

**Pázmány Péter Catholic University**

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences



**Vera Prontvai**

**Poetry and Rituality in Contemporary Hungarian Theatre**

Attila Vidnyánszky's Directions and András Visky's Staged Dramas

**Doctoral Theses (PhD)**

Dissertation Supervisors: Enikő Sepsi PhD, Anikó Radvánszky PhD

**Doctoral School of Literary Studies**

Head of Department: Emil Hargittay DSc.

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## Background of the research, problem identification

The dissertation explores the question of how ritual and poetic elements can be embedded in the theatrical world of contemporary Hungarian artists such as Attila Vidnyánszky and András Visky. The doctoral thesis focuses on the work of these two theatrical figures because the works of these two artists have never been examined side by side, nor have all of Visky's works for the stage been considered in a summative study. My questioning also focuses on the similarities and differences between the *poetic theatre* represented by Vidnyánszky and Visky, approaching them from the aspects of the role of the body, dramaturgy, and the treatment of space and time. In my research, I also examine whether the performances analysed are situated within the framework of the *evangelical aesthetics* described by Pilinszky, and if so, under what conditions, and whether the poet's theatrical vision continues to live on in contemporary theatrical practice.

Enikő Sepsi's monograph *Pilinszky János mozdulatlan színháza Mallarmé, Simone Weil és Robert Wilson tükrében*,<sup>1</sup> which explores the relationship between poetry and ritual in the theatre imagined by the poet, can be considered as an inspirational source for the research. The work of the research groups at the Károli Gáspár of the Reformed Church in Hungary, especially the scholarly focus and results of the *Rituality, Theatre, Literature* Research Group, can also be seen as a precursor to this dissertation.

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<sup>1</sup>SEPSI Enikő, *Pilinszky János mozdulatlan színháza Mallarmé, Simone Weil és Robert Wilson műveinek tükrében*, Budapest, KRE – L'Harmattan, 2015.

## Research methods

The corpus of the dissertation consists of Attila Vidnyánszky's portrayals of Christ – *Gyilkosság a székesegyházban*, *Mesés férfiak szárnyakkal*, *Halotti pompa*, *Johanna a máglyán*, *Csíkomyói passió*, *Bűn és bűnhődés* –, and Visky's staged dramas – *Tanítványok*, *Alkoholisták*, *Pornó*, *Megöltem az anyámat*, *Caravaggio terminal*, *Visszaszületés*, *A szökés*, *A test történetei*.

The works of these artists are in the focus because they are based on the same mechanism of action, and they are also the ones in which the striking features of Pilinszky's theatre aesthetics are most evident.

The analysis of the theatrical performances - based primarily on ritual and semiotic foundations - was made in view of the activities of the workshop around the National Theatre and the writings of theatre theorist András Visky, whose interpretation allowed a deeper insight into the performances. As there is a scarcity of literature reflecting on the theatrical work of Vidnyánszky and Visky, I had to turn to sources who were actively involved in the creation of the theatre productions discussed: I made a number of audio recordings with dramaturgs and actors of the National Theatre, authors and directors of the productions. Also, the aim of the interviews was to conduct authentic research, both summarising the activities of the workshops to date and reflecting on them to inspire the creators to integrate interpretative pathways into theatrical practice.

The performance analyses were developed within an interdisciplinary framework, with emphasis on theories of ritual

theatre, performativity, semiotics, spatial analysis, the role of the body, and the specificity of mystery plays. Moreover, the dissertation also engages in a dialogue with contemporary discourse on Hungarian poetic and ritual theatre. In my view, the perspective of applying these theories has allowed the characteristics of poetry and rituality to be explored and presented in the theatrical worlds of Vidnyánszky and Visky.

One of the aims of the dissertation is to make the study of poetry and rituality among contemporary artists part of the discourse of theatre theory. The first part of the dissertation describes the research, aspirations and experiments of the greatest artists of Western theatre in relation to ritual theatre and discusses initiatives of ritual theatre. After describing the directions of ritual theatre, the dissertation discusses the *transformation cycle* introduced by Visky. This is followed by a chapter on Pilinszky's theatrical vision, synthesising the relevant research results, and then demonstrating that the most characteristic features of the theatre imagined by the poet live on in the works of Vidnyánszky and Visky. In a separate chapter, I explore the rites and liturgical features that characterise the theatrical world of the authors, and then the liturgical structure on which, in my opinion, the performances they stage are based. The characteristics of *poetic theatre*, its ritual and liturgical features, its mechanism of action, its interpretation of the body and its references to mystery plays are supported by the analysis of a number of plays.

## Research results

### The survival of Pilinszky's theatrical idea

The new, original aspect of my research is that it applies the characteristics of Pilinszky's theatrical aesthetic analysed by many others (Tamás Hankovszky,<sup>2</sup> Ibolya Maczák,<sup>3</sup> György Mészáros,<sup>4</sup> Enikő Sepsí<sup>5</sup>) to the work of contemporary Hungarian artists, and shows the characteristics of the poet's evangelical aesthetic and liturgical theatre in the works of Vidnyánszky and Visky. The author, who lives in Cluj-Napoca, refers to Pilinszky's theatre as a point of reference in several of his writings and statements, although the Berehovo-based director does not do so, although some of his productions do show similarities with the poet's theatrical vision.

a., Like Pilinszky, the theatrical world of both artists create liturgical structures on stage: the structure of their performances can be compared to the structure of the Holy Mass. This structure places the performances in a semantic web that triggers the operating mechanism of the central metaphor and can prepare the audience for action while placing redemption at the centre.

