis.'
  14. The ear said to that one, 'Just as I am prosperity, in the same manner are you also prosperity.' Then the mind said to that one, 'Just as I am the abode, in the same manner are you also the abode.'
  15. Verily, people do not call them as organs of speech, nor as eyes, nor as ears, nor as minds. But they call them only as Pranas; for the Prana indeed is all these.

The long fragment quoted above belongs to the *Chandogya Upanishad*, Chapter 5.

## THE QUESTIONS

It is often stressed that what is most inspiring and fresh in Polish theater tends to be rooted in the Romantic trend or is a response to the tradition of Polish Romanticism, a response to a new, total perception of the human being; a complete human whose being is almost identical to the gods. For the sake of a complete individual and complete community, the tradition insisted that the endless procession of life be joined by those who have passed away and who have not yet been born. The Romantic tradition is permeated by the spiritual presence of Others, by communing with the dead. Prof. Maria Janion writes straight out, "In Romantic tradition, which I have a special affinity for, the layers of generations express the idea of a communion of the living and the dead. Mickiewicz was convinced that this idea was the basic mode of existence of our culture." Communion with the dead ancestors, the ritual of "forefathers," might be the basic form of existence of people in general; our main tasks include remembering, with memory, perhaps, holding the key to the essence of life. I am not talking about memory understood as a record or a chronicle of facts but about noticing that we ourselves are "the memory of life that remembers itself", that our bodies are not just vessels but memory itself. This evokes the image of a scroll unrolling along a line — the axis of time — which contains a number of points. Rather, it is the kind of memory where the points are accessible at the same time and at all times. The memory resides in



the eye, in the very process of seeing; in the eye of the Creator “that sees, in the first eternal gaze, all things as they were to be”; in the eye of a newborn baby; the eye that is memory. Eyes wide open with surprise until the moment of death. To understand this, one would not only have to collect all testimonies, but then smelt them into a single moment; one would have to collect the whole of life, all human flesh, and smelt it. To remember is the primary task of the singer, actor — the singer in the lineage of the Homeric Aoides who remembers, who spins a story, but who remembers mostly with her own body, with each minutest quality that flows from her soul, that even flows from the spheres that she “does not remember.”

#### MUSIC AS MEMORY

Musical memory becomes a wonderful thing — the purest model of memory vibrating all for itself. Of course, one can work on musical memory by developing particular skills, but it is not the kind of memory I am talking about. I am referring to developing the “state of remembering”; a certain sensitivity, sympathy, hearing. One cannot perfect musical memory without perfecting hearing, without perfecting feeling; no one can escape from sound, from the vibrations that are sound. One cannot perfect the “state of remembering” without understanding life as musical vibration: listening for the remnant sounds of the Big Bang; the aural mode by which we start discerning the world when we are still in our mothers’ wombs, through voices that reach us; a person can be perceived as a sound; even God enters a woman’s body through her ear and she becomes pregnant. An actor becomes a chord, a multidirectional figure imitating ancient protagonists. One cannot perfect memory without the belief that song precedes all being and can condition all perception, that song can reveal the ineffable.

We approach the songs gathered during our expeditions as texts. Songs are texts, and all texts are songs that are impoverished, severed like arms from the body. We meet them like we meet people, and they give us solutions, give us certain directions, like travelers do. We hear them, recompose them. We listen to them, trying to recognize human fortunes, changeable, decomposed, deformed. I also know that silence is indispensable. We cannot imagine a music or theater event without pauses, silences, just as we cannot imagine poetry without a falling into silence. It is silence that we try to measure, tune out with the clock of music; the silence that can be heard after each meeting that life gifts us. Silence is not darkness, it is not absence, it does not remove, does not put aside the foundation of our being, does not lord it over us. Just the opposite — it places us in the very center. Silence itself is the center.

True inheritance of a tradition is an attempt to transport through time the questions of a Master rather than his answers. Asking a question of someone who is absent makes it necessary for me to transgress into the territory of my own experience and doubt.

#### ON THE THEATER OF EMBODIMENT

I believe that the stiff, lax, lying, or hanging body of an actor is an exceptionally pointless way of representing death on stage. The superficial curiosity of death and the ease with which it can be presented in drama (which always remains a theater project, a text, recorded in language) prove how superficial the contemporary culture of representation is. Treatises on death in torrents of words and treatises of empty forms in living bodies, move us away from the key experience/inexperience of death.

Of most importance for the theater, however, remains the question of “abolishing” death, which borders on misunderstanding and ridicule. This is the question of embodying something that is absent. I try to name the basic limitation of the theater and its language to realize (like a craftsman) the qualities and limits of the material I work with. The limitations of language are present in every art, but this is particularly painful in the theater — in the territory of “living art,” to invoke Appia — as it makes us realize we cannot express the whole, the totality of our life when we are alive. And here, realizing that we have come close to a rather trivial truth, we can only smile.

Can *zar*, the column of sound, take on itself some of the theater’s wrestling with the imperfection of representation and shift its power toward embodiment? For a moment? Also, toward the embodiment of my own death, of our death? Or perhaps we are left with nothing else but the bitter gift of representation/embodiment of dying, not death?

I grapple with the belief that Theater is a death mask (my own, ours) that I put on while I am still alive in front of those gathered around the performance. And I hear my death mask, I still hear it breathing. This performance is my death mask and the death mask of all my friends. This performance is my death mask and the death mask of all those present, put on while we are still alive. We demand these missions for theater as the art of embodiment; a theater that is a death mask put on by those still alive; realized through sound, and especially through song, as our focus is on that which flows from the body, that which is part of the body like the heart or eye; that which is both immanent and transcendent in relation to my body; that which is at once instrumental and is the medium of being in a body. Song is the most likely path to fulfil this mission.

## ANAMNESIS OF ART, ANAMNESIS IN ART

ANAMNESIS (written with capital letters) is the title of a triptych — a three-part performance “on the road to the theater,” which is not so much “only” a reading of past records, or also a voice of the present, but rather an attempt to build up fields of memory thanks to the shared presence of actors and spectators. Its stage *hic et nunc* is to combine all of our effort together — anamnesis, recollection, an attempt to represent but also be part of the performance, as well as creating layers of active humanity, which we subconsciously pass to each other with and without cultural identity or belonging.

Witnessing does not only mean to communicate issues based on facts, registers, records, but also, having the power of incorporation, opposing the passivity of modern times, the passivity of voyeurism. In the case of being a spectator/witness, it means having the power to oppose the universal, widespread pornography of the media.

The three-part performance, which comprises the following sections: “Medeas. On Getting Across”, then “Armine, Sister” (the second part of the triptych, which we devoted to the now fully EU recognized Genocide of the Armenians of 1915) and “Moirai” (the third part, dedicated to the Desaparecidos), explores the subject of witness-action, trying to restore to theater art its ethical dimension, not just constituting a new aesthetic form.

When we think about the theater “which does present,” we mean the medium which, in recalling those who have passed, is feeding our humanity. It feeds on my voice, my breath and the breath of everyone gathered in one space of the spectacle.

In Anamnesis we call on the absent presence of refugees who want to change or even save their lives by reaching the shores of Europe. We call on those who die without names, without trace, sporadically appearing in messages and the media as numbers, imprecise estimates. We ask the question if it is possible for the theater to call them unnamed, or rather, is it possible to hear their silence through the theater.

Anamnesis (ἀνάμνησις) is, according to dictionary definitions: memory or memory of the past, reminiscence. This is also a Platonic reminder to yourself of what you once met while staying in the world of ideas, actually the way cognition works through reminding, independent from sensual experience. Anamnesis in medicine is part of the diagnosis, the history of the disease recorded in documents but above all in the body of the patient (body confession). Finally, in the Christian liturgy, anamnesis is part of the Eucharistic prayer with the memory of death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In our work we want to propose yet another definition of anamnesis: Anamnesis in Art - anamnesis as the power of building a field of memory that



both surrounds us like a wave, as well as communicating with this part of us which is inside. This interior part is not filled, and that is what allows us to grow, live, understand, feel.

Remembrance is fundamental for the function of art. *Téchnē* (τέχνη) cannot exist without anamnesis. Theater through anamnesis can transmit/transit and transgress the experience —foreign to me — that does not consist of the same elements as before but is deeply human, and legible. Through the infinite requiem about crossing I tried to build a field message for all those whose names or even numbers we will never know. One of the fundamental shifts within our anthropological approach to defining a performer's score is that we no longer see it "only" as restoration of behaving but rather as restoration of recomposed experience. Theater/performance shall be understood as "recomposed experience." We will not be able to remember anything even if everything we understand, we understand only thanks to memory.



THE TRAGEDY OF MAN AS THEATRUM THEOLOGICUM  
(A DRAMATURG'S DIARY)

ANDRÁS VISKY

*The theater of parousia means the theater of "Christ's appearance at the Last Judgment." In other words: the theater of the Resurrection. In ancient Greek usage, parousia referred to the rite of the ruler's visit; in the Gospels, to the final visit of the Redeemer, that is, to the second coming of the Messiah, the final, fulfilling event when He restores "the country" and sits in final judgment. "This will be the theater of parousia," Silviu Purcărete declares on the first day of rehearsal of The Tragedy of Man with a theater company in Temesvár (Romania) in 2019. This dramaturg's diary documents the elaboration of this directorial proposition meaning rendering justice that represents the essence of theater. This is not solely a philosophical-theological matter, but also poetic advice: with Purcărete, in any event, we come face to face with it, since he regards the theater as the stage of universal events: a space where Revelation is achieved and we participate in the administration of justice. Not a theater of illusion, opposed to reality, but on the contrary, the theater of the sole reality, opposed to the world as optical illusion.*

*The theater to which I commit myself is that which glorifies men's failures much rather than their strength and efficacy. A place where we can observe the human being's frailty, weakness, faults, and inadequacies.*

Silviu Purcărete<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Silviu Purcărete: *Images de théâtre*, Carnières (Belgium), Lansman Editeur, 2002, 26.



JANUARY 1, 2020.

The theater of *parousia*, Silviu Purcărete announces at the first rehearsal of *The Tragedy of Man*:<sup>2</sup> it's his way of summarizing the goal of the endeavor before us. We see a shabby company on the unusually narrow, built-up stage. The director continues. They're all naked, covered only by beige trench coats: they're all here with us. They will perform the tragedy of man, the man of every age and our own, each in their own way, "poor in spirit." The theater of *parousia*, which means the theater of "Christ's appearance at the Last Judgment." In other words: the theater of the Resurrection. In ancient Greek usage, *parousia* referred to the rite of the ruler's visit; in the Gospels, to the final visit of the Redeemer, that is, to the second coming of the Messiah, the final, fulfilling event when He restores "the country" and sits in final judgment.

What else should we understand in this directorial proposition but the act of rendering justice that represents the essence of theater? It is not solely a philosophical-theological matter — but, of course, that's essentially what it is! — but also poetic advice: with Purcărete, in any event, we come face to face with it, since he regards the theater as the stage of universal events: a space where Revelation is achieved and we participate in the administration of justice. Not a theater of illusion, opposed to reality, but, on the contrary, the theater of the sole reality, opposed to the world as optical illusion. Alain Badiou defines the post-Brechtian theater of political subject(s) as "the means to display truths,"<sup>3</sup> whereas Purcărete's theater is the theater of existence-truth, therefore that of the sole truth, which is the final summation of the kaleidoscope-play of Badiou's "truths."

The main entrance to the Gergely Csíky Theater — the enormous building that houses three major theatrical companies (Romanian, Hungarian, and German)<sup>4</sup> and an opera company — can be found on its southeastern side, from which a fairly uninviting staircase leads up to the former ballroom, now converted into the stage of the Hungarian company. The hall can also be reached from the northwestern side of the building on Opera Square, presently under renovation. For me, well known if not legendary for my poor sense of

<sup>2</sup> Imre Madách (1823–1864): *Az ember tragédiája* [The Tragedy of Man], S. Purcărete – András Visky (eds.), a play in verse and one of the foundational works of Hungarian theater: Director, Silviu Purcărete; Sets and costumes, Dragoș Buhagiar; Music, Vasile Șirli; Dramaturg, András Visky; Directorial assistant, Ilir Dragovoja; Musical assistant, Enikő Éder; Sound, Sebastian Bayer; Stage manager, Éva Kertész; Lighting, Zoltán Gidó; Prompter, Marika Czumbil; Photography, Petru Cojocaru; Poster design, Csilla Joó; Cast: Géza Aszalos, Attila Balázs, András Zsolt Bandi, Emília Borbély B., Anna Csábi, Zsolt Csata, Enikő Éder, Attila Kiss, Levente Kocsárdi, Ildikó Lanstyák, Rita Lőrincz, Szilárd Lukács, Etelka Magyar, Zsolt Imre Mátyás, Csongor Mihály, András Csaba Molnos, Enikő Szász, Mónika Tar, Andrea Tokai, Eszter Nikolett Tóth, Richárd Vass; Gergely Csíky Theater, Timișoara, Romania, March 3, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Alain Badiou: *Le siècle*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> That is, one company for each of the three historical ethnic groups of Transylvania.

orientation, it's frightening: the interior spaces, evoking their manifold re-modelings with their — to my eyes — utterly illogical connections, sometimes strike me as downright hostile. I'm utterly incapable of finding my way, and indeed, I give up right away, on the first day.

In the theater, as also of course in any context, it is dangerous to speak of "a single truth," but in this case I think of the singular event of reality becoming fact, and not of the diversity of perceptions: the spiritual development that becomes a life fact feels unique in the (practically unknown to the individual) present, which, as a matter of fact, is the *it exists* and the *I am*.

Purcărete uses abstract and largely unknown theological concepts as easily as if they were self-evident, yet the company doesn't start in fright because his next sentence expresses the theatrical language in which he explicates *The Tragedy of Man*, not solely Madách's "dramatic poem" but the *conditio humana* itself: namely, that which interests us, *nolens volens*, in theater. People who've just been resurrected perform the work for us, an amateur company whose hands have just picked up the script of *The Tragedy of Man* and who sense an unknown prompting, arising from the depths, to realize this salvation-poem.

It is the theater of *parousia*, and right in the midst of Lent, which is an especially significant season in Romanian culture, even, *mutatis mutandis*, in the age of the consumer apocalypse. During Lent, the city changes its aspect: restaurants and sidewalk crêpe stalls and food carts offer Lenten menus, bells toll more frequently than at other times, visibly more people go to church even on weekdays. This is less noticeable in Hungarian communities, but the atmosphere of the whole city still exerts an effect on everyone.

Purcărete's world is the theater of forms, the *theatrum theologicum*. The form: memory, or rather, the act of remembering. Dust or seaside sand: amnesia. Not only the memory loss of terrestrial beings, but also of astral ones: stardust mingles with the dust, it is not only human bones that become dust — so that we might already think of our appearance and disappearance as form. And to the extent that it is form, it must always be concrete, fundamentally sensory, and experiential: this is what he places in opposition to the abstract quality of Madách's poem. Faced with the great questions, all of us — if, of course, we're fortunate — are poor in spirit. And theater, when it reflects, engrossed, on its own historicity, and then sharply questions its own identity, becomes the existence-laboratory of the poor in spirit: *theologia pauperum*.

What are we performing? Bunraku theater, in our humble manner. The performing actor doesn't speak: he makes an action visible. The actor who speaks is not acting: he makes speech audible and exists as the double of the one who acts in the performance space. This would be the concept of the production being prepared. There is something in this that I find dazzling: the separation of body from soul. The fact that, as it were, we have stepped back into time for the timespan of the performance, into time that we had already left behind us



with finality, since we've already died, and indeed, already been resurrected: thus, we have stepped back into the perfect form of the *imago dei*. This is none other than the re-elevation of the theater's communal lifestyle, which had remained current for millennia, into our everyday context. Every story is an origin story, presence is a breaking free, and time is the experience of waiting. The actors come among us from the far side of time; they arise from the earth, as depicted in the frescoes in Orvieto's cathedral of the Assumption of the Virgin. Luca Signorelli, the artist, himself conceives the scene as theater, in which he paints himself and Fra Angelico, the other painter of the cathedral, in bourgeois clothing as they observe the promised resurrection in the theater of the Apocalypse: this is how they take part in the events of the Last Judgment. They already knew the piece well from the Book of Revelation, and now they see the performance itself as a cosmic spectacle in fulfillment of the Scriptures.

Resurrection: that is, nakedness — the question, *in concreto*, the question of nakedness is unavoidable. It's difficult, in fact impossible, to be naked in the theater. The intimate proximity of the audience in *The Tragedy of Man* in the space proposed here reveals the body's naturalism, rather than demonstrating the spiritual image of the body, namely, the possible sensuality of an abstract concept: it will not be *the* body that we sense, but the actor's concrete, natural (fleshly) body, as a recognizable individual, and this is what would destroy the production's language. The actors wear skin-colored tights under the trench coats, white color paint covering their skin unevenly: these are rather just patches, stripes, the very distant yet recognizable traces of lime-filled mass graves.

