

# **TEXT AND VOICE IN TWENTIETH CENTURY DRAMA**

Performativity of the Dramatic Text

## **THESIS – SUMMARY**

**Gabriella Ágnes Nagy**

**Doctoral School of Studies in Hungarian Literature**

Head of School: Dr. Zoltán Kenyeres

**Program in Comparative Literature**

Head of Program: Dr. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák

**Supervisor:**

Dr. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, Member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences

Eötvös Loránd University  
Faculty of Humanities

2008, Budapest

## **Subject, theoretical grounds and aim of research**

My research has focused on the study of dramatic texts from a perspective made possible by the concepts of performativity and theatricality. Through the analysis of a few dramatic texts, the dissertation tries to demonstrate how the text is able to provide the theatrical practice with new energy. Our possibilities are not confined to the mere disposal of the dramatic text, or the transformation of the text into acoustic noise, a roar, or the renouncing of the text on behalf of other signifying systems, but in each case the staging of the text poses questions for both the receptive and the productive aspects. The main theoretical guidelines for the research have been the speech act theory developed by Austin together with its critique, questions of authority and the problems of context, parergon and frame from the perspective of the theory of arts and of deconstruction. In addition I have developed and understood the concept of theatricality as a relational concept.

## **Introduction**

The dissertation approaches from different perspectives the problems of the inscriptions of performativity and theatricality of the dramatic text – this is done through some texts written in the twentieth century. From the perspective of this century the problems posed by the analysis of dramatic texts seem insignificant, since by the end of the twentieth century it was the postmodern and postdramatic performances that started to dominate theatrical practice. In theatrical discourse rhetorical, stylistic and dramaturgical problems of dramatic texts no longer seem to be of interest, however dramatic texts are still able to resurrect and offer themselves to interpretation and usage. Dramatic texts are analyzed together with their theatrical performances culturally stimulating theatrical events seem to be more focused upon within the territory of theatrical studies: the text obviously lost its once overemphasized significance. Dramatic texts should be taken into consideration under these circumstances when disciplinary boundaries are constantly widening, and the territorial struggle of the dramatic text is not unfamiliar to theatre studies since the boundaries of theatre studies itself is under attack by a new emerging discipline of performance studies, that defines its object of study any event, whether public or private, intentional or not, artistic or quotidian. Looking back to the dramatic text from the point of view offered by performance

studies leaves little doubt that the significance of the verbal text has been significantly undermined.

Remapping the boundaries of disciplinary territories does not only mean the redrawing of boundaries or the focusing of so far neglected phenomena. It also initiates the need for redefining phenomena within their own territories. When dramatic texts were considered within the field of literary studies they had to define themselves as both similar and different in relation to other literary genres. When the literary-dramatic text was pushed over into the territory of theatre studies, a field that is based on interdisciplinary research, as a verbal sign system the text was redefined in relation to other sign systems and had to become readable as a text that always points to its staged realization. In the last decades of the twentieth century there have been a growing interest in performance-art accompanied by appearance of performance studies departments in Western-Europe and in the United States. The representatives of this new discipline would have liked to colonize the territory of theatre studies as well. During this disciplinary remapping of boundaries performance studies had difficulties in defining its own territory – this is exactly why some scholars have labelled it as an anti-discipline: neither a new discipline, nor an interdisciplinary study but a questioning of disciplinary boundaries, approaches and structures themselves are characteristic of this new field. The advancing of performance studies has made it necessary for theatre studies to redefine certain concepts, for instance the concept of action, of theatricality, of participation, of the body, of the public space, of the text, etc. The redefinition of phenomena, concepts and diverse textual units reinterpreted the notion of the dramatic text itself, and the process in restructuring of the disciplinary territories has had an effect on the understanding of the textuality, theatricality and performativity of the dramatic text. In harmony with our theatrical experience it has made it possible for us to read dramatic texts applying new approaches.