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<sup>2</sup>HANKOVSKY Tamás, *A „hit közegében” fogant esztétika*, Tiszatáj, 2011, dec., 89-105.

<sup>3</sup>MACZÁK Ibolya, *Papírdarabok. Pilinszky János drámaírói munkássága*, Budapest, Balassi, 2015.

<sup>4</sup>MÉSZÁROS György, *Pilinszky János színházesztétikája*, Iskolakultúra, 2006/3, 44-52.

<sup>5</sup>SEPSI, *Pilinszky János mozdulatlan színháza Mallarmé, Simone Weil és Robert Wilson műveinek tükrében*, i. m.

b., Their plays can be classified as liturgical works not only on the basis of thematic principles, but also because the function of the productions is equivalent to the effect of the rites.

Vidnyánszky's and Visky's plays are not only determined by issues of content, but also by performative acts inherent in ritual and liturgical events.

c., The performances studied also contain a number of ritual elements that refer to Christian culture and Hasidic traditions.

d., The concept of stage *presence* in the theatre of the authors examined in the dissertation goes beyond the experience of the actor's intense presence time and takes on a new perspective: the loss of the theatre's presence is experienced, as in Pilinszky's case as a metaphysical problem. Their use of theatrical language is often identical to the Church's use of words and meanings, and they interpret stage *presence* as a manifestation of transcendence.

e., Just as murder is one of the most frequently used metaphors in Pilinszky's oeuvre, it is one of the most fundamental metaphors of the performances analysed. The directors not only universalize the sufferings of the individual in history, but also parallel them with the suffering of Christ.

f., The *poetic theatre* of Vidnyánszky and the *poetic theatre* of Visky - like Pilinszky's - can be compared to poetry because of the organisation of the performances on stage and the function of the central metaphors written in space. However, the performances analysed are also characterised by the features of

poetry: strong musicality and imagery, metaphoricity, dramaturgy suggestive of montage.

g., Vidnyánszky's productions and some of Visky's dramas can be classified as contemporary mystery plays, miracles or passion plays.

h., "A. = a. This is the basic formula of all art."<sup>6</sup> - Pilinszky wrote in his diary notes, and I believe that this connection is the starting point of the theatre of the two authors in question. The collective myth evoked by the performances can be placed in the present time of the human bodies present, questioning their own (body) image. The performances may break the familiar boundaries of the body's meaning, giving the audience the opportunity to place them in a different conceptual space.

i., Visky - like Pilinszky - deepens the structure of his dramas in the direction of Beckett's dramaturgy of expectation.

k., The dramaturgy of the analysed performances bears the traces of fragmentation. The visual representation of the plays, the dramatic texts created from poems and/or mosaics of text fragments, the use of space, the illustration of mutilated human bodies, the alternation of stage images, the shortcomings of storytelling, make the components that define the performances (use of space, dramaturgy, scenography, script) fragmented.

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<sup>6</sup> PILINSZKY, *Naplók, töredékek, i. m.*, 116.



## Poetry and rituality

At the heart of Vidnyánszky's and Visky's theatre, which he calls poetic, is the spatial inscription of the *central metaphor and its liturgical function*. Their staged works have structural characteristics that are driven by a central metaphor that Northrop Frye called "king"<sup>7</sup>. This central metaphor is expressed in the images displayed on stage during the performances, in the possible exploitation of spatial structure and in the figurality of the scenery, and then reaches its fullness in the human body present. The role of the characters in the performances and the spectators present can also be understood in relation to the *central metaphor* of the play. The central metaphor *spreads* throughout the space of the stage and *extends* to the body of the spectator, leading to a state of catharsis (*rapture*). The *central metaphor* of the performances can be traced back to the events of Christ.

Each of the performances analysed can be examined through Visky's *transformation cycle*, in which form is not only the work of art, but also the bodies of the participants: the effect of theatrical performance, which has a ritual - and transformative - function, can be felt in the experience of the human body. The *founding event* and reference point of the performances is the redemption, the evocation of the event of Christ's death and resurrection through the liturgical structure and the allusions of the scenic set on the stage.

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<sup>7</sup> Northrop FRYE, *Kettős tükör. A Biblia és az irodalom*, Budapest, Európa, 1996, 159-161.

## **The body-interpretation of the performances**

Both artists explore themes related to the human body, linked to the concepts of murder, the human body subjected to violence, infertility, addiction and physical confinement. They explore the un-narratability of physical and psychological suffering, how the representation of human suffering becomes poetry in the space of the stage, and the relationship of the individual to his or her own body or to the body of another. Their theatrical world creates a language at the centre of which is the human body that has experienced physical or mental trauma.