Three more important directorial observations regarding the production's world of form. First: we will handle each of the fifteen scenes forming the tableaux of the Madách work separately, leaving it as an assignment for the viewer to create the connections between them. Second: four actors will create the figure of Lucifer. Who is Lucifer? The personage who does not sing. Third: different pairs of actors will play Adam and Eve from one tableau to the other.<sup>5</sup> (This alone is reason enough for the lack of narrative continuity between Madách's tableaux.)

<sup>5</sup> For those readers unfamiliar with *The Tragedy of Man*: Adam and Eve, expelled from Paradise, wonder what will become of them and their progeny. Lucifer, with the intent of making Adam give up on humanity and thus spoil God's plan, offers to show them and guides them through scenes spanning human history from Antiquity to the far future (in a pioneering example of science fiction).



JANUARY 20, 2020

Return to Timișoara after nearly forty years. A broken down and pillaged city greets me; the prettiest portions of bourgeois Timișoara strike me as a ghost town. Beautiful bourgeois buildings, varied yet unified in architectural style, on the far side of the river Bega, around the Hotel Savoy, or on St. Mary Square: waterlogged facades with peeling plaster peer distractedly into the void. One cannot detect the faintest tremor of life. Fear takes up residence in my chest; I don't notice as my ribs tighten, then the muscles between the ribs wrench into a cramp, I cannot inhale enough air: breathlessness, confusion. Temesvár, Temeschwar or Temeschburg, Темишвар or Темишвар, Timișoara — where have they gone?<sup>6</sup>

The production's flexible masks are made of latex and reproduce the actors' own recognizable faces. Their proper faces: masks. White paint will cover the latex surface; at present, it's still skin-colored. In the case of the actors with speaking roles, they'll cut off the masks' lower lip and chin to enable speech. The face as quotation. This three-dimensional license makes the audience see even the nearby, familiar face as distant, placing it in a different time that is not our own.

These latex faces are death masks prepared from living individuals: the death-evoking attitude that belongs to the eternal, but of course mainly the oriental, theater. These flexible masks, on the other hand, evoke the hallucinatory effect that living people wearing their own death masks are walking amongst us. It is the inscenation of "you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead."<sup>7</sup>

Purcărete's absolute pessimism regarding human history is counterpointed by the view of a child who doesn't fall into despair over what he sees but builds himself a new world out of the elements of a Western civilization that has fallen to pieces.

The most important material of the rehearsals, right from the start, is the acoustic environment. As though an opera were being born using the method of "devised theater," that is, collective creation. "We're finished,"<sup>8</sup> says Eve in Scene Two, the Fall in the Garden of Eden: if, in this situation, you speak this sentence on stage, you can attain at most a comic effect with it. "If, however, you sing it as in opera, and the pathos of the singing voice and accompanying

<sup>6</sup> Temesvár had been a major provincial city of Hungary prior to the 1920 Treaty of Trianon that ceded Transylvania to Romania; it was and is a multicultural City. The list here gives the town names as known, respectively, to the Hungarians, Germans, Serbs, and Romanians. The original text uses Hungarian place names for which I have substituted the Romanian place names most likely to be familiar to Anglophone readers.

<sup>7</sup> Rv 3:1 (All biblical quotations are from the New International Version).

<sup>8</sup> Imre Madách: *The Tragedy of Man*, trans. George Szirtes, Budapest, Corvina, 1988, 4<sup>th</sup> ed (2000), 41.

music amplify the pronouncement, then it will sound to the viewer as a drama he can experience.” This lesson of Purcărete well describes the poetics of his most recent productions: he tends increasingly to investigate the theatrical possibilities of operatic form. His production of *Victor, or Power to the Children* (2013) in Cluj-Napoca<sup>9</sup> slips unnoticed, as it were, into opera: by the time the viewer realizes it, every rejoinder has long since been sounded in song. It is as if Purcărete’s latest works were testing the rehabilitation of pathos in theater.

Actually, I sense every danger of this communal rehearsal process-initiation already in the first rehearsal. Since, as a matter of fact, the director made the entire enterprise largely dependent on my participation, he had to find someone whose decisions he could trust, given that the work is a monument of the Hungarian literary canon and the holy scripture of its theatrical tradition: thus we must read it together and be brave; to listen to (and hear) and observe (and see) the echoes of tradition and face them if they’re unavoidable. Above all because when working with the text I am liable to take a leap in the dark and deal dishonorably with textual canons, “not consulting with flesh and blood”<sup>10</sup> as my heart’s apostle, Paul, says. To remain sensitive to every invitation, interior and external equally; and to go to the wall, indeed, to go through it, if that is the price of being able “to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.”<sup>11</sup>

He constructs situations, he outlines and sketches in scenes, then hands them over to Assistant Director Ilir Dragovoja, while we two enter a dressing alcove to work on the text and take account of the interpretive traditions of the *Tragedy*. Purcărete inquires with great sensitivity about the poem’s place in Hungarian culture and about its theatrical productions that were, in my experience, defining. I begin by mentioning two films, *The Annunciation* by András Jeles, and the animated version of the *Tragedy* by Marcell Jankovics.<sup>12</sup> My lengthy explications of both films enthrall him. He returns to the Jeles film several times; he cannot tear himself away from it. Today, though, it would be unrealizable, he says, since the virtual (but very much real) space’s child pornography mania has made an innocent relationship to the naked child’s body impossible. The depiction of the human body, but especially the child’s and the woman’s, is undergoing a thorough alteration of meaning in contemporary culture, one that relates to the identity crisis of Western culture. We cannot relate to the naked body in an unspoiled manner because we cannot relate that way to our own body, either. The purist and iconoclastic movements of the

<sup>9</sup> The capital city of Transylvania, known to Hungarians as Kolozsvár. Cluj-Napoca, its official Romanian name, is colloquially abbreviated to Cluj, which is how it will appear henceforth.

<sup>10</sup> Gal 1:16.

<sup>11</sup> William Shakespeare: *Hamlet*, III.2.

<sup>12</sup> András Jeles: *Angyalí üdvözlét* [*The Annunciation*], 1984; Marcell Jankovics: *Az Ember tragédiája* [*The Tragedy of Man*], 2011.



latest era proclaim the religion of *shut down and restart*, trusting that in doing so, they can eliminate the accumulated Western guilt and — torn away from our own histories — we can continue our lives as newborn infants.

We work on the text in the dressing alcove's many-mirrored, tight, intimate but very much theatrical space — I feel good in here. Purcărete and I discuss and finalize the work conducted via email through December and January. He wants to hear whether the scenes that have remained from Madách's work can stand on their own feet, since the goal he has set is that the performance last no more than two hours; furthermore, he cannot conceive of it including an intermission. It had been decided very near the beginning, in December, that we would use not Octavian Goga's Romanian translation as our common text, but Jean Rousselot's freer "adaptation."<sup>13</sup> Purcărete states that Goga's translation is so over-stylized and nostalgically romanticizing that it hides Madách's philosophical precision and very much followable rhythm of thought — something that he discovered while reading the French text and not the Romanian. He also rejects the somewhat better-known poetic French translation of Roger Richard:<sup>14</sup> in this phase of the work, he's not looking for the text's poetic qualities but a more technical, dryer treatment that can offer us the chance to follow the "ideas" of Madách's writing, as Purcărete calls them, and in this manner to construct a pure script<sup>15</sup> that best serves the production.

The work method is as follows: Purcărete sketches out the scene's construction for me — at least the one the director currently envisages — and he tells me in detail what happens, what each actor is doing at each moment, and I identify the corresponding dramaturgical impulses in the poem and finalize the text. It's classical dramaturgical work, I'd say — from my point of view, it's certainly that, since the dramaturg doesn't "deal with the text," he doesn't "cut the text", but, rather, he verbally constructs the plot embodied in speech and the structure of the suggested situation and follows its tracks, adjusting the always open and flexible textual corpus to it. It is only possible to be faithful to the spirit of the theatrical text when we examine the possibilities of its becoming action, and this, the action, is in every respect a communal act: that

<sup>13</sup> I. Madách: *La tragédie de l'homme*, trans. Jean Rousselot, Budapest, Corvina, 1966.

<sup>14</sup> I. Madách: *La tragédie de l'homme*, trans. Roger Richard, Budapest, Corvina, 1960.

<sup>15</sup> I use this term in the sense of Richard Schechner, that is: "...scripts,' by which I mean something that pre-exists any given enactment, which persists from enactment to enactment. ... I assume that the dancing took a persistent (or 'traditional') shape which was kept from one event to another; that this shape was known by the dancers and by the viewers (if there were any), and that the shape was taught by one group of dancers to another." Richard Schechner: *Performance Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, New York, Routledge, 1988, 68.



of the actors and of the audience. “How long will it be before they inscribe in the theatrical tables the following law: *words in the theater are only embellishments on the design of movement.*”? Yes, Meyerhold.<sup>16</sup>

It is a special, interesting and, on the whole, enrapturing moment in the work when, at the end of a given scene, the non-Hungarian speaking Purcărete asks me to read the entire scene out loud to him in Hungarian, in a sort of interpretive reading close to the situation. He wants to hear the text’s rhythm, the inflection points; he wants to feel the lifelikeness of the dialogues.

The “*Poème d’humanité*” or the “*Tragödie des Menschen*” is a known trope of the nineteenth century that has become surprisingly close to us at the start of the third millennium, particularly as posed in Madách’s sci-fi-sensitive manner. This is yet another reason why Purcărete’s approach via the theater “poor in spirit” is of particular value to me. He doesn’t put it on a pedestal because he approaches it fundamentally as theater and not as a canonical literary work, locked up, controlled, and guarded by many. In addition, he alloys market-fair acting with Bunraku and then places this refined abstract choreography and marketplace immediacy in an intensely sensory, situative musical world unique to the theatrical music compositions of Vasile Şirli. In the Budapest production of *Richard II* (2019) in which I participated as dramaturg, the musical material, and more precisely the final scene, is exceptionally beautiful; in the musical texture unifying the entire performance, for instance, one can descry the shrieking of the wheels of the no. 2 streetcar as it negotiates the sharp 90-degree bends in front of the Hungarian Parliament: this, too, is a very fine Şirli invention.

JANUARY 21, 2020

The reading rehearsals with the actors are also in progress; he distributes the roles for portions of the scenes in different combinations, like someone collecting sound samples. Meanwhile, he provides detailed and extremely precise instructions on methods of voice production. Purcărete sets the Madách text into an opera of his imagination, as if he could already hear the entire performance — this realization is staggering. He requests four different water sounds (*sunet acvatic*, in Romanian) and experiments with them in the scene of Creation, exhaustively, accurately.

As early as our first discussions in November, I mentioned to Purcărete the curious coincidence that I had just been working with Levente Gyöngyözi on the libretto of *The Tragedy of Man*, and that we had completed the outline of

<sup>16</sup> Vsevolod Meyerhold: *The Fairground Booth*, in Edward Braun (trans and ed.): *Meyerhold on Theatre*, London, Bloomsbury, 1978, chapter 10.

the plot — Gyöngyösi is planning to compose a scenic oratorio to the text. Purcărete asks me: where did we end up? We departed significantly from Madách, or at least from the work's overdone modernist worldview, from the equalized dualism between the Lord and Lucifer. Our theatrical *Tragedy* is much more “a” *Tragedy* interpretation, without any doubt personal to us, and, in fact, a radical rejection of the modern dogma that emphasized the necessity of Evil in the name of development and progress. According to Madách, that is, God generously forgives Lucifer; as a matter of fact, He doesn't even regard him as The Evil One in the philosophical sense, but merely as the spirit of “cold,” unemotional reason lacking the feminine principle:

And you too, Lucifer, you are a link  
Within my universe — and so continue:  
Your icy intellect and fond denial  
Will be the leaven to foment rebellion  
And to mislead — if momentarily —  
The mind of man, which will return to me.<sup>17</sup>

According to Madách, Lucifer is not merely the “leaven” of progress but also the agent of Salvation, since he only “misleads” humanity temporarily from the Creator so that it may find its way home to Him with yet more eager desire.

It is certain that Madách was familiar with the Augustinian concept of the “*felix culpa*” [happy sin] which resounds in the *Exultet* [gospel, good news] of the Easter vigil, but the theological propositions of the Protestant tradition made no impression on him; at least, I could find no trace of them in the poem. And it is on this point that the difference between *Faust* and *The Tragedy of Man* seems essential. By the end of *Faust*, Goethe's Mephistopheles becomes isolated, indeed laughable, even in his own eyes. The angels definitively rescue Faust's soul from him, while Mephistopheles laments thus:

To whom can I go for redress?  
Who will get me my well-earned right?  
You have been fooled in your old days. Confess,  
However, you deserve your sorry plight.  
I have outrageously mismanaged,  
A mighty outlay — shamefully! — is lost,  
Absurd amour and common lust have managed  
To catch the canny Devil to his cost.  
But if the one of wise experience got  
Himself involved in that mad, childish game,

<sup>17</sup> Madách: *Ibid.*, Szirtes, 259.

Still, slight the folly was most surely not  
Which caught him at the last and overcame.<sup>18</sup>

The Lucifer of Madách, however, is convinced that the Lord cannot cast him away, since he himself is an important principle of the creation: God, therefore, depends on his existence, the way a king depends on his valet to dress him: without a valet, the king remains naked. Madách's poem, examining modern ideas, bears the readily visible imprint of the feudalistic worldview.

The difference between the two, *Faust* and *The Tragedy of Man*, is not only philosophical-theological, but also and at the same time dramaturgical (of course, the latter is the inevitable consequence of the former): it is Adam's induced "Adam and Eve dream" that frames the *Tragedy*, as instrumented by Lucifer. This dream-dramaturgy, with history presented to them (and the fresco of past-present-future displayed before the viewer), takes on the meaning of the crossroads presented to humanity, and it transmits the conviction that purifying struggle ("strive") and doubt-free faith ("trust, have faith") have intrinsic value.<sup>19</sup>

The parallel reading in terms of similarities and contrasts will permeate our further conversations. Purcărete's 2007 production of *Faust* in Sibiu — which the standard-setting critiques (*N.B.*: does such a thing still exist, hereabouts?) proclaimed as the apex of his lifework, a wonder and a masterpiece, and which the Radu Stanca National Theater of Sibiu continues to keep in its repertory — remains the mirror of our interpretations and disputes, and in a certain sense, our standard. If I count correctly, I saw the Sibiu production six times, and from today's viewpoint I consider Purcărete's distancing from the Sibiu production's language, heading in an entirely different aesthetic direction, to be even more significant. Nothing is brought over from *Faust* into the *Tragedy*, at most his creative experience in debasement and exaltation, the imprint of ephemeral (theatrical) creation in his soul.

We're not playing a parody of Madách — or rather, the *Tragedy* — but a *guignol*: we seek the amateurism and immediacy of folk theatrics, he tells the actors. If the *Bible*, then a peasant bible or a *biblia pauperum*; if theology, then a *theologia pauperum*.

The stage dimensions: 6.5 by 4 meters, that is, 26 m<sup>2</sup> — a dizzyingly confined space that *The Tragedy of Man* can scarcely have seen before. Of course,

<sup>18</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: *Faust, Part II, Act V*, trans. Charles E. Passage, New York, Bobbs-Merrill, 1965, 402. Alas, no English translation I know remotely approaches the extreme wit, insolence, and toughness of László Márton's Hungarian translation (Pozsony/Bratislava, Kalligram, 2015) as quoted by the author.