### **The structure of the research**

In the first part of the paper I have focused on the problems of the marginal text, and presented a few textual or theatrical possibilities that would undermine or subvert these structures. Analyzing the problem of the name – I considered the name more like a rhetorical figure than an identifying reference. The problems around the text of the stage directions, especially when framed by the semiotics of theatre and drama, that has been so often connected to speech act theory, has pointed to a few complex issues that involves the not unproblematic concept of the author and of the concept of intention. Those theories that

have looked to the dramatic text with the promise of scientific exactitude – for instance Ingarden’s phenomenology, semiotics or discourse analysis – revealed a theoretical conundrum when they did hear the voice of the author in these texts. The figure of the author cannot have an unproblematic role in the margins of the dramatic text, nor in the theatre. For this reason I analyzed the concepts of performativity and concept of intention from the point of view of speech-act theory, because speech act theory has provided a very convenient ground to misinterpret the marginal texts of the drama. We may take the risk and accept the statement of Mieke Bal and say that the concept of intention is not opposed to contextualization or reconstruction, but to the concept of abandonment. The problems of the concept of intention led me to pointing out the problems of authority and collaboration. Speech act theory has excluded the poetic and the non-ordinary utterances and seems to repeat a dichotomy between ordinary – poetic or literal – metaphorical language. Austin’s theory presupposes a fixed reality, a standard language, a language which is more basic, more true, more authentic, more honest than its parasitic counterparts. When writing about postmodern theatre Patrice Pavis has also stressed the parasitic dimensions manifest in the self-reflective, self-conscious utterance of theatrical speech, the gesture of the actor by which he puts himself in quotation marks. In my paper I have looked at the concept of theatricality and the relationship between dramatic text and theatrical text as a different but of equal importance and status.

By sketching a very brief history of the artist and focusing on his function in theatrical practice I have emphasized in what gesture the author hands his piece of writing over to the company. By reading the text to the company in hope of acceptance he abandons it, allows its transposition into a different medium. Giving up one’s intentions maybe equal to the abandonment of the control over the text. In the first chapter of the second part I elaborated on the fact that dramatic texts, just as other literary texts as well, have often been the result of creative collaborations – collaborations due to which it sometimes proves to be problematic to characterize a text by one name only. Instead of the single author we may need to speak of a signature or an act of appropriation. The figure of the author who tries to control meaning has survived in the margins of the dramatic text but based on theoretical considerations or the practice of writing and staging this figure may not be considered a real referent.

In the second chapter in the second part I have analyzed the relationship between the text and the stage in order to be able to interpret those acts when the text has been literally staged. The relationship between the two types of texts may be of various kind – I have found Derrida’s concept of the supplement and Kittler’s concept of the transposition productive

since these two concepts acknowledge the unbridgeable gap or medial difference between the two types of texts, their independence. The relationship, however, between text and stage still exists, only their incompatibility and their tension could manifest itself. I have analyzed the consequences of staging a dramatic text through an installation that staged *Bildbeschreibung* (*Explosion of a Memory/ Description of a Picture*) by Heiner Müller – installation here had been considered as a specific form of theatrical activity. Müller's texts are very open to experiments with the radicality of the text. His texts are often staged in their own materiality since he has experimented with the strategic refusal of the authority of meaning. For him the text is nothing else but material to be presented to the audience who in return will consciously interpret their own experiences when being faced with the text. Müller's *Bildbeschreibung* is staged in an installation that does not examine the dynamics inherent in the relational triangle of the text-actor-audience but by staging the text it points to those interpretative strategies that define the text we read and the text that is staged – these interpretative strategies will have to consider the medial differences and will be the following: trying to apply a point of view, being aware of the bodily presence and participation of the viewer/ audience and the framing applied and processed in order to receive and interpret art as such. The installation also shows how the border between text and viewer might disappear when the viewer too closely approaches what he tries to frame as art. Eradication of the boundary becomes an obstacle in cognitive and pleasure driven interpretative processes.