At the heart of their *scenic poems* is the operation of the metaphor, which allows for the transformation of the person present in such a way that the metaphorical representation does not remain within the framework of the artwork alone, but can also make the ~~present~~ person himself a metaphor for Christ through transformation. Both Vidnyánszky's and Visky's liturgical and *poetic theatre* is characterised by their interpretation of the human body as a metaphor: a metaphor of Christic life story. The collective myth evoked by the performances can be placed in the present tense of the human bodies present, and the already familiar interpretative frames of the human body can be uprooted. The recipient forced to place them in a different conceptual space, the coveted catharsis of experiencing the transcendent dimension also affecting the bodily presence of the spectator.

The traumas presented, and the effect of the metaphorical work already explained, can be the shock of the spectator's experience of

God in the theatre, as the individual realises his or her own redemption. The human body at the centre of the (stage) world - the body of the participants - is a surface through which transcendence can break through the infinite and take a finite, determinate form.

### **Contemporary mystery plays**

Vidnyánszky's productions and some of Visky's dramas can be classified as contemporary mystery plays (*Mesés férfiak szárnyakkal*, *Halotti pompa*, *Bűn és bűnhődés*, *Tanítványok*, *Alkoholisták*), miracles (*Gyilkosság a székesegyházban*, *Johanna a máglyán*) or passion plays (*Csiksomlyói passió*, and all Visky monodramas in a broader sense).

In Vidnyánszky's portrayals of Christ and in Visky's theatrical world, the centre of the performance does not appear as a character on stage, but the scenery of the performances creates a theatrical aesthetic trace through which the non-present candidate - Christ - can be evoked. The references to the non-present candidate in their mystery plays enter into an allegorical field of meaning through poetic theatrical language, extending the basic metaphor of the performances, which permeates the whole theatrical text.

Vidnyánszky's and Visky's contemporary mystery plays revolve around themes of murder, death, crime committed and trauma, with many elements of mourning rituals, and Vidnyánszky's productions also have some of the traits of folk plays.

## The theatrical world of the artists studied

In the plays, talk of absolute reality is spoken in a fragmented language of incompleteness and unfulfillment, which I have called the *aesthetics of woundedness*. The interpretation of the murder of Christ as an extended moment, the timelessness of the components that define the performance (use of space, dramaturgy, scenography, script) make it fragmented, and therefore similar to the *barrack or autistic dramaturgy* used by Visky and the *fragmentary dramaturgy* associated with Vidnyánszky.

The use of body, space, time and language that follows from the *dramaturgies* used can help those present to move from one level of the stage element,<sup>8</sup> as defined by Søren Kirkegaard, to another, and finally to the religious stage. The Danish philosopher's insights, the characteristics of the aesthetic, ethical and infinite state of resignation, can also be applied to the process that takes place during theatrical performances. The performances all fall into Visky's category of the *theatrum theologicum* in terms of the time, space and plot management and the function attributed to the performances.

The dissertation opens up the possibility of further deepening the definition of *poetic theatre*, in parallel with contemporary theatre theory research. It also draws attention to the theatrical connections between ritual and poetry in the theatrical world of Ottó Tolnai, András Urbán or János Térey.

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<sup>8</sup> Søren KIRKEGAARD, *Vagy-vagy*, ford. DANI Tivadar (Budapest: Osiris, 2019), Søren KIRKEGAARD, *Félelem és reszketés*, ford. RÁCZ Péter (Budapest: Európa Könyvkiadó, 1986)

## Publication activity

PRONTVAI Vera, *Barakkból a végtelenbe, Pilinszky színházszemléje és Visky András Caravaggio terminal című drámája*, Vigilia, 2016/10, 745-751.

PRONTVAI Vera, *Megérinteni vagy meghaladni Istent? A metafizikai színház jellemzőinek vizsgálata a Mesés férfiak című színelőadásban*, = „Uram, hogy lássak”, szerk. ZILA Gábor, Budapest, Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége, 2016, 251-261.

PRONTVAI Vera, *Amikor Isten késni látszik, A transzformáció köre a Visszaszületés című színelőadásban = Mellékzörej, Írások Visky András 60. születésnapjára*, szerk. SEPSI Enikő – TÓTH Sára, Budapest, KRE-L'Harmattan, 2017, 141-152.

PRONTVAI Vera, *Visky András: Ki innen: Hét színházi kísérlet*, Vigilia, 2017/6, 476-477.

PRONTVAI Vera, *A sebzettség esztétikuma: a hiátus szerepe a Halotti pompa színrevitelében*, Alföld, 2019/7, 78-84.

PRONTVAI Vera, *Visky András: Mire való a színház? Útban a theatrum theologicum felé*, Vigilia, 2021/, 8.

PRONTVAI Vera, *Kísérlet a liturgikus színház kompozíciójának megragadására, Az igazság keresése Visky András Tanítványok című drámájában = Vallás és művészet*, szerk. FALUSY Judit – KISS

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PRONTVAI Vera, *Átlépés a határon. Søren Kirkegaard stádiumelmélete Visky András A szökés című drámájában*, Theatron, 2022/6, 14-25.