<sup>19</sup> This refers to the closing line of the *Tragedy*; in Szirtes's translation: "Man, I have spoken: strive on, trust, have faith!". Madách: *Ibid.*, 260.



it could have happened, nevertheless. Antal Németh<sup>20</sup> directed the *Tragedy* in a studio in 1939, after the famous technical “fireworks” of the 1937 main-stage production. I wonder: what might the dimensions of the National Chamber Theater’s studio have been? Németh: “I’m producing the *Tragedy* on a stage that fits one’s palm, foregoing all technical tricks.” How could Antal Németh have avoided facing the fundamental conflict between theatricality and the story in the text, which is as old as theater itself?! How could a director of such large-scale format and thought, who understood the dramaturgical character of the Shakespearean stage so profoundly, avoid the temptation of empty space? György Lengyel, the other great Madách interpreter and director in Hungarian theatrical history, mentions a religious ceremony taking place in an intimate atmosphere in his writing about the Antal Németh studio production.<sup>21</sup> An open-winged altar’s changing panel paintings indicated the settings, and Madách quotations written on ribbons (“speech ribbons,” in the manner of medieval painters) led the viewer: I mention them lest I omit the pre-Brechtian element of the Antal Németh-esque conception. Eighteen actors played the *Tragedy*, conceiving the work as an oratorio. A speaking chorus. And another thing: the set designer, Balás László Viski, painted the altar paintings.<sup>22</sup>

In the present production, a 2 by 1 meter table appears in the long axis of the stage from time to time. The emphasized scenes take place on this table: for example, this is where we will see the tiny pyramids constructed of sand, or just a single one, we’ll see. The possibility of using projections comes up: from above onto the 2 m<sup>2</sup> table and the 26 m<sup>2</sup> stage — Purcărete has in mind mainly animated versions of the emblems of the civilizations in the historical scenes. I recommend Géza M. Tóth to him, and we instantly watch the animated film director’s marvelous *Ergo*. Again, that pure childlike enthusiasm for this truly poetic film: he’s deeply touched by the work’s purity, its refined, tragic quality and poetic respiration. I promise Silviu to phone Géza, as long as the theater’s manager, Attila Balázs, agrees; he, by the way, is one of the three Lucifers (alongside Andrea Tokai and András Zsolt Bandi). Of course, uncertainties arise over whether the intended form can tolerate digital interventions — but we let this decision await the evolutionary process. But I go ahead and phone Géza M. Tóth, today.

<sup>20</sup> Antal Németh (1903–1968): Hungarian director, professor, theater manager, historian of theater.

<sup>21</sup> György Lengyel: La tragédie de l’Homme, poème dramatique d’Imre Madáchi, *L’Annuaire théâtral* 47 (2010), 157–171.

<sup>22</sup> Tamás Koltai: *Az ember tragédiája a színpadon*, Budapest, Kelenföld, 1990, 111. In fact, his name was Balás László Viski, but his name was printed in the program with a *y*. It is worth mentioning that Balás Viski, born in 1909 in Dés (today: Dej, Romania), was a student in the Accademia de Belle Arte in Cluj, whence he arrived at the Hungarian Conservatory of Applied Art in Budapest.

Yesterday, in the midst of feverish work, I suddenly began to pay attention to the mirror play in the theater dressing alcove: how many mirrored replications of ourselves do we see, and how many of the versions of the space present different interpretations of the relationship between the two of us...? When it's a matter of play or of something expressed plastically, Purcărete instantly switches and suddenly, he, too, studies the infinite variations with childlike enthusiasm and alert attentiveness. We take pictures with our phones and show them to each other unselfconsciously, and both Ilir and Vasile join in quickly.

A layout table as theater appears in several Purcărete productions. In his *Danaïds* produced in Craiova in 1995, the gods sit around a transparent layout table lit from below, discussing tragedy as artform, while disposing of humans and the world's fate with a single motion. The sentences of Aristotle, Corneille, Stendhal, Etienne Souriau, Scaliger, Schopenhauer, Hegel, and Nietzsche on the lips of Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, and Hermes: they commit themselves to defining European identity by inventorying the Greek heritage of tragedy while refugees disembark on the shore: the fifty virgin Danaïds who, as they say ashamedly, speak with a barbarian accent, only babbling the lofty Greek language. In the final scene of *Julius Caesar* in Cluj (2015), the war plays out on a table, the warriors seizing on each other wear only loincloths; in the battle, the fallen slide off the table surface: the minimalism of this utterly absurd battle that tips Roman democracy into ruin is totally upsetting. The minimalist approach to greatness — divine events, metaphysical questions, world history, fundamental human needs — also comes up in the Timișoara *Tragedy*: it's an exceptional poetic aspect of Silviu Purcărete's theater.

JANUARY 22, 2020

Purcărete rehearses not the piece but the theatrical language he envisions — nobody among the directors with whom I've previously worked travels this path. Robert Woodruff seeks the reality of the actor's presence in the rehearsal process; Vlad Mugur doesn't rehearse but anti-rehearses: he proceeds in the most extreme way opposite expectation and constructs the performance out of these "anti-materials"; Andrei Șerban<sup>23</sup> is most interested in discovering the distortions of human relations; Yuri Kordonski, in the course of rehearsals, is most interested in observing the unavoidable emergence of hierarchies and the necessary ritualization of human activity in every situation; Karin Coonrod discovers the text's concentrations of meaning and weaves them into a performance; Matthias Langhoff seeks the reflection of contemporary social relations in the piece and grows them into critical paradigms from a faithfully

<sup>23</sup> Andrei Șerban (1943–): Romanian theater director.



Brechtian viewpoint — all of them, however, without exception, constantly focus on the piece purified into a playbook: that is, they devote the rehearsal timeline to the dramaturgical reading of the text. They place the text onto the stage or into the space. Not Purcărete: he first examines the possibilities in the surmised theatrical language: could that which he hears and senses assemble into a distinct theatrical form? Can it hold up to theatrical reality? This is why, at the beginning of rehearsals, after having collected many kinds of speaking variations and different sound samples, he rehearses scenes that can most probably demonstrate what the proffered aesthetic can make possible. Now, he's beginning with the London scene:<sup>24</sup> it's as if the entire scene were a *danse macabre* in Madách's vision. And then he returns to the beginning of the playbook and constructs the scene of the Creation.

Perhaps — although I haven't asked him — this is why he never repeats himself. For him, a production brought into existence is like a newborn poem: it's impossible to write the already self-writing poem anew. Purcărete's score is not the piece, but the performance outline he has composed, which becomes real communally with the actors, composer, and scenographer. I must ask him this question about his systematic rejection of self-repetition.

Starting the rehearsal with the London scene's harrowing, exceptionally beautifully written dance of death is thought provoking. In the course of his studies in Berlin, Antal Németh viewed a performance of a *danse macabre*, and the sudden realization that Madách's *Tragedy* is built on the death dance's conceptual world struck him like a bolt of lightning. Later, as I'm reading a study by Gábor Kozáky,<sup>25</sup> the thought grows stronger: "to my greatest surprise, I have found philological support for my intuitive sense of a couple of years ago. The study definitively shows, via thorough reasoning, that Madách indeed likely thought about something related to the medieval death dance while writing his work..."

JANUARY 23, 2020

Purcărete outlines the Creation as a resurrection-event with disarming theological precision. The first Adam-Eve pair (Attila Kiss and Rita Lőrincz) learn the language of animals: they first behold the world, come into existence before them and without them, as an acoustical richness. Lucifer (Andrea Tokai) wants to make the forbidden fruit — already desirable in itself — desirable by first tasting it him/herself,<sup>26</sup> before offering it to Eve. Might this be theologi-

<sup>24</sup> Madách: *Ibid.*, Scene 11.

<sup>25</sup> Koltai: *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>26</sup> Evil itself has no gender, and in this production the role of Lucifer is shared between male and female actors.



cally acceptable? Many depictions of the Garden of Eden show the first couple next to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, one on each side or beside each other, and there are some that show the serpent tempting them, the fruit in its mouth. I like these finely considered details that are so characteristic of Purcărete. “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die,”<sup>27</sup> says the Creator to the first human couple. Might God Himself be the lead actor in the biblical Creation, who doesn’t keep His own word? Adam and Eve do not die following their consumption of the forbidden fruit. Or had God created mercy and forgiveness for Man before the creation of all things? And with this loving divine breaking of His word, did He release these two chief virtues on the human world: mercy and forgiveness? Why isn’t it precisely this that strikes us in the biblical depiction: the very fact that it isn’t worth creating Man without both mercy and forgiveness? And might the Fall not mean precisely that the presumed knowledge of good and evil consigns Man to extreme mercilessness and absurdity that requires forgiveness? Or perhaps: that the merciless knowledge of good and evil is, finally, the work of Satan who, as a matter of fact, resides within us? In any case, Madách, in his emphasis of the feminine principle — often, of course, in a misogynist manner — calls our attention to this, maybe more unconsciously than intentionally. Well, yes, misogyny is woven all through our cultural inheritance.

Goethe’s Mephistopheles follows the framing story of Job, that mysterious biblical screenplay, in stepping onto the stage of (salvation) history; but Lucifer, on the other hand, stands from the start as a fallen angel whom a weak and extortable god keeps beside himself. It is perhaps Madách’s misunderstanding — or rather that of an overdone modernity? — that God curses two trees in the garden (the tree of knowledge and the tree of life), then hands them over to Lucifer to do with as he pleases:

Look down to earth:

In the heart of Eden stand two slender trees.

I curse the pair of them: now they are yours.<sup>28</sup>

It’s a revealing misunderstanding, in any event. Adam even refers to it, fairly clumsily: once he’d eaten of the fruit of knowledge but before he picked one from the tree of life, the divine curse struck both of them and they were expelled from the garden, so, to the extent that he’d become mortal, Adam reasons, he wants to see whether it’s worth struggling through the span of life measured out for him. According to Madách, the two pillars of modernity are

<sup>27</sup> Gen. 2:16–17.

<sup>28</sup> Madách: *Ibid.*, Scene 1, 28.

knowledge and the quest for eternal life — that is, the creation of an earthly paradise in contrast to the spiritual one: Man will brew both in his “chemical kitchen,” and in doing so, definitively topple God from His throne. But why would he do that? Arising from *superbia*, the motivation of the ambition to rule is found in the desire to rule itself, and it is utterly infertile.

We'll stop here, says Purcărete, we will not repeat it anymore, lest it become mechanical: he doesn't allow the form, constructed with undeviating exactitude, to turn into formalism. He leaves the life within it and the actor — which, nevertheless, is none other than the smudges of the contingencies of theatrical play, thus everything that still makes the theater human, warm, intimate, experiential. Robert Wilson “overdoes” the infinitely purified form: it is this intensification beyond all limits that endows his theater with its unique life and undeniable power. Sometimes I see perfect performances (including here, in my immediate vicinity) that can no longer hold my attention after a few minutes precisely because they take perfection to be mechanical execution in which the actor's individuality and presence completely disappear. Of course, there have been attempts at this sort of theater of perfection, but they all failed because they forced a sort of theatrical eugenics whose desired result was hoped to be for the actor, in the name of technological precision, to transform him/her/them into a marionette: that is, into the unthinking soldier of the director-deity.

We do not know what sort of theater Tadeusz Kantor's<sup>29</sup> would be if he, the director transformed into a layman compared to the actors, were not continuously in the productions as observer and animator, reflecting consciousness and stage master, the viewer always freely displaying his feelings and, because of his own imperfect creation, shaking his head, a hysterical and clumsy demigod. Without Kantor's continual onstage presence, we would not be dealing with the theater of Tadeusz Kantor: facing masterworks, all we can say are clumsy sentences, biting their own tails and merely confirming the works' existence. What exists, exists.

What is Lucifer's “drive” in *The Tragedy of Man*? What really drives him through the entire work? Without a “drive,” the actor has nothing to say, the question-quartet, “whence-where-why-how” is unanswerable, and as a result we cannot get hold of Lucifer's character. He is not Job's Satan who, at an elegant celestial reception, taking advantage of the Lord's good mood, takes objection to the impeccable, God-fearing, evil-avoiding Job and sets to the great attempt to empty him of his unconditional faith and love.<sup>30</sup> Madách's

<sup>29</sup> Tadeusz Kantor (1915–1990): Polish artist, set designer, and director.

<sup>30</sup> For the sake of remaining faithful to Holy Scripture, let us note that Satan does not, in fact, object to Job, but accusing Job of hypocrisy, he provokes, as it were, the “Faustian” pact: “Then the Lord said to Satan, ‘Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.’ ‘Does Job fear God



Lucifer conceives of himself as intrinsically the loser right at the start (“You triumphed over me since it’s my fate / Incessantly to fail in all my struggles”),<sup>31</sup> this is why Adam’s request that he lead him all the way through history, in and of itself, puts Lucifer in the losing position again. History is, after all, the framework of the divine story of salvation, and Lucifer knows it: God proclaims not only the exile but also the promised arrival of the Messiah, which places the woman at the center of the recital of history. Lucifer cannot resist Adam’s request and shows him human history in the “horrificing visions” of a dream, but he hopes that Adam, having seen the horrors piling up over time, will refuse to take that path in reality. And Lucifer nearly succeeds with this hypothesis — Adam wants to commit suicide:

I can still defy you, God, yes, even You.  
 Though fate may keep repeating: Live so long!  
 I could laugh it out of court if I were dead.  
 For am I not alone in all the world?  
 There stands the cliff before me, there the drop:  
 One final leap, the last act of the play...  
 Then I may say the comedy is ended...<sup>32</sup>

Eve saves him. Not even Eve, but the Child to be born: the turning point in the great story of salvation.

His production of *Faust* stamps its imprint onto Purcărete’s conception of Lucifer, and the resulting conflict over Lucifer’s motivating intention becomes staggeringly gripping. Mephistopheles is a more human, understanding devil, capable of feeling, while Lucifer, perhaps because modernity began to point out his self-contradictions, is more committed: he wants not only to regain his power but to force the created universe back into formlessness, into non-existence. Lucifer seeks to prepare the way for the Lord’s downfall, and this is why he requires Man. Mephistopheles, for his part, is even capable of experiencing the laughable insults of old age (“You have been fooled in your old days,” as Charles Passage has it, or “You’re fucked over on reaching old age,” in László Márton’s daring Hungarian translation); indeed, what is surprising overall is that he is capable of identifying with Job’s suffering, to the extent that he himself becomes Job by the end: “What is this! — I am raw with sores

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for nothing?” Satan replied. ‘Have you not put your hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.’ The Lord said to Satan, ‘Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.’ Then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.” (Job 1:8–12).

<sup>31</sup> Madách: *Ibid.*, Scene 1, 27.

<sup>32</sup> Madách: *Ibid.*, Scene 15, 252.



all round, / A very Job, shocked at the state he's in..."<sup>33</sup> The great assumption of Mephistopheles by Ofelia Popi arises in my mind, one of the final, irresistibly humorous scenes: with despairing urgency she tries to glue the angel feathers falling from the sky onto herself: what if she could, all unnoticed, get mixed up in the angelic ranks rising heavenward with Faust's soul, and ascend to heaven, herself?<sup>34</sup>

All the Purcărete-humor in *The Tragedy of Man* originates in *parousia*: the catharsis of the Last Judgment.

Knowledge, ambition: Weapons that beguile:  
Yet fight I not anew with them in vain,  
Their only shelter: love ...?<sup>35</sup>

The word "love" is strong, too strong: I return, after all, to Madách's "sentiment." Although if we approach this question from the viewpoint of the actor's play, Lucifer is, as a matter of fact, the character incapable of love: the furor of impotence rages within him. Eve's proximity and the unexpected turning points arriving because of the woman, remind Lucifer of his own incapacity for physical love: he feels himself even smaller than Adam. Opposed to "cold, calculating reason," Eve represents the "child's disposition," and because of it, the Luciferian attempts fail, one after the other, in the historical scenes. Eve is a stronger personage in *The Tragedy of Man* than Adam, and this is important also because in eliding Madách's teeming misogynistic lines we obtain a more contemporary text; not completely contemporary, of course, which I happen to regret, since Madách seemingly saw modernity's turn for the better in woman. He paid a severe price for this recognition, but, well, who hasn't?

JANUARY 24, 2020

To display the infinite in the minuscule — here the theatrical space reduced to the size of a tabletop — this spatial proposition fills me incessantly with worry.

I believe that we must free ourselves from thinking of minimalism as a style. Rather, we must interpret it as a mode of thinking about space — its proportions, surfaces, and illuminance relationships. This way of looking at it is comprehensive

<sup>33</sup> Goethe: *Ibid.*, trans. Passage, 401.

<sup>34</sup> Ofelia Popi, taking the role of Mephistopheles, is a female actor.

<sup>35</sup> Madách: *The Tragedy of Man*, trans. J. C. W. Horne, Budapest, Corvina, 1963, 9. Translator's note: Szirtes' translation used for most of the citations; Horne translation for the first two lines. However, as A. Visky quotes *his own adaptation* of the third line, it has been translated literally.

and unified; it signifies not forms, but space, not things, but rather the quality of spaces. For just this reason, in its most complete and most precise sense it is not easily grasped in its details,

writes John Pawson in his manifesto of minimalism entitled *Minimum*.<sup>36</sup>

History, when great, is like fate: the person disappears from it. It is neutral with respect to human feelings: this is what we call, when related to people, godlessness. Alternatively: it knows neither god nor man: in other words, it is inexorable.

In the final scene of *Julius Caesar*, Silviu Purcărete creates for the story of a man (*vulgo*: history) its icon: objective, clean, reduced to a single plastic gesture; naked human bodies (from which a dense cloud of white dust rises) woven together on a not-too-large tabletop, fight the civil war following the murder of Caesar, who had still been powerful a few moments before. We do not know who is who, but at this point it's not at all important, no matter that we hear the names that were earlier familiar.

Having followed the events of the preceding three acts, we might think that it's the legions of the two opponents battling, led by Caesar's murderers, Brutus and Cassius, on one side and Octavian and Antony on the other, but nothing of the sort. The battling, interweaving bodies present us images much more resembling human-shaped, ravenous, anthropophagus larvae. And the Shakespearean poetry that still sounds in the extremely confined empty space of the starkly backlit stage is not the speech of rational man but the evocation of the guttering out of a misunderstood and liquidated Western civilization collapsing in on itself. Let us not even think of the magnificence of the verse; nor are the poetics of the visual construction pretty — on the contrary, it's repulsive, its power difficult to bear, more resembling an installation made of human flesh that suspends in us the dilemma of belonging to the winning or losing side: after all, in this war, losers battle losers from the start, and the victors, after finally having annihilated their opponents, quickly create new opponents from within their own ranks, until at last only dust glitters on the table in the impassive, artificial light.

"What shall I do? Or: why should I do it? — are not appropriate questions in such places," writes Kafka as his conclusion to the short story *Railway Travelers*.<sup>37</sup> This enigmatic text of only a few lines regards people as passengers on a train that has suffered an accident in a tunnel, and furthermore, in a place

<sup>36</sup> John Pawson: *Minimum*, New York, Phaidon, 2006.

<sup>37</sup> Franz Kafka: *Railway Travelers* [Eisenbahnreisende], unpublished translation by Péter Czippott. (No existing published English translation of this parable is found.)

where the light from the entrance is no longer visible and the light from the exit is so faint that one must search for it constantly, and it constantly disappears, and where, in addition, even which way is which is uncertain.

The passengers experience the resulting situation, however, in many different ways, so that no overall picture develops that would prompt either the group or any individual stuck in the tunnel to action:

All around us, however, in the confusion of the senses or in their intensified sensibility, are monstrosities and, depending on the disposition or injuries of the individual, a kaleidoscopic game that is either entrancing or enervating.

“Depending,” writes Kafka: people in each other’s proximity, indeed piled up on each other, have lost the ability to join to create a picture of their own situations despite having been dealt blows by the same fate: though the picture fragments wind up adjacent to each other, they can nonetheless form either horrific or beautiful images, bearing no meaning at all, so in consequence, they lead to no relevant action.

Kafka is first to recognize and record the dissolution of humanity’s ethical order and the orderly-seeming operation of evil that captivates us all, but the euphoria that this process continually generates renders us, ourselves, also the system’s devoted, even celebratory, supporters. “Honor your superior!” — this is the sentence they sew into the skin of the condemned man of the short story *The Penal Colony* because fundamentally this is the only law that has remained in effect, and this is the one that supports the system and renders it operational. The horrors that happen (before our eyes and to us) are no accident but normality itself. *Amerika*, however, devotes itself to the course of the suit against cosmic misfortune. Karl Rossmann, exiled from Prague to America, sees the Statue of Liberty, greeting the immigrants with its torch raised high, as the goddess of the Last Judgment waving her sword, inciting him to the speedy prosecution of his suit.

There is scarcely a better stage for the suit’s prosecution than the theater to the extent, of course, that the performance is not in the least “entrancing and enervating,” thus an event that switches off our sensitivity to the world. The theater takes all of us into the Kafkaesque tunnel and certainly repeats the cataclysm that has taken place, unobserved, within us. Its explicit intention is to show that all of us are the devoted, happy captives of our situation, and then it prosecutes the suit with the most precise formulation possible.

But we viewers are not seated on the defendant’s bench, not at all: we sit in the judge’s chair. We must pass judgment. Given the artificially created law court of the theater, we must enforce our realizations without delay.



FEBRUARY 2, 2020

We're continuing the rehearsals after a long — nearly two week — break. Work on the text, interpretive conversations, dressing alcove, mirror play. I approach the relationship between the large and the small by bringing Caravaggio's art into the discussion. Michelangelo's fresco of the martyrdom of the apostle Peter and Caravaggio's canvas in Santa Maria del Popolo are two different interpretations of the world and two different views of God. Caravaggio places the god question preferably in the intimate sphere of the individual: the great redemptory events play out inside the theatrical black box of the soul. Michelangelo's historical picture is a cosmic story of the divine, while Caravaggio's definition of history would sound like this: industrious male backside business. An enormous, infinitely ridiculous male backside, stuffed into orange-yellow pants, dominates Caravaggio's canvas: it is the composition's brightest surface. Purcărete composes the Caravaggio painting into the Roman scene.<sup>38</sup> As a matter of fact, the entire scene builds on the imagery of a world in pandemic: we are all equal when facing the plague because it spreads not from outside but from within the soul's most hidden, darkest alleys.

I'm writing a song lyric (or at least compiling it, assembling rhythmic formulas) and hand it over to Vasile Şirli, who is working together with Enikő Éder on the songs. That's Enikő! An omniscient actor: she coaches using the electronic keyboard, warms up the cast's vocal chords, explains the prosody and confidently scans the verse for the non-Hungarian-speaking composer; she performs her Eve scene (Athens, Scene 5), she provides musical accompaniment for the scenes, and if needed, she also serves as conductor. She is an omniscient actor composed of many kinds of noble material, knowing the numerous aspects of her craft; she's not merely an "A-a-ah-tist."

FEBRUARY 3, 2020

Silviu gets stuck when he cannot remember the exact term for the white linen that covered Christ. Typical: for him, precision is no mere metaphor.

At the end of the Roman scene, the miracle of baptism "elevates" her: could this be the key to the scene's coherence, the resurrection? "Why does Eve rise?" I ask Purcărete. "Because we're in theater," he responds. One must strive for simplicity in the theater and one mustn't ID everything.

The rehearsal halts: he cannot continue it without the masks, he says, everything in the performance seems too realistic, and in addition, at this close range, this assumed, overly expansive performing is becoming continually

<sup>38</sup> Madách: *Ibid.*, Scene 6: ancient Rome in time of plague.

more comical and untrue. "And this — at least from my viewpoint," I tell him, "is caused by the text that already sounds archaic to our ears." He has the masks — just experimental and not final faces, used to examine the behavior of the latex — put on, and as soon as they appear on the actors, everything changes. The text, for instance, is easily "understandable" and acceptable, since every word comes from the other side of time, and neither its old-fashioned nor its poetic qualities seem excessive. The mask strikingly alters the body image of Etelka Magyari: she finds refined, sustained movements and instantly senses that she must strive to create images. Well of course, as if this were the language of performance.

FEBRUARY 4, 2020

To be an amateur: an unintentional gift. To play the amateur: a style. The amateur actor cannot play an amateur. Acting is only born of a very personal interpretation of amateurism: who is the amateur (actor, author, artist, etc.)? What is the true criterion of amateurism in an age when we long for the elemental and when civilian actors appear on stage and on film? Would amateurism be enfeeblement now, in our case? To discover the enfeebled in ourselves — would this be our actual task?

Timișoara's main square has fallen under the rule of the buskers. They are many, and it appears that it is all indeed organized — at least, it seems as if everyone knows when it'll be their turn: at times, entire salon orchestras perform on the square or on one of its nearby side streets. It's hard for us to work this way: Purcărete can only exist with open windows and the unceasing flood of music from outside makes concentration difficult, especially because at times the production's musical samples also start up during the course of interpreting the scenes.

The rehearsals proceed, incorporating the musical materials given to the sound engineer so far: without setting up the acoustical space, not one scene can proceed further. In reality, Purcărete is directing an opera — this provides the key to the production's form.

After rehearsals, they take us out to Recaș<sup>39</sup> to visit the noted winery and taste the wine. Dragoș Buhagiar brings up his conservatory years and talks about the artists who exerted a major influence on him in Cluj: Sándor Mohy, Sándor Bardócz...<sup>40</sup> The name of István Szőnyi (not the painter of the Danube Bend region, he!) — who found his world in Bucharest and whose gorgeous daughter Julieta Ivanca Szőnyi achieved a fine career as a film actor in Romania

<sup>39</sup> *Temesrékás* in Hungarian.

<sup>40</sup> Sándor Mohy (1902–2001): visual artist; Sándor Bardócz (1962–2017): musical artist. It is worth noting, in case the reader has not guessed it, that the intimate and respectful



— also comes up.<sup>41</sup> Purcărete and Şirli also reminisce about the Szőnyi salon, attended by every artist who counted, and whose main attraction was the Szőnyi daughters. The Szőnyi girls, sighs Şirli: they glided through the assembly like Etruscan goddesses and disappeared behind one of the doors, leaving deep silence and the discreet sighs of desire behind them. Sándor Mohy taught him his craft, Dragoş continues, and the most important aspects of the entire school year to him: the conversations in the studio. They inhaled the cultural atmosphere of Europe as students, in Cluj. We chat about the artists of the Nagybánya [Baia Mare] school, about Ziffer's blue, and Thorma and Ferenczy, about this concentration of talent and dialogue that came together there, and from which Mohy also drew his own amiable-modern post-cubist world, luxuriating in joyous colors. His cubism struck one as if he had tamed Georges Braque to the exceedingly sedate Cluj. He was my own father's drawing teacher in the Reformed Lyceum<sup>42</sup> of Szatmár;<sup>43</sup> my father spoke about him to us a lot, and I'd have been happy to inherit a Mohy canvas from him. Purcărete looks Ziffer up on his smartphone, then Mohy, and we look at their paintings all the way to Recaş.

Helmut Stürmer<sup>44</sup> wanted to become a painter, Andrei Şerban and Georges Banu<sup>45</sup> actors; Purcărete is constantly drawing during rehearsals and at home, here with a pen, there with a fine brush dipped in India ink, and he even paints on canvas at times. Nothing is left behind by a director, he says, and now that writing reviews has gone out of fashion, he cannot even count on a detailed description of his productions: the textual future of the theater has completely locked down as a possibility, at least for a while. His distress over his oeuvre's disappearance in the age of digital archives breaks his heart.

In recent years in Romania, directors, competing against each other, publish albums one after the other, at times of spectacularly poor quality: unrefined photos, blaring typographies, print production that washes shades of color together, crushed and defaced hardcovers — all, of course, for a lot of money. The directorial album-inflation is striking, but no matter: competition demands it. In university teaching, unusable or scarcely usable portfolios and ego trips make their appearance, and these, too, before at most a tightly limited theatrical public. These publications are more fulfillments of power, indeed,

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collaboration between ethnic Hungarians and ethnic Romanians in a part of Romania that had been Hungary until 1920 is still not something to be taken for granted. In this case, the ethnic Romanian Buhagiar has cited ethnic Hungarian artists as major influences.

<sup>41</sup> István Szőnyi (1913–1967): artist, winner of the Romanian People's Republic State Prize, not to be confused with István Szőnyi, born Schmidt (1894–1960), the artist working in Hungary. Julieta Ivanca Szőnyi Gigha (1949–): Romanian film actor.

<sup>42</sup> In Hungarian *gimnázium*; in German *Gymnasium*.

<sup>43</sup> Today: Satu Mare, Romania.

<sup>44</sup> Helmut Stürmer (1942–): ethnically German-Romanian production designer.

<sup>45</sup> Georges Banu (1943–): Romanian theatrologist.



at times the symptoms of arrogance, rather than true cultural gestures. And to the extent that now and then they succeed in being the latter, these heavy albums printed on glossy paper are more emphatically discourses on theatrical photography and less a directorial vision of productions, examples of theatrical language or unmissable works of aesthetics. Though we can find usable works about Silviu Purcărete's productions, nevertheless we cannot find a proper monograph, let's say one like those Veronika Darida wrote about András Jéles or József Nagy. I've taught Purcărete's theater in the master's program on theory of theater at Károli University, and I know what it means to assemble a semester's material about him. The lengthiest work, for instance, proved to be Marina Constantinescu's *Les danaïdes. Histoire d'un spectacle*,<sup>46</sup> which comprises a rehearsal diary and a lengthy interview with the director. I find the detailed conversations particularly interesting; Purcărete is a difficult interview in any case, at least recently, perhaps because he feels he's required to do the analytical work in place of others. But there is the first Purcărete album, too, the *Images de théâtre*,<sup>47</sup> which collects the work of two very important theatrical photographers, namely Patrick Fabre and Sean Hudson. The great virtue of this thoughtfully edited, well-proportioned book is the deep interview with the director conducted by Jean-Pierre Wurtz. This, as with Marina Constantinescu, offers a glimpse into a truly original, well-considered, mature, and purified aesthetic. The photographers and Jean-Pierre Wurtz belong among those who tracked the formation of Purcărete's theater, seeing every production and in this way bringing "inside news" of this highly complex visual world born on the border between moving visual creations and theatrical productions.<sup>48</sup>

FEBRUARY 5, 2020

Rehearsal. "Let's do it! I only know what should happen when it happens," says Silviu, cutting short the long-drawn-out conversation which had, without anyone noticing, become unproductive.

Definition of old age: "All of a sudden, everything in the person reverses direction: one progresses not outward, but inward." I sensed in myself what Purcărete is talking about: love.

<sup>46</sup> Marina Constantinescu: *Les danaïdes. Histoire d'un spectacle*, Bucharest, Editura Nemira, 1996.

<sup>47</sup> Silviu Purcărete (ed.): *Images de théâtre*, Carnières (Belgium), Lansman éditeur, 2002.

<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, a book by Oltița Cîntec: *Silviu Purcărete sau privirea care înfățișează*, Bucharest, Cheiron, 2011 [*Silviu Purcărete or the Look He Presents*] has also appeared, which could be a good starting point for writing the lacking Purcărete monograph. (Published by Camil Petrescu Cultural Foundation – *Teatrul Azi* – Cheiron.)

Construction of the production is heading in the direction of colossal clumsiness. I tell Purcărete János Pilinszky's definition of theater that he discovered in Paris, under the influence of *Deafman Glance*:<sup>49</sup> "perfect clumsiness." "Nice," he says. Then he adds: "Brilliant."

A reading in the brand-new New Millennium Reformed Church Center, at the invitation of the writer Melinda Mátyus. The concert hall is packed, with many standing in the two entryways, despite our inviting them to take seats at the front. This is my true return to Timișoara. Familiar faces look at me, but from such a distant past that I fail to recognize any of them. At one time I directed the Timișoara University student cultural circle called *Látóhatár* [Horizon], I scarcely remember what for, but both the official informers (leaders of the Church and the Student Union) and the reports collected under duress by the Securitate<sup>50</sup> made sure to preserve the memory. I decide not to return to the past, rejecting every temptation of nostalgia and opening up to every question in this exceptional *now*. Every *now* is an exception, without precursor and untouched: as this moment also is. I first met Melinda Mátyus in the early 90s in Cluj, when students in the hundreds would still come to our home, and in the long time since — to the extent that two and a half decades constitutes a long time — she disappeared from my view. She had sought me out in Cluj, she reminds me, to ask me for help on her thesis in theology: she was writing about Béla Hamvas<sup>51</sup> and her teachers directed her to me. I fortified myself for this public conversation: at such times, no matter where I might be, I'm seized by embarrassment: as soon as I can, I signal to her and the audience that I find it difficult to hold my own in such situations, since they did not invite any of my favorite authors, but me — and I'm not one of my favorites. Melinda, however, doesn't let me off but poses her questions with gentle determination. I read father and mother poems from my *Nevezd csak szeretetnek* [*Just Call It Love*]. Many actors are in attendance, nearly every member of the *Tragedy* production team came. I yield to the compulsion to public penance (Stanislavsky?). It is a lovely evening in this brand-new, skyward-reaching architecture of Imre Makovecz,<sup>52</sup> an entirely unusual encounter for the audience that, I sense, is not to my credit but to Melinda and her leading of the conversation by which she tactfully draws me back to the subject when I wander too far afield. Afterwards, István Gazda, the local pastor, leads me around the building: beautiful stones have been set on one another, many richly carved pieces of wooden furniture and organically arching wooden beams next to each other. All that's

<sup>49</sup> Robert Wilson: *Deafman Glance*, music by Alan Lloyd, Igor Demjén et al., premiered in Iowa City, IA, 1970; subsequent performances included Paris, 1971.

<sup>50</sup> The communist secret police prior to 1989.

<sup>51</sup> Béla Hamvas (1897–1968): Hungarian philosopher, essayist, and social critic; forbidden to publish under communist rule, he was forced to earn his living as a manual laborer.

<sup>52</sup> Imre Makovecz (1935–2011): noted Hungarian architect, leader of the school of organic architecture.



still needed are the “living stones,” whose numbers, however, are continually dwindling. In its every gesture, Timișoara is a collection of fragments; my heart constricts from these spaces, and its atmosphere of the mausoleum depresses me, but I drive the thoughts away, since the auditorium was packed for my appearance tonight.

Three of us at dinner at the Scotland Yard gastropub in Savoy Street. I've just arrived in Timișoara, on this evening. Until now, for me only an unfamiliar and at times frightening city's theater and company existed. All that it takes is a single face, a look or an unexpected exchange of words for one to arrive, finally, and to feel not only the work but also the community of the people who will see the production.

FEBRUARY 6, 2020

“*Théâtre à l'ancienne*,” says Purcărete, “we need something like that. Raised voices, mild pathos, a slower rhythm. *Dispoziție barocă*,” he says.<sup>53</sup>

At the break, the actors come over to me and flood me with their affection because of the conversation and reading last night; they also tell Silviu what happened. Now I bathe a little in their lovely regard.

It's worth noticing that in the scene set in Byzantium,<sup>54</sup> it is not Eve through whom the story turns, while Adam longs not for a “new path” but a “new life” at the scene's conclusion: it is a strong change of emphasis in the text. It is indubitably the deepest point of the *Tragedy*, the symmetric pair to the ice age tableau<sup>55</sup> that horrifies Adam so terribly. Here, Adam seriously doubts the sense of continuing the experiment called history, and it seems as if this is related to Eve, or more precisely to her absence: she who, rejecting the sensual life, finds the fulfillment of her own life in the cloister.<sup>56</sup> The Byzantine scene is the triumph of Luciferian logic, since murderous impulses are released within the religion of love. Yet Lucifer fails to triumph: it seems as if he himself is surprised by the undisguised evil of the “human race.” Madách is unable to digest the bloody, self-annihilating history of Christianity: he feels they have tricked him, indeed, cuckolded him. I feel his feeling. Of course, I realize that it's more difficult for a Catholic.<sup>57</sup>

With respect to the “baroque frame of mind,” mention is made of Péter Esterházy, whom Purcărete met personally at our house, during the rehearsals

<sup>53</sup> *Dispoziție barocă* (Romanian): a baroque disposition.

<sup>54</sup> Madách: *Ibid.*, Scene 7.

<sup>55</sup> Madách: *Ibid.*, Scene 14.

<sup>56</sup> Eve is an active participant in many of the scenes. In Scene 6 (Rome), she was a courtesan; in Scene 7, she becomes a nun.

<sup>57</sup> The author is a member of the Calvinist Reformed Church, where the existence of evil is perhaps more easily digestible as an element of predestination.



for *Victor*.<sup>58</sup> The plan was for them not only to meet each other but also to discover each other. Not forgetting, of course, the calculated opinion that the theatrical realization of the Esterházy dramaturgy requires a Purcărete. It was a glorious evening, perfectly prepared Argentine steaks and Italian red wines underscored the cultural interchange. I also invited Şirli and Buhagiar so that the creative team could be at least nearly complete (it could not be complete in the absence of Helmut Stürmer). A psalm of forgiveness was the order of the day, and before the supper I read it aloud in Hungarian and Romanian, but also in English and French, and of course the dazzling conversation proceeded in both Hungarian and Romanian. The following day, I purchased the Esterházy volumes available in Romanian, among which was hidden his “Rubens and the Non-Euclidean Women” (*Rubens și femeile neeuclidiene. Patru dramolete*).<sup>59</sup> “You, who creates non-Euclidean theater, must be familiar with the dramaturgy of self-commentary, whose closest relation is the theater of Tadeusz Kantor.” The encounter in Cluj was followed by one in Budapest after Purcărete’s production of *As You Like It* at the National Theater, not at the premiere but on the second night. There was no follow-up; human things come to an end. We all come to an end.

## FEBRUARY 7, 2020

The text resonating from the doppelgangers and the gestures of the masked actors (the non-speaking ones) present us with the image of two separate theaters. For the time being. Can we make it through to the discovery of the gestural language and its detailed refinement, I ask myself — and not just myself. In any case, the gestures of action do not point in the direction of realism because, in this case, the text remains purely a *voiceover*, and the production splits apart into at least two performances.

He stands in the empty space, two tables and nothing more; he stands motionless as if beholding interior images. He’s not simply thinking but appears to sense the entirety; his hands move at times, sketching out gestures. He rearranges the tables, but the spatial relations hardly change at all. He spends an unreal amount of time this way, standing stock still in the space.

“I find the old [original] texts much more appropriate to the stage, simply because the words arrive from another time and in doing so, they filter through and reflect from the culture’s mirror and consequently, they possess greater weight and purity. I contend that the farther the text comes from, the more

<sup>58</sup> Roger Vitrac (1899–1952): French surrealist dramatist; *Victor ou les enfants au pouvoir* [*Victor, or Power to the Children*], 1928.

<sup>59</sup> Péter Esterházy: *Rubens és a nemeuklideszi asszonyok. Három dramolett* [Rubens and the Non-Euclidean Women. Three Mini-dramas], Budapest, Magvető, 2006.

powerful the present message of the performance.”<sup>60</sup> Purcărete does not direct contemporary texts: is it possible that it is exclusively the signs of accumulated time in people that interest him? The imprints of time on the human soul clothed in a decaying body?

FEBRUARY 8, 2020

The Roman scene is continually becoming clearer (Adam: Levente Kocsárdi, Eve: Mónika Tar). It casts aside details that wring my heart, but, well, what else would artistic creation be but the discovery of its own limits and acquiescence to the composition's mysterious mathematics — so I console myself. Next, back to Athens in order to upset the temporal sequence and find and uncover each scene's individual emphasis (Adam: András Csaba Molnos, Eve: Enikő Éder).

He's taking theater back into music and dance: where it came from. “Dance, and consequently theater, had not even come into existence yet,” Derrida quotes Artaud, if I recall correctly. The memory wells up in my mind, again, of the firmament-ceiling of the stage box in the Cluj production of *Victor*, that flawless digital print that portrays, in a plane, the beautiful, living, and moving painted firmament of the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, the cupola's heaven spread out overhead. Except that in *Victor*, Buhagiar's digital print announces the impossibility of catharsis: like the colored landscapes covering bedroom walls in the 80s, which mercilessly abducted the sexual act from its own bodily reality to replace it with reverie. It is as if love, despite our intent and instincts, were pure pornography and eternal shame and debasement, because neither of us is “present in the present,” in each other's sweaty, happy body, but somewhere else, in a porno film displaying oneself as a perfect world, and each as the other's object. One was unable to travel, but there on the bedroom wall undulated the motionless ocean, and yes, the motionless gulls carved the motionless sky.

The Mediterranean, that is Greek, theatrical discourse permanently changed when it was forced inside a stone building that shut the sky out from overhead: when they exiled nature — the sun resting in the clouds' cove, then peeking forth, the rain or the airborne birds flying above us and resting on the ridges of the amphitheater or the Globe, and the wild animals seeming to shout into the productions — in other words, when they locked the nature that echoes our lives out of the plays of existence. The cosmically universal became particular, and God became an aging, tiring janitor. We also turned away from ourselves then, and not just from God.

<sup>60</sup> Purcărete: *Images de théâtre*, 20. (Translated by A. Visky).

FEBRUARY 9, 2020

Athens, again. Silviu reaches back to the tradition of movie stills when he sets up the scene (I could have noticed it in his *Julius Caesar!*). He's in command of a lot of material, not only in his accomplishment in the plastic arts, but also thanks to his own refined theatrical language, so that the visual artistic variety of his productions is infinite. (How much lazy and calculated reuse can you see in theater, O my Lord!... And that's just in self-epigonism... But what's going on with "production quotations": solutions that simply consist of lifting pictorial solutions from others' productions?)

Silviu does not repeat himself, he just speaks the Purcărete language. Once a language exists, the variations are inexhaustible. The theatrical language is not born from the piece but from the worldview. Not the language from the piece but the piece from the theatrical language.

Back to the movie stills: Adam and Lucifer, as Virgil and Dante, watch the infernal scene, and furthermore, Adam, suddenly doubled, witnesses his own lynching, shocked, "And only I was fool enough to think / That people such as this would welcome freedom," he says.<sup>61</sup> All in vain, as we know.

FEBRUARY 10, 2020

Purcărete links the scenes in the *Tragedy* together using a pair of blood-red, stiletto-heeled women's shoes. This object, shining out from the faded, skin-colored overall picture, connects the fragments like chain links, satisfying the viewer's need for narrative modestly and wittily. It's at once an erotic and surrealist image: Lucifer's prime objective is the poisoning of love. The shoes comprise the production's unifying *eros-thanatos* motif, shining forth from the entire production's dominant skin and beige tones and burning into the viewer's memory. First, Lucifer places them on the table when Eve wants to pluck the fruit but cannot reach it. With Lucifer's help, however, she dons the shoes and can finally pick the fruit. It's undeniably an amusing scene, foreshadowing the coming concealment of their nakedness, and the shame hidden in fashion. In the Byzantine scene, the shoes appear on a flaming platter; Eve runs onstage fleeing the crusaders: Adam is seeing a dream, not a real Eve, who indeed disappears before his eyes. (Adam: Zsolt Csata, Eve: Anna Csábi.)

For a person, physical love is not merely the instrument of species survival: precisely because of its metaphysical nature we don't have any idea how to handle this burden. For, as a matter of fact, amorous love is the language that sustains and nurtures the innermost human identity. Amorous love: I love

<sup>61</sup> Madách: *Ibid.*, Scene 5, 82.



you more than myself.<sup>62</sup> And: it is thanks to you that I can accept myself. The unconditional is a divine attribute in us, and love must be its transformative bodily experience. The shame following the Fall is the sign of an irrevocable injury that love has suffered. Could it be that dolphins “know” more about it than we do?

FEBRUARY 19, 2020

The planning of a production cannot take place independently of the company: of course, this is self-evident, we might say — but it really isn't. The particularly great value of Purcărete's theater is that he constructs his productions not in an abstract mode; rather, the given company's skills in the craft become the production's concrete material. He thinks in terms of *ensemble*, sustaining the theater's living traditions. His productions proclaim that there is no artistic theater that is not simultaneously the theater of the poor in spirit. Those first-day messages appearing on the rehearsal board, inviting the entire company to the communal work, are legendary: let those who want to be in the coming production show up the next day for rehearsal. This is also a Purcărete-brand trademark. Measured by the questions raised or merely touched upon in the theater, we are all poor in spirit; heaven does not belong to the geniuses, yet nor to the stupid — but to those who, in the presence of others, look at themselves and who bare themselves. “Blessed are the poor in spirit”<sup>63</sup> — this is the Gospel lesson that can be experienced in the theater. We are always lacking, but that fills us with happiness because the enraptured spirit in us, that is, the creative imagination, cracks through the stone wall.

FEBRUARY 20, 2020

The Phalanstery:<sup>64</sup> molecular gastronomy, the inversion of *nouvelle cuisine*. In a manner of speaking, it's a DNA collection. The viewer, as a matter of fact, sees nothing but the stainless-steel vessels in which the scientist mixes various concoctions and has Adam and Lucifer taste them in sequence. The demented

<sup>62</sup> Hungarian has two words for love: *szerelem*, romantic and physical, i.e., amorous, love; and *szeretet*, the selfless (often misnamed platonic) love of caring and friendship, as well as parental and filial love. The distinction is akin to that between *eros* and *agapé*. Translator's note: In this sentence, Visky uses the first on the first occasion and the second on the second. Note, however, that he expands on the emotional-metaphysical aspects of *eros* in this paragraph.

<sup>63</sup> Mt 5:3.

<sup>64</sup> Madách: *Ibid.*, Scene 12.

scientist is hysterically anti-culture: he considers the highest good — which just barely makes him humane — to be his memory of his mother's damaged reputation. Purcărete's typical gastrohumor.

The assignment of the children of the Phalanstery has become a heart-rending scene in the manner of Tadeusz Kantor with Enikő Éder, robbed of her children, collapsing beautifully.

Silviu loses his faith in the meaningfulness of the mask-play. He assembles the actors on stage and tells them again the meaning of this dualism: the relationship between the masked actor — that is, the simulacrum speaking the text into his microphone — and the animator. The pronounced word is what brings the (non-speaking) masked actors to life on the stage. And those who actually speak the text are not bystanders in the scene, and in no way at all mere synchronized sounds, but, on the contrary, they are the creators, via the words spoken aloud, of the characters that are physically active in the space. At times, one can see decidedly beautiful dualities; they work with great energy and meaningful immersion, but they remain far indeed from being settled in their roles. After the encouraging talk that enlivens the performance-technical instructions, Silviu turns to me and says he sees no chance of a premiere on the first of March. He called attention to important performance-technical elements earlier, I tell him, but for the animators' handling of the text and the actions of the masked actors to display an organic unity would require roughly another seven months of specialized work — choreography of sound and body.

The masked (silent) actors must speak the text internally, he says: it's the same as when we write and speak what we've written aloud: the movement, rendered essential, is what gives the scene its meaning.

He demonstrates the gait of the elderly to Andrea Tokai: as if you were walking on ice, he says. He loves this discovery; he taught Csilla Albert the same thing in *Julius Caesar*.

Purcărete's *staging* process is extraordinarily complex; I have not even seen anything remotely similar: at every instant of the rehearsal he's working on the entire production. Not psychological but form-based thinking characterizes him. The underlying relations of psychology are born in form, and it is not form that is born of constructed psychological processes. Music, noise, and sound samples play a definitive role in the rehearsal process: a scene — indeed, even its sketch — can only evolve within the condition of the acoustical space. Purcărete is a Meyerholdian, with scarcely a doubt.

FEBRUARY 21, 2020

Rehearsal is canceled, but because of the heavy rain and the lack of suitable light, so is our joint plan to go to Reșița<sup>65</sup> to photograph the surrealist industrial ruins in changing light conditions. I used to go there in my student days; at that time the furnaces still operated, and the famous machine works that the Monarchy bequeathed to Romania and where they manufactured steam, later diesel, locomotives and gigantic drive motors. Following '89 everything there collapsed as if a whirlwind had sucked the life out of it, leaving behind nightmare-tormented ruins. I go there, nonetheless, to see my son Andrej's Marivaux production in the Reșița Theater.<sup>66</sup> An enormous funicular arcs over the town, standing on giant concrete columns: an immobile, evil, primordial beast dominates the entire area. Now it's still sleeping peacefully, but it could awaken at any moment to devour the town's unsuspecting citizens. Tubes hover overhead, congealing into the densely clouded sky: they, too, await some sign. On the other side of the river Barzava, parallel to the river channel, a gray diesel locomotive rolls through the town's old center. I cannot decide whether I'm actually seeing it or just imagining it. It's a movie-set town.

I relate the whole thing to Silviu and he listens, his face glowing. It's certain that we've run out of time for the photography: we must use every moment for rehearsals. Will we ever return?

FEBRUARY 22, 2020

The dramatic crux of *The Tragedy of Man* is posed solely on the question of whether or not Lucifer will succeed in convincing Adam to reject history. One might say that this, of course, is not negligible as the inner motive force of the production, if we handle it well: it can propel the Lucifer project onward through an entire performance, but by the end, nevertheless, it proves to be a skeleton of glass bones that cannot bear the sharper twists and turns and, thus, quickly fractures. For example: Adam finally rebels not against Lucifer but against the Lord (this, as a matter of fact, would be the dramaturgical turning point), without, however, causing Lucifer's downfall or, at least, change of status. The dramaturgical triad of Adam & Eve — the Lord — Lucifer is not built upon the conflict but rests on the allegorical undoing of modern ideals.

Lucifer's identification — the one onstage character who doesn't sing — reminds me of the character in Purcărete's masterly *Cumnata lui Pantagruel*

<sup>65</sup> *Resicabánya* in Hungarian.

<sup>66</sup> Pierre de Marivaux: *Le Jeu de l'amour et du hasard* [The Game of Love and Chance, performed in Romanian as *Jocul dragostei și al întâmplării*]. Teatrul de Vest, Reșița. Premiere: 21 February 2020.



[Pantagruel's Sister-in-law]<sup>67</sup> called *L'Homme qui ne rit pas* [The Man Who Doesn't Laugh]. Dressed in black, a large man — Cristian Stanca, also one of Purcărete's favorite actors — receives the viewers from among boxes, placed downstage, that conceal people and foods. One can peer into the boxes: a live fish and naked man in a tub, cauliflower, freshly dripping blood (one cannot tell whether animal or human), and on one of the boxes, Hans Holbein's terrifying Dead Christ in its original dimensions. At the end of the performance, that builds on Rabelais' eating-mystique, the actors knead bread dough, then, after they've carefully stretched the base material, they strip an actor naked, lay him on a round table, cover his entire body with the dough and then push him into the incandescent oven. In the final scene, *L'Homme qui ne rit pas* enters, at which they remove the freshly baked human-stuffed bread and give it to the man in black, accompanied by a carafe of red wine. *L'Homme qui ne rit pas* tears off the human-shaped bread's head and begins to eat. An anti-eucharist. It is not the symbolic signs and elements that form the Lord's supper here, but the actual man. *L'Homme qui ne rit pas*, that is, the grim or humorless man: is a cannibal. *Pantagruel's Sister-in-law* examines the question, with much humor and virtuosic theatrical invention, of whether the world, as well as ourselves and the other, can be recognized via the communal ritual of eating. Then, in the final scene, having displayed the dark side of the question, Purcărete radically excludes the possibility that play — humor, laughter — could be left out of this process of recognition. Laughter, on the other hand, can only be a communal act. *L'Homme qui ne rit pas* eats alone, and he eats humans. He does not laugh. God, for His part, created the universe in seven bursts of laughter.

The character of Lucifer is born from this knowledge: the non-singing character also cannot laugh. The theater of Silviu Purcărete is of a deeply metaphysical nature. In this theater, the world is still whole, all its horrors to the contrary. In this prolonged age of all-enfolding violence, his theater remembers this laughter: it echoes the child's voice taking part and playing in nature.

FEBRUARY 23, 2020

The first full rehearsal, the mythical and terrifying first throw of the theatrical dice.<sup>68</sup> This is where the composition as a whole first makes itself felt, even if

<sup>67</sup> Silviu Purcărete: *Cumnata lui Pantagruel* [literally *Pantagruel's Sister-in-law* but usually rendered in English as *Pantagruel's Cousin*], a silent work inspired by texts of Rabelais. Cluj, Hungarian State Theater of Cluj, premiere 28 May 2003. A co-production of the Hungarian State Theater of Cluj, the Radu Stancu National Theater of Sibiu, and the Company Silviu Purcărete of Lyon, France. See, e.g., [http://www.lesartsetmouvants.com/media/pantagruels\\_cousin1\\_\\_095739600\\_1910\\_16022012.pdf](http://www.lesartsetmouvants.com/media/pantagruels_cousin1__095739600_1910_16022012.pdf), accessed 28 August 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Translator's note: the original uses the word *snúr*, referring to the game of pitching pennies, so a literal translation would read "the first pitch of the penny." A metaphor more common

only fragmentarily. The Lord's voice is a child's voice: could this be a reminiscence of the inspiration of our conversation in November, when I spoke to him about the *Levente Gyöngyösi* opera that is being written? I don't know, but the answer isn't important. The Book of Proverbs describes Creation as the joint work of God and a child. When I read the biblical passage, this viewpoint also radically altered Gyöngyösi's conception of the *Tragedy*, because everything from then on was woven through with humor. The child-Messiah is present at the Creation, this alone is enough for the interpretation of the *Tragedy* as fulfilled salvation and last judgment to be a theatrical thought of overwhelming arc: I cannot get enough of it. During the rehearsal, I forward the biblical passage to Purcărete via email; he wished it were in front of him on the screen:

The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; I was formed long ages ago, at the very beginning, when the world came to be. When there were no watery depths, I was given birth to, when there were no springs overflowing with water; before the mountains were settled in place, before the hills, I was given birth to, before he made the world or its fields or any of the dust of the earth. I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep, when he established the clouds above and fixed securely the fountains of the deep, when he gave the sea its boundary so the waters would not overstep his command, and when he marked out the foundations of the earth. Then I was constantly at his side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence, rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind.<sup>69</sup>

Wisdom personified speaks here, which, of course, is not Lucifer's own but that of pure nature: Creation is not a representation of power but a world born of God's and the Child's play, in which mankind should enjoy itself. The child's voice is the rebuttal of time: this frames the entire production, the Child who calls to us all.

Poor theater! — its infinite complexity. And the terror in the details. From which we must not turn away.

FEBRUARY 24, 2020

The weightiest casting decision is made: Enikő Éder<sup>70</sup> is the voice of the Lord. She realizes this asexual angel-voice, coming from a great distance, so precisely that it's impossible to let it go. Such decisions are always difficult and risky:

in English was chosen, so as not to distract the reader — but perhaps the local color is worth retaining.

<sup>69</sup> Prov 8:22–31.

<sup>70</sup> N.B.: a female actor.

Vasile Şirli has already been auditioning many children invited from the Bela Bartók Elementary Lyceum in Timișoara, searching for the most appropriate children's voices to make sound recordings of them. And there were several who made their way to the theater as well as working on the text at home, and now they're dropped from the production. It's sad but seems somehow unavoidable. An unresolvable contradiction also lurks here: is it precisely the children's voices, upon which the very concept of our *Tragedy* is built, that will go missing from the production? My Lord, do not abandon me!

Another most weighty dramaturgical justification appears alongside the voice we've found: to the extent that the Lord's voice is a *voiceover* that the sound engineer provides as the final word, the Lord transforms into a mechanical voice, and thus the child, no matter how fine its singing voice might be, cannot be a part of the production's present time: the Lord's personal drama would cease. And another justification, if needed: it seems that the theological content of the Lord's texts is utterly beyond the children; one can hear how the text detaches from them and sounds alien. This distant poem fails to become their own text, at least not in the time span at our disposal. Singing, of course, would solve this problem, it could become interior. But, well, now this has taken an unexpected turn.

Time, always. Theatrical performance is made from the material of time; the infinitely long rehearsal time liquidates theater — this is just one of Brook's important realizations, as he says in *Threads of Time*: "nothing can alter the fact that we need an audience." One must step beyond rehearsals at some point: one must present oneself. The theatrical production can never be finished and perfect, because then it would be inhuman. Becoming mechanical is the death of theater: "the audience is a mirror in which we confront our own inadequacy," Brook emphasises once more.<sup>71</sup>

I mention to Purcărete that the idea of transposing the Lord's words into song had already come up in the 1934 production of the *Tragedy* in the Burgtheater in Vienna, which amplified the poem's dramatic emphases. According to Antal Németh's account, the Lord "does not speak but only sings in a *recitativo secco*-like manner, which effectively differentiates what he has to say from the angels' verses, although they could have easily modified stylized speech to the point of pure sung speech."<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Peter Brook: *Threads of Time: Reflections*, London, Methuen Press, 1998.

<sup>72</sup> Koltai: *Ibid.*, 39.



FEBRUARY 25, 2020

More and more stuff ends up on the stage: the three tables, costumes, the final props, body paint, makeup, masks. Now that everything becomes skin-colored, this proximity suddenly becomes beautiful and gripping. Eroticism is not a matter of nudity.

The text becomes perfectly incomprehensible — I was waiting for this moment. The technology, the objects, the lighting, and the sounds confuse the actors' speech. It will clear up: it must clear up. When a scene, or even a short passage, takes place, the text is perfectly audible. I take notes feverishly; Purcărete changes his location in the audience space more and more frequently, paying attention to sightlines, from above, from below, from the locations most distant from the main axis, or from the very front rows.

FEBRUARY 26, 2020

Set decoration is in progress on the stage; meanwhile, we reviewed the entire text with the actors in the studio. Could it be that the need for scrupulousness in examining the philosophical-theological aspects of the text, which is the essential uniqueness of theatrical tradition, is in danger of extinction? But, of course, we also seem to be lacking in fundamental dramaturgical knowledge, or perhaps we are continually distancing ourselves from the cultural principles of the Hamburg dramaturgical tradition. What will theater become in the post-literary age? Will the demand — indeed, the need — to point out and analyze socialized aggression remain at the center of the contract the theater has made with itself? It would be good to live to find out; I will not.

After the workshop, the actors thanked me for the textual work with a warmth I had not expected. They told me that they had begun to sense their neutral, meaningless sentences, and their relationship to the text had changed. The eternal danger of the theater of Purcărete — given that it's very frequently ensemble play with protagonists flashing into view, then vanishing, as well as characterful, idiosyncratic (antique) choruses — is that in several productions one can see the above problem; only the director shows his hand because the actors do not achieve true characters, worked out in detail and thus rendering the strongly formal element unnoticeable: that is, they fail to become a *personage*. The role, as it were, stands before them, at times very distantly; they race after it during the performance, so the viewer is left with the directorial intent, observing the performance at a distance, sometimes without the slightest chance of merging into it and achieving empathy. When, by contrast, the dynamics of the protagonist group work organically and the actors completely fill the form, as in *Faust* or *Victor*, in *Phèdre* or *Pantagruel's Sister-in-law*, or in

the Budapest *Cherry Orchard* — how long shall I extend the list?! — then we become swept away, participants in the performance; and later, when we've been reborn as ourselves and view our own relationships with these other eyes, we shiver to think of what we've brought into being and who we truly are.

Not two but three tables of equal size play in the production. The direction that rehearsals took finally excluded projections, and Géza M. Tóth is not taking part in the production. It is sad, but the language of theater and style has no regard for friendships: it is implacable and absolute.

FEBRUARY 27, 2020

The space. It's an impressive construction, an ancient amphitheater and an elliptical Renaissance operating theater — which itself quotes the Greek amphitheatres, of course — and thus the captivating combination of the theater of the human body. Planed planks, beige, light brown: its grain is highly visible. It's the theatrical space of the salvation-*agon*: its struggle for the (final) revelations. For Silviu Purcărete, posing the question of salvation in the theater is an ineluctable deed: one can sense it the moment one steps into the space. The seating area, set up high, paradoxically brings the viewer close; we see inside the salvation-laboratory in a way that we are simultaneously inside it. It is loftiness, at least a location raised out of the everyday, and a "great" event: it is pathos, to be precise, but in the sense not of affectation but of anguish.<sup>73</sup> But, on the other hand, what glimmers in the depths of the mirror of pathos is a sharp humor, and at times more than that: sarcasm, provocation, subversion, the silent — or sleeping? — God's persistent "prodding."

The viewer sees three tables along the long axis of the ellipse; someone is asleep under them — we don't know who. These and similar installations are born of constraints that, in the best case, remain unnoticed by the viewer: someone has to be there to hide the props prearranged under the tables. Technical theatrical requirements (scenery, costumes, props, lighting, the viewer's way into the space, as well as the departure route) are the very material of theater. Without recognition of the boundaries of language (of theater) and their mapping, there is no theater (more broadly: no creation of works). The characters enter, following a snake, the tempter of the Garden of Eden, which slithers all the way along the length of the tables and disappears before our eyes. We sense that it will return. And of course, we expect it to. For if we await the snake, then the snake will come to visit.

<sup>73</sup> Translator's note: Visky makes a play on the Hungarian words, *szenvelgés* = affectation and *szenvedés* = suffering, anguish, which share an etymological root.



Today's rehearsal: reading the space. What does the space know; how can it transmit its knowledge to us? Spatial studies. The space displays the most resistance during the times of alterations and transition: Purcărete examines the changes between Madách's scenes, makes actions and rhythms more precise, keeps track of timings — these are all meaning-constitutive components. For Silviu, the acting space at first presents itself as completely unknown, even alien. When they installed it, he sat for a long time in the auditorium, gazing at it endlessly, from different locations, seeming actively to feel the space, without so much as a tremor. At times he'd stand up and continue the contemplation that way. Then he'd change locations and "learn" the space's language from an entirely new viewpoint. Meanwhile, he'd adjust details, and this, when one is truly absorbed in it, has a truly captivating effect: after all, these are the fine tunings. Only a completely rapt dialogue with the space makes it possible to reveal and learn its possibilities in the theater. Mastering it is impossible since its possibilities are infinite.

What surprises and catches him unawares is the space's radical control with respect to the viewer's path: the viewer must step into the acting space to take his seat in the bleachers, and he can only approach it from a single direction. We mention the space designed by Helmut Stürmer for the production of *Lulu* (2008) in Sibiu, which was a perfect replica of a Renaissance dissection theater, but there the viewer entered without being able to touch the acting space, contacting the self-referential zone of erotica and mystery, at once metaphorical and concrete, from outside. The space of *The Tragedy of Man* retains the table of the *Lulu* space, but here, in contrast, they are of traditional height while there they were lower and comprised a single long structure.

The Egyptian scene<sup>74</sup> shows most clearly that the three Lucifers speak to us — the viewers — and they must not speak the texts to their partners (Adam: Zsolt Imre Mátyás, Eve: Eszter Nikolett Tóth). The situation must be expanded into an existential paradigm using demonstrative, declarative play: I am speaking neither about Pharaoh nor to him, but to you, viewers — that should be the actors' attitude.

Even before their love should be consummated, Eve wraps the Pharaoh's body with a bandage, making him already a mummy. This is the *conditio humana*: transformation into a mummy. They wrap us in bandages and shove us into the crypt that we ourselves have built for ourselves. The lifework, whether it be a pyramid or a temple, is nothing other than a crypt. When the rehearsal stops to clear up some technical matter, I remind the actors of our original intent, which the space magnanimously serves and amplifies, namely — to be demonstrative. This once, I say this to the company in Romanian, and Purcărete reinforces the message. I call attention to the echo in this space

<sup>74</sup> Madách, *Ibid.*, Scene 4.



made of wood, which makes the text incomprehensible even at close range. The actors are surprised, and none too soon, at the difficulty represented by this echoing proximity.

Purcărete tells the masked doppelgangers speaking into microphones: “*Te ascunzi, să te vadă lumea*” (“You’re hiding, but only in order that the audience see you still better”). And he shows how he imagines it: everyone laughs at this childish grandiosity. While directing, the joy of play often seizes him. This uninhibited, ludic perception of the world, in which, as Imre Kertész<sup>75</sup> would say, the trust in existence shines through, is liberating. The fact that we live amid ruins — we ourselves brought them into being — calling it all history, while in fact we ourselves are also ruins, yet “everything’s fine,” because we recognize ourselves in what exists and the entirety of existence within ourselves. It is the Greek feeling and the *risus paschalis* [the Easter laughter] together: these might be the spiritual genes of theater.

Could it be because of the proximity of bodies, the unavoidable experience of myself, and the manifold face-epiphanies, that I experience theater as a more spiritual formation than institutionalized, wealthy, and self-satisfied reality, of which I myself am of course the terrified, fallen, and slain subject?

We must strengthen the Lucifer throughline, since for him, the deed is not merely the demonstration but the destruction. Will he be able to convince Adam to join in the rejection and destruction of the world, in fact, of the Creation? Can he persuade him, having seen the horrors of history, to commit an Adrian Leverkühn-like retraction of his *Ninth*?

He removes the hammering of the nails into the wood in the Roman scene, or rather, the sound of the distant hammers; it lacks “*toacă*.” He ties the scene change to the recurrent blood-chilling wolf howls, and this indeed remains as the acoustic element linking the production’s fragments. In Rome, the appearance of the plague is the more important motif, he says, and not the apostle Peter’s crucifixion that Purcărete had inserted into the scene. I regret the disappearance of these offstage hammer blows; their sound opened an entirely new dimension before me. Furthermore, I feel the text:

“They’re crucifying a few lunatics  
Who dream of justice and fraternity”<sup>76</sup>

to be a very contemporary message, since only some new or renewing fraternal turn of humanity could save civilization from the ecological catastrophe at whose threshold we stand today. I preach to the director at length on the

<sup>75</sup> Imre Kertész (1929–2016): Hungarian author (*Fatelessness*, *Kaddish for an Unborn Child*, etc.); Nobel laureate in Literature (2002).

<sup>76</sup> Madách: *Ibid.* (trans G. Szirtes), 95. Translator’s note: the production, whose text Visky quotes, modifies the lines: They’re crucifying a few unfortunates / Who dream of fraternity...

side of the hammer blows: we stand here at a civilizing Good Friday moment, something new is coming, a sort of cultural resurrection, and I find the wolf howls too metaphorical compared to the fact that here, everything is being born, via the sound of water burbling into the tin bucket and the sound of wind produced by actors and their microphones. The scene perfectly reproduces the fear of new people, familiar to us as well<sup>77</sup> — we need to create this turning point acoustically, somehow. I convince him. Vivat! He asks Şirli to create the “*toacă*” sound after all; let’s see what it adds to the expectancy and to our fears, and to the atmosphere of Lenten lack of meaning.

Here we find that untranslatable word, “*toacă*,” which the Romanian-Hungarian dictionary can also only describe thus: “the hanging wooden or metal plate that replaces bells in Orthodox cloisters”,<sup>78</sup> since for most of us, the meaningful ritual content of the word doesn’t come through. “*Toacă*” (in Hungarian dialect, rarely, “*tóka*”) is tied most closely in Orthodox territories to Lent, rather than replacing a bell, as the dictionary misinforms us. Once during Easter Holy Week I was in Voroneţ, and there I experienced the unique quality of the sound that reminds one of Christ’s sufferings: an Orthodox nun was taking part in a procession around the outside of the monastery church, carrying the planed wooden plank on her shoulder that, transfigured, she was beating with a wooden hammer, following some unknown inner spiritual rhythm. Inside the churches, they beat two dried, hanging wooden beams with two wooden hammers. It is a sound simultaneously sharp and refined (wood striking wood), unusual, acoustically impossible to mistake for another, the instrument of the church “poor in spirit.” This is the only “musical instrument,” besides the bell, that the Orthodox Church accepts; all other musical duties fall to the human voice. In Cluj, the “*toacă*” resounds from the tower of the Orthodox cathedral during Lent, and meanwhile the city slowly grows quiet until the Saturday night’s resurrection service, when the faithful bring home the eternal flames from the graves. Culturally, in this region, this sound evokes the suffering of Holy Week in the viewer, and it promises the resurrection.

Byzantium. Purcărete hands the chief priest a gasoline canister (he will use it to sprinkle the heretics being sent to the pyre), and then asks that he be provided platform buskins to be at least 8 or 9 inches taller. He’s a great, aged bird, 120 years old, he says, and then he himself plays the role with great gusto, the way he imagines the character. Everyone breaks out in laughter, and by the end, so does he. No inhibitions, play, theater. Purcărete likes the byzantine scene more and more, enriching it with newer and newer details.

<sup>77</sup> Translator’s note: Visky here alludes to the waves of African and Middle Eastern immigrants that so alarmed many in Europe.

<sup>78</sup> *Semantron* in English (from the Greek: *σημαντρον*), also called *xylon* (ξύλον). Go to [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y1viidJRx\\_w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y1viidJRx_w) for a demonstration of *toacă* playing with informative subtitles (accessed 28 August 2020).



I'm enthralled by the easy refinement and precision with which he speaks Romanian. His instructions are precise, the actors understand them instantly, even the tiniest distinctions.

FEBRUARY 28, 2020

The day begins with a story. Silviu Purcărete was directing in the Teatrul Mic in Bucharest, sometime near the end of the 70s. "Back in those days," he says, "we were directing long, involved productions lasting five hours, and we spent our lives in the theater. The production's second part proved highly unusual because on the front stage the actors did not play to the audience but catty-corner, as it were, to the side, and as a consequence the principal axis of the scene also took this orientation. A strange, unaccustomed world came into being, surprising everyone, the critics most of all. After the production, many people congratulated me and praised the invention and its fine but courageous political allusion, since, as it were, they were playing to the exit. I pondered," he says, "how this second act could even have come about. Smoking was forbidden inside the auditorium, and because I was still a heavy smoker at that time," he says, "I constantly had a cigarette in my mouth while at work, and that's why I stood in the doorway nearest the stage, following the rehearsals and constructing the scenes from that vantage point. The actors got used to that direction and the entire act remained that way, rotated 45 degrees, aimed right in the direction of the *leșire* (exit) sign." With this story, he informs the actors of the reason why he changes his vantage point from time to time during the rehearsal.

The Paris scene<sup>79</sup> — here, even more sharply, if possible, Silviu Purcărete's deep-seated doubts come out; indeed, it's his dark resignation distilled to stoic wisdom in face of the great historical events. Absurdity, blood, appealing and infinitely empty slogans: this is what history is, nothing more. During the rehearsals of *Julius Caesar* in Cluj, several times he mentioned that revolutions — that is, thoroughgoing societal changes — generally make bad things worse: and this finds its source in human nature. In the Paris scene, cabbage heads fall into the awaiting handcart, balloons pop, one of the severed heads bounces like a basketball, and Danton, with a virtuoso motion, shoots it and makes it land (in the handcart). The scene hurts and amuses simultaneously, topped by Eve "as a ragged, aroused porn star," when she urinates the tricolor piss onto the table, attempting in this way to obtain Danton's masculine favors. (Adam: András Csaba Molnos, Eve: Etelka Magyarai.)

<sup>79</sup> Madách: *Ibid.*, Scene 9: Paris, Place de la Grève.



Beforehand, the murder of the marquise (Ildikó Lanstyák) is seemingly the work of chance — two drunken *sans-culottes* enter, one of them recognizes the marquise and shoots her down like a dog, aiming at her between Danton's legs. It's an unbearable scene in its unmistakably erotic aim — in the literal sense of the word.<sup>80</sup> It reminds one of the two clown-murderers in *Richard III*, those infinitely absurd Shakespearean figures who render the great historical project laughable even before their defeat.

"*Aristocrația mizeriei*," Silviu tells Etelka Magyari, playing the "woman aroused" by Danton, and that's what she plays: the dignity of the commoners and the misery of the aristocracy.

During the interval, the significance of [Eve as] the "aroused woman" reverses, compared to the original conception: they don't kill her; on the contrary, this prostitute winds up leading the revolution. I ponder the woman's words:

Danton! Look at this conspirator —  
He would have killed you but I killed him first

Oh, I've done well, and I want my reward:  
I want to spend a night with you, great man.

You are a man, and I am a young woman.  
My admiration draws me to you, great one.<sup>81</sup>

And then [Adam as] Danton's response:

I'm counting,  
Madam, and find that I have fewer nights  
Remaining than are traitors in this country.<sup>82</sup>

I interpret the woman's words as the situation of political provocation in our own, radically abridged version, from which, as far as I'm concerned, what follows is that Danton has the woman murdered. In this utterly illusion-free version, on the other hand, she becomes a co-conspirator with the prostituted Saint-Just and Robespierre: they don't kill her; rather, she participates in Danton's liquidation. They remove the prostitute from the table, and she fuses with Saint-Just in a Hollywood kiss lasting until the end of the scene. It is the image of the scarcely begun but already prostituted revolution: Purcărete's resignation knows no limits.

<sup>80</sup> Translator's note: Visky plays on two meanings of the Hungarian word *célzás*: aim (as at a target) and allusion.

<sup>81</sup> Madách: *Ibid.*, 158–159.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

London.<sup>83</sup> The beginning doesn't please Purcărete. It has no meat. "Does anyone know a Shakespeare monologue in English?" he asks. Csongor Mihály volunteers, reciting a monologue from *Henry V*:

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more;  
Or close the wall up with our English dead...

and then Attila Balázs spontaneously joins in with Sonnet LXVI, also in English — they're "quarreling" in this space that has suddenly become Shakespearean: passionately, committedly, at the highest pitch of poetry.

Tired with all these, for restful death I cry,  
As to behold desert a beggar born,  
And needy nothing trimm'd in jollity,  
And purest faith unhappily forsworn,  
And gilded honour shamefully misplaced...

It's a confusion of sound, at times an explicitly humorous situation; but it is not yet a scene. We discuss whether we should, as it were, lay the London crowd scene over this very English theatrical moment, one that really cries out more for Danton's severed head than for the modern age's Yorick-skull, and which would remain in the space through to the end, anyway. A severed, bloody head over which the actors compete with the passions of Shakespeare's texts, in English. "*Hai să facem cum zice András,*"<sup>84</sup> says Silviu, and he inserts the new version: two lost actors and a severed head. The crowd enters later. The whole thing is beautiful. Simultaneously funny and heartrending. Theater itself. And Lucifer announces,

But this is what I've looked for all these years,  
A place where we could have a splendid time.  
The din of merriment, abandoned laughter,  
The kindling of the Bacchanalian fire  
To bring a rosy glow to every cheek  
And lend a foolish mask to poverty.  
Isn't it splendid?<sup>85</sup>

It is transformed into a strong start to the scene, with humor, blood, and dislocation of the theatrical tradition. I blush, inside, that Purcărete has completed the scene by citing me.

<sup>83</sup> Madách: *Ibid.*, Scene 11.

<sup>84</sup> "Let's do it the way András wants."

<sup>85</sup> Madách: *Ibid.*, 179–180.

Right on the first day, Purcărete let me know that what he needs is not foremost a minder of the text — this, after all, is a self-evident task for the dramaturg, especially in the case of such a difficult text as this one — but a discussion partner, outside observer, and source of inspiration. I'm reminded of a sentence that Robert Woodruff sent me during rehearsals in Cluj for *The Birthday*:<sup>86</sup> "You're not here to agree with me but to question my suggestions." In the course of rehearsals, Purcărete did not indulge in petty power plays one single time, not even in moments of fatigue or exasperation. A liberating atmosphere suffuses the rehearsals, as is clearly visible in the actors' acting and their creative collaboration.

FEBRUARY 29, 2020

A sentence in the morning — not just one but three, on the sunny bridge over the river Bega, behind the Orthodox cathedral:

I've grown old in your arms  
Your embrace has cloaked me in death  
Let it be you who takes me to the far shore.

In yesterday's stroll together, Silviu and I spoke about the Phalanstery scene. It seems thin, lacking in meat, and, well, the militaristic interpretation of the situation doesn't strike us as very inventive. Not, mind, the gastro-labor, the literal invention of the Phalanstery, which is very much a Purcărete trademark; that is, that the Phalanstery should be a kitchen and not a laboratory, where the old scientist is trying to mix up the flavors of the future. "Maybe we ought to develop everything from the thought of the gastro-Phalanstery," I think aloud. "Let's go eat and then sleep on it," he says. By this morning, it has become clear: it's impossible to go for a new *staging*, since time has by now made us its captives. We can only work with the existing material, deepening and refining it, and filling out the characters as much as we can. The scene settles in, the humorous upbeat followed by a truly beautiful Tadeusz Kantoresque scene with the puppets of the children being separated from their mothers.

The Eskimo scene<sup>87</sup> seems to examine the question: can the essence of humanity be irrevocably lost? Is evolution in reverse possible: that is, the person's

<sup>86</sup> Thomas Vinterberg, Mogens Rukov, Bo Hr. Hansen: *Születésnap* [*The Birthday*]. Hungarian State Theater of Cluj, 4 October 2011. Stage adaptation: András Visky and Robert Woodruff; Director: Robert Woodruff; Dramaturg: András Visky; Scenery and costume design: Carmen-cita Brojboiu; Music: Zsolt Lászlóffy; Choreography: Ferenc Sinkó; Video: Attila Sóos; Assistant directors: Simón Hanukai, Andrej Visky; Stage managers: Yvonne Nagy, Zsolt Györffy.

<sup>87</sup> Madách: *Ibid.*, Scene 14.



involution? According to Madách, yes: a new Ice Age casts humanity into the ranks of the animals, but they yet remain *homo religiosus* — indeed, unconsciously awaiting the Messiah and thus not even surprised by the sudden appearance of Adam and his cohort. This is the visit of the heavenly ones, and one must not offer them food but show them a sacrifice: offering them the Eskimo's wife will convince them to show mercy. Blood — this time, a seal's — the fallen state, and humor, again. (Adam: Zsolt Csata, Eve: András Csaba Molnos.)

The closing deals with Lucifer in the spirit of Madách, at most adding that the Lord handles the three rascal devils like little pupils: he will put them under stricter discipline in future.

## MARCH 1, 2020

First throw of the dice. The themes of the warm-up discussion: the poetry of Mircea Dinescu, Artemisia Gentileschi (prompted by *The Guardian's* recent article: Artemisia as the baroque heroine of the #MeToo movement) and, well, Caravaggio. It is a threshold situation — one more step and an entirely new life begins. Travel away, new projects, writing. Silviu will begin in Pitești, with Șirli and Buhagiar (a production based on poems by Mircea Dinescu), I will continue with Woodruff — more precisely, I will restart *Caravaggio* in Cluj: a reworked revival. Longing for the quiet of my study. Assembling the volume of theatrical studies, of which this diary will also be a part, then, finally, “the” novel. Bucharest: the Securitate archives — I can hardly wait for the research work: I must exhume the history of the female pilot, Nadia Russo: loves, executions, betrayals, staying alive seemingly “by accident” in the era of the dark and vengeful dictatorship. What will I find in the incomplete archives? I must learn whether she actually wrote the will in the prison camp for my mother as she prepared for death. Or was it Mrs. Tereza? Tereza, for sure — but Nadia and our mother: how close did they actually become in the *Lager*? Answering the question requires that I see Nadia Russo's handwriting and the material relating to her in the secret police archives.

Apocalypse — which, of course, was to be expected after the first throw. But, to our joint surprise, the full rehearsal lasted two hours. Almost unbelievable. “At least the duration is right,” I tell him. “Nothing else is,” he replies.

The apocalypse of the first dice throw is a true theatrical experience: I really love these unavoidable collapses because, paradoxically, they validate the existence of the form we have found. Only a production built with such circumspect exactitude can display this picture of near-cataclysmic collapse. It will take no more than two or three rehearsals, and the whole thing will soar.

The entire collapse is, as a matter of fact, caused by the lack of masks and the affected personnel's lack of practice. How can they be sufficiently practiced

in order to reach confidently the production's style by Tuesday? It occurs to Purcărete to play the entire piece without masks — but this is impossible at this point. The language of the entire production is built on them: the doubling of masks and voices. That rupture — the one speaking and the other acting — evokes the aesthetic of puppet theater, but this, however, must come off with total precision. Silviu suggests that we dispense with the masks and make do with strong facial colors, because he no longer has confidence in the arrival of the masks. Dragoș Buhagiar suggests gold-colored makeup — but in that case, what would we be playing, that's the question. Purcărete envisions strong face-painting nonetheless, calls in the theater's makeup artists, wanting to explain the latest proposal to them. In fact, he wants to dispense with the masks of the *Lucifers*: gray makeup, black teeth. Silviu exits, thinks with visible gestures, thinking various options through. "I cannot rearrange the entire production in forty-eight hours," he says.

Meanwhile, the lighting people are at work, having received specific instructions about the installation of the lights. Cleaning up, corrections, bafflement — and all simultaneously.

Enikő Szász complains to me about the text's unintelligibility: diction, breathing, articulation, emphasis. That's right, yes. Except that, well, nobody is yet truly speaking the text; they rattle it off as well as they can, running after the scene, props get switched, chaotic exits and entrances: it's all a natural consequence of the production's complexity, I tell them. When they've all found their places, the text will get its voice: I trust in that.

A newer proposal: get rid of the masks except for the Adam-Eve pairs, and double them with amplified voices, while the others speak. Yet another text-apocalypse! Because even though everyone knows the text, it's entirely different to speak it aloud, to articulate it aloud, to formulate true and exact thoughts, rather than to mutter it to themselves invisibly behind the masks just to keep the action going. Let's see what the actors have to say about the idea. And if they say yes, when will I have time to rehearse, to work individually with each of them on the text — since we haven't had the time thus far, we've always been racing for time like those who've lost their minds? Somehow, the text always gets left for last in these projects, which also means that the real textual work never happens, and the actors get inevitably slapped around by the critics, even though it's not their fault. Only once everyone's mask is perfect can the work begin to define the masked characters.

The solution is born: only the Adam-Eve pairs will wear masks; in this way, the switching between pairs will also be easier for the audience to follow. "Maybe it will be comprehensible that Adam and Eve find themselves not in their own skin," says Silviu. According to the actors, this version is achievable in the short time available; "Let's tackle it," they say.



Meanwhile, it turns out that everything that happens under the table is visible to the viewers, so it must be acted out (for example, preparation of the props must be made part of the performance, including the snake, etc.). The forbidden apples are raised into the flies — they will not be managed by the actors; we give up the dwarfs' props in the Athens scene; the circus-like mechanisms of hands and feet are dropped from the scene (it would be truly impossible to drill their handling in the time available); there are scenes where the absence of masks requires a new *mise en scène*, for example, the Athenian scene, etc., etc.: an astounding volume of changes, which Purcărete, paying attention to the production's language, handles coolly, like someone who can no longer be surprised by anything in theater.

MARCH 2, 2020

After yesterday's dispute about Lucifer's *drive* — whence, where, why, how [?] — that I had provoked in the discussions following the full rehearsal, today Purcărete returns to the topic. Yesterday I felt that the actors had lost the production's path, especially the Lucifers, who propel the scenes. They actually carry the "story," or human "history," somewhere, but the problem is that it's not quite possible to know why. What do they want? Purcărete summarizes where we had ended up yesterday: Lucifer wants to prove to Adam that there is no salvation in history and thus, the life to which God had called him into existence is meaningless. Except that the consequence, I continue, is that Creation itself would collapse, because following the Fall, it is the promise of Salvation that keeps the created order alive: this is what shines at the center of Life, giving it its rhythm and pulse, because "For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever,"<sup>88</sup> I quote the letter to the Romans in alarm. Therefore Lucifer would derail this because he stands on the ground of pure rationality, whatever it might mean, or rather, on the ground of science, whatever this too might mean, whence, so he thinks, he can dislodge God's rule. The positivist science-eschatology taken to its limit renders the God story unnecessary because the solution is "coming" soon, and that is a scientific, or what is worse, technological question: there is nothing else we could await.

Where the eternal 'Nay' his foot shall set,  
The world shall at his treading crumble yet.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>88</sup> Rom 11:36.

<sup>89</sup> Madách: *Ibid.* (trans. J.C.W. Horne), 6. Translator's note: Horne translation cited here, not the Szirtes, as it hews closer to the original's literal meaning, especially in Lucifer's boast that he will topple God's world.



What sort of world? The Creation and, within it, humanity; that is, in point of fact, the “seeming contingencies” of always uncontrollable love, and its humor. With the elimination of Creation, however, God withdraws into abstraction, since he would give up the inexhaustible love relations linked to his own Work, in which he himself is mirrored for both humanity and himself. Lucifer is not a God-denier, but he rejects the fallibility of the human essence, which God accepts (or accepted at last). He is the ideologue of eugenics and extreme experiments on humans: here, Madách nicely reports the “perfect” worlds soon to come: the genocidal and horrific experiments to improve man espoused by dictatorships of left and right.

Madách's Lucifer is the product of the Enlightenment and is no longer a Christian devil, to the extent that he steps radically outside the Christian system of argument and opposes God with the inevitability of secularization. But he also realizes that Man will remain *homo religiosus* as long as he lives, and thus the religion of science must step in to replace the faith in God.

Structurally, dictatorships are the most religious ages: dethroning and exiling God is a fundamentally religious deed, and the fear of His power is a recognition that the exile will certainly return, judging the living and the dead. According to the Book of Proverbs, however, as I have already stated, God created the world with an eye on “the child”: humor calls this forth from time to time out of the “divine order,” because it is part of the essence of order. Lucifer's world — perhaps also according to Madách — is that of the religion of science: a modernist experiment that forms the basis for materialist dialectic, the annihilating ideology of necessary antagonisms. Which leads, of course, to the manufacture of ideological antagonisms and to the operation of laboratories of political communication that, on demand from the Center, supplied (and of course still supply) the necessary contradiction and with it, the opponent. The conversation places the Lucifer actors back into the dramatic arc of the *Tragedy*: they not only introduce Adam and Eve to history but also seek to convince them to reject the human continuation of the divine Work, and not trust in the promise of salvation.

It is an important discussion and, far from hurrying it along, Purcărete becomes absorbed in it and explicates and argues with pleasure — one day before the premiere. Mephistopheles “is a secularized thinker in whom a poison-pen liberal journalist got lost,”<sup>90</sup> László Márton writes wittily about Goethe's devil; Lucifer is more an offended family member continually reminding his overly strict father that he also belongs to him, and that it's not *fair* that God loves this unfortunate, constantly-in-thrall-to-its-feelings, pronouncedly sentimental human couple more than he loves Lucifer. Madách's Lucifer is a fallen angel,

<sup>90</sup> László Márton: *Ördög szerződik, Isten eltűnik. Támpontok a Faust értő olvasásához* [The Devil Draws up a Contract, God Disappears. Bases for a Reading of Faust], in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: *Faust*, trans. László Márton, Pozsony/Bratislava, Kalligram, 2015, 658.

but he is an angel, and as God's anti-footman he seems a devil of smaller format than Mephistopheles. This is also demonstrated by the fact that there is no pact between the Lord and Lucifer, there's no agreement one can call on. History is a dream which, however — this exemplary dream-dramaturgy! — we must make the viewer forget in order to preserve the dramatic deeds for him. The awakening, the intrusion of the pregnant Eve among us, this *deus ex machina* must be a great and experiential turn of events, not merely a simple reminder of the "unseriousness" of the theatrical play up to that point.

Antal Németh writes about the highly successful Vienna production, which, by the way, he names a "cash register piece" (not bad!): "The main objective of the [Hermann] Röbbeling dramaturgy was the most thorough possible elimination of resemblances to *Faust*, so that nothing should remind the viewer of Goethe's opus."<sup>91</sup> That's understandable. And for us, our main objective was a sweeping, accosting, then-and-there performance that wipes away all prior knowledge and invites the viewer into his own life.

Lucifer carries forward the tradition of the small(er) *platea*-devils, dipped, of course, into the conceptual world of the Enlightenment. Because of the Phalanstery scene, Madách is forced (or so it seems, at least) to forgive him, since there, in the community of overdone scientificity, handled ironically, Lucifer becomes Adam's co-conspirator, and — for the duration of one scene — not his opponent. He contradicts his own principles when he introduces Adam to the self-annihilating world of "cold" science.

Another possible parallel comes up, which may assist the concrete thespian construction of the character in depicting the chief plot lines. And this is the example of the prodigal son: the older son who stays at home and doesn't squander his patrimony resembles this Lucifer in several ways, since, *per definitionem* he, too, regards himself as a member of his father's house. Most importantly, Lucifer's sense of offense is striking: he feels he has been unjustly sentenced to repeat a grade. In the example of the prodigal son, the debauched wastrel, who nonetheless returns, chastened, becomes the positive hero, while the elder sibling is, in fact, condemned as a calculating mediocrity.

Purcărete initially headed in the direction of radical minimalism. The absence of masks (and other items) at the end of the Roman scene lead in a different direction. They don't crucify the apostle Peter upside down on the two-branched wooden ladder — I'm going to miss that! His speech is simple and free of anger: he is the sad, tired prophet who does not believe in the greatness of his mission, but despite that, still carries the miracle through to the end in the name of "holy love." He doesn't even take stock of his actions: he performs what the text prescribes with wavering faith. He is not only the apostle-actor but also Silviu Purcărete. And the miracle happens.

<sup>91</sup> Koltai: *Ibid.*, 38.



I was mistaken: the crucifixion remains: the Caravaggio Peter, wooden ladder, head downward. He himself spreads his arms wide, since there is no crossbeam: a particularly beautiful, pure image. Joy; at last.

A break. Something happened during the break that I could never have imagined: Silviu invites us to play volleyball, and Ilir and I jump into the game. The unselfconscious ball play goes on until the ball hits dangerously close to the lighting booth. We sneak away from the scene of the crime conspiratorily, as if we'd never been there. The childlike joy of the preceding scene permeated the entire break.

The masks arrive. Dragoş will adjust them individually to the actors' heads early tomorrow morning, on the day of the premiere. And then we should have another dress rehearsal so we can finally see the performance itself.

I marvel at the human immediacy of this "poor in spirit" fairground acting, which brings *The Tragedy of Man* into such human proximity as I have never experienced before. The viewers laugh at the start, understandably, timidly, since humor is lacking in the *Tragedy's* tradition, but not, as it now becomes clear, in Madách's text and the resulting theatrical situations. The *Tragedy* productions, even the more significant ones, or at least those that still live in my memory, associate the text's greatness and elevation with a sort of theatrical grandeur and elevation: as if the direction and theatrical imagery typically sought to compete with Madách's poetry. In Silviu Purcărete's conception, theater is the (self-)definition of human essence, and this is worth approaching not from the direction of grandeur but from the fallen state and its intimate ordinariness. Human greatness — which becomes the director's great theatrical temptation in the hands of many (thus, the titanic image of the "great man") — obscures the true calling according to which making theater is the praxis of the event of common understanding: theater cannot be good unless surprise, wonder, and amazement do not enfold us; in other words, we are always caught in the act when we slink into the proximity of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or to its fruit tempting us with the promise of eternal life. "Really, there is no need to make too much of it" — it is with this liberating sentence that Ortega y Gasset begins his 1946 study *The Idea of Theater*, in which he examines the possibilities for theater in Western culture's null point following the Second World War.<sup>92</sup>

A tiring, all-day rehearsal that I observe with concentration; refreshing conversations during the necessary technical breaks. Silviu hands me the drawings he's done during *The Tragedy of Man*: two sketchbooks of different size, one with a white cover, the other black. Staggering, yet again. As if I were leafing through the rehearsal process diary, in drawings. Our discussions are mirrored in them with staggering subtlety. I take photos for myself of a portrait

<sup>92</sup> José Ortega y Gasset: *La Idea del teatro*. Biblioteca Nueva, Madrid, 2008 [1946].



of Caravaggio and an ink drawing of Saint Peter's martyrdom. I would love to have a duplicate of this pictorial commentary so I could better understand what has happened to us during the course of the rehearsals.

The Lord's voice always arrives unexpectedly and movingly. An ageless child speaks to us, or rather, does not even speak, but sings, sometimes stepping out of song into the recitative of intimate address, as if it were here, in our immediate proximity.

MARCH 3, 2020

Rehearsal, even on the day of the premiere. Corrections: masks, lighting, and occasionally even entire scenes. "We need two more weeks," he says, "but we always say that, before every premiere," he adds. Purcărete reminds me of the most valid definition of theater, which I had told him at the start of the rehearsal process: the art of "perfect clumsiness," yes. "You are creating this theater, too," I tell him, thinking not only of his latest work, this Timișoara production of *The Tragedy of Man*. Tragedy shows its true face in the laughter of children and in their suicidal trust in the world. "It is a long path that leads to perfect clumsiness," he says, "and individual productions are each a single stairstep on the path. I've got to stop now," he continues, "direction is a concern for the things of the world that is meant for the young."

"It is not Shakespeare whom we direct but a production of the sort that Shakespeare would have directed if he were our contemporary," said Purcărete at the first rehearsal of the Cluj *Julius Caesar*, according to my diary entry for the day. To imagine the text as theater we can only read the Madách poem validly from the perspective of our own bodily experiences. The text is, as it were, the document of a virtual production that played in Madách's imagination. "What I read transforms into a sort of hallucination inside me, which is visual in its essence. But not only visual. Tentative rhythms and sounds are added, traces of atmosphere, music. [...] The only thing I've led myself to do while reading is to relate to the text as irrationally as I possibly can, to let the irrational work as freely as possible within me. At least at first. Later, when I sit down to work, these images and traces of hallucinations begin to organize themselves — true, with a fair amount of difficulty. As a consequence, the next stage aims at a sort of syntax of the imagery, the creation of image-sentences. And when I say 'image,' I am not thinking solely of visual tableaux. The text, in practice, changes into images of the production that are all the better, the more irrational they are. I am inclined to preserve this path for the

irrational, because I am very much a Platonist on theoretical issues. I believe that the artist does nothing of his own volition but creates under the influence of inspiration.”<sup>93</sup>

During premieres of his own productions, he vanishes, and we have no idea where he is. He creeps away alone, somewhere. Theatrical artists are the best at withdrawing into solitude. Vacuum, breathlessness. How can one step outside work — and where to? Well, into everyday life. That's the most difficult destination. Breaking away. One must break away.

I asked him, before *Julius Caesar*, what the viewer means to him. He gave a surprising answer: “For me, the viewer is a virtual being, my own mirror image. Or rather, someone is inside my head, an ideal viewer, for whom I bring my production into being. The viewer living inside me is my double, a phantom, ‘someone’ for whom I work: if ‘he’ likes it, then it’s good, and if not, then it’s not.” Then I ask him if he observes the audience reactions during the performance. “Never. I cannot watch the performance if the audience is also present. For me, everything shuts down at the premiere. I don’t watch premieres. Perhaps I might pop in for the extent of a short scene, but then out I go: I’m unable to watch the performance to the end. Never. I can watch it much, much later, if they’ve recorded it on film. When I’ve grown distant from it, then I can manage to watch it, but not otherwise. Not if they’re playing it, if the audience is there.”<sup>94</sup>

The premiere. *The production is a ship that sinks not far from shore.* A saying of Beckett; as a matter of fact, a verbal comment reported by Peter Brook. One can believe that it’s Beckett.

I observe the audience reactions from one of the highest points in the space. Madách is near us: come closer, you too, don’t be afraid.

*Translated by Peter Czipott*

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Paderborn, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2019). She is co-editor of an edited volume on modern art and ritual (Saskia Fischer – Birgit Mayer (eds.): *Kunst-Rituale – Ritual-Kunst. Zur Ritualität von Theater, Literatur und Musik in der Moderne*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2019) and, in addition, has published articles and books on rhythm, ritual, dance, camp literature and holocaust literature as well as guilt discourse and forgiveness in German literature and philosophy after 1945.

**Jarosław Fret** is a founder and leader of Teatr ZAR, theater director and actor as well as the Director of the Grotowski Institute. In 1999–2002 he organized a series of expeditions to Georgia, Armenia, and Iran, conducting research into the oldest forms of religious music of Eastern Christianity. In the following years, together with members of Teatr ZAR, he led expeditions to Mount Athos in Greece, Sardinia, Corsica, Armenia, Turkey, and Israel. He has directed several performances, concerts, films, and an opera. Teatr ZAR's *Gospels of Childhood* triptych has been seen in Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Athens, Belgrade, Edinburgh, Florence, Madrid, Paris, Sibiu, Cairo, New Delhi, and Seoul. In November 2013 he completed work on *Armine, Sister*, for which he developed an original musical dramaturgy and special stage architecture. In 2016, *Medeas. On Getting Across*, a performance dedicated to rejections and migrations, premiered during the Theatre Olympics in Wrocław, later presented in Warsaw, Thessaloniki, Madrid, and Paris. He lectures and leads work sessions in Poland and abroad. His awards and honours include: Best New Music Theater for Teatr ZAR from "Los Angeles Times" (2009); Wrocław Theater Prize for the *Gospels of Childhood* triptych (2010); the prestigious Total Theatre Award for Physical/Visual Theatre and the Herald Angel at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival (2012). He has devised and coordinated numerous Polish and international projects at the Grotowski Institute, including the Grotowski Year 2009, Masters in Residence, the International Theatre Festival *The World as a Place of Truth*, and the Theatre Olympics 2016 in Wrocław. His efforts led to the opening, in 2010, of Na Grobli Studio, a new location of the Grotowski Institute. In 2019, another new venue of the Institute was established: Bakery | Center for Performing Arts.

**Birte Giesler**, Dr. habil., *Privatdozentin* at Bielefeld University, adjunct teacher at Braunschweig University, and academic staff member at the University of Applied Sciences Bielefeld, Ph.D. in Germanic studies, Habilitation in literary and cultural studies. Senior/Lecturer, University of Sydney, Australia, 2005–2012; Feodor Lynen Fellowship of the Humboldt Foundation; visiting professor at the University of Łódź, Poland; Research Fellowship at the *Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach / Deutsche Schillergesellschaft*, Marbach am Neckar. Recent publications include: *Weibliche Kreativität um 1800 – Women's Creativity*

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**Jan L. Hagens'** research focuses on German and comparative drama (1550 to the present), drama theory, and philosophical and theological approaches to literature. He has published articles on seventeenth-century Jesuit drama, dramatic genre theory, theater semiotics, German film, Nietzsche, Freud, and language pedagogy. Hagens studied German literature, English literature, and Philosophy at the Universität Tübingen, Williams College, the University of Virginia, and Princeton University, then taught at Carleton College, Eckerd College, and the University of Notre Dame before joining Yale in 2010. He serves on the editorial board of *Text and Presentation* and the conference board of the Comparative Drama Conference.

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**Karina Koppány**, theater historian, Bachelor of Liberal Arts, graduated in 2017 from the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary. During her studies, she also participated in two Erasmus+ programs during which she had the opportunity to work together with foreign artists. Inter Alia, a Greek nonprofit organization, recruited her for a performance that focused on education, democracy, citizenship, and human rights. She played the part of Antigone in the Hungarian version of Sophocles' play. For a similar cause, she



also took part in the Ars Omnis Cultural Association's Italian program. She was awarded her master's degree in theater studies in 2019, also at the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary. She has been looking for adventures in the world ever since.

**Anna Lenz** studied comparative literature, English, and pictorial science at the universities of Saarbrücken, Bergamo, and Bielefeld. She is currently a research assistant in the Department of Literature at Bielefeld University and is writing her doctoral thesis on Elfriede Jelinek's history plays.

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Toward the end of the twentieth century, in art as well as ritual studies, cultural turns contributed to elaborating a broad definition of ritual and rituality. Rituality is now generally regarded as one of the master keys to understanding not only cultures in general but also arts in particular. Poetic rituality sheds light on the liminal characteristics of the art form and references to ritual practices, ritual forms and structures that are set in motion in a way that allows special aesthetic characteristics and semantic aspects to arise. The contributors to the volume - theater and literary studies scholars as well as students from Yale, Bielefeld, Károli University, and the Grotowski Institute - had the opportunity to share their related works in the course of several recent international academic events. Since our team also included dramatists, dramaturgs, and directors of theater, our workshops offered frames for sharing insights into artistic laboratories, especially in the barrack-dramaturgy of András Visky and the work led by Jaroslaw Fret at the Grotowski Theater. Complementing the many different approaches to poetic rituality, all of the workshop presentations and studies brought together in the present volume continue to demonstrate how fundamentally rituality can contribute to the formal, semantic, pragmatic, and structural unfolding of literary and theatrical art works. Besides continuous theoretical reflections, a vast array of examples is given, ranging from Greek, Japanese, English, and Hungarian to German, Russian, French, and Sámi drama, performance, and theater productions, as the studies in the present volume also illustrate.

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