In the third chapter I discuss the questions posed by the difference between text and work - the distinction established by Roland Barthes. In this chapter I have presented two examples of how the categories of text and work may intermingle with each other in the practice of dramatic writing. The difference between text and work as applied to the dramatic text and its staged realization is not an exclusive difference but there is a continuity and dialogue between the two. Gerald Rabkin has identified the work as the property of the author and the text as that which might be freely appropriated in the *mise en scène*. I have presented two examples through which it is possible to demonstrate how we are unable to differentiate between work and text in the oeuvre of such writers as William Shakespeare and Samuel Beckett. Shakespeare's text has been passed down to us in various versions, the expropriator of his texts is not Shakespeare himself but rather the publishers of his texts. The texts of Shakespeare are not stable even as works and it is absolutely possible to prepare a publication of the versions, like Warren's, in such a manner that it inspires the reader to compile another different version of the "same" dramatic text. Samuel Beckett has been the example of the playwright who has not only had luck in staging his first play with the help of

Roger Blin, an unconventional avant-garde artist, but he also realized the need for constant rewriting of the dramatic text. For instance, his *Play* exists in various versions, all of which had been written by the author. In this process of rewriting Beckett has moved from modernity towards postmodernity. While modernity considered textuality and the textualization of culture as the definitive interpretative strategy for approaching phenomena in the world, postmodernity has taken into consideration those aspects of performativity and those dimensions that point beyond the limits of language and text. Shakespeare's texts are unstable even as works, Beckett has written texts that might always already should be interpreted as texts since in reality each and every dramatic text of his should have the following data provided: the date of writing, the original language of the text and the data of the specific publication – all of this in service of a search of a new theatrical (not dramatic) language.

In the third chapter I have examined the structure of the frame and the context. These concepts helped in understanding of the status of stage directions and theatrical frame. Instead of the stable, passive concept of paratext and context I have used the concept of framing and parergon since interpretation of art (whether dramatic or theatrical or otherwise) counts on the interactive receptive strategies in creating the work of art. I have emphasized the performativity of framing and referred to a few examples from the visual arts that are suitable for creating a parallel with the receptive strategies set in motion when staging a text. For instance I have mentioned one lithography by Frank Stella, *Gran Cairo*, which in playing with the framing processes makes the viewer enter into the world of the picture in a moment of a visual turn. The installation of Stefan Kunzmann, that has staged Müller's *Bildbeschreibung* staged exactly this turn, and in the moment of this visual *and* bodily turn he has put to risk the possibility of encounter between the work of art and the receiver. In this sense, the postmodern dramatic text has no longer moved into the direction of the dispersion of the logos, it does not transform itself into a roar, or an incomprehensible fragments of human voice, it has not necessarily been interwoven with intertextual citations but it keeps its close relationship to the dimension of visibility – in which case Kunzmann's installation has been almost equal to the linguistic materiality of the dramatic text itself. But this equality is prevented exactly by the presence of the theatrical frame, and it also enriches the texts since the installation pointed to the surplus energy and performativity of this frame.

In the third part of the dissertation I have analyzed the performativity of the dramatic text in *Waiting for Godot* written by Samuel Beckett. We might find a few instances in the text that might be interpreted as examples of the utterances excluded by Austin from felicitous

speech acts. Since from this perspective Beckett seems to examine the relationship between language and deed, dialogues and instructions belong closely together. The paratextual title has been cited many times by the characters and may be understood as an act of authorial rights: Didi and Gogo cannot move and are captives of the title and authorial rights respectively. Samuel Beckett did nothing else but is testing the presence and felicity of language on stage where according to the theory developed by Austin language is capable of doing nothing. The dramatic text may be interpreted as undoing the situation where the force of action is no longer attached to language. The performativity of discourses in power relations, and the resistance to these discourses may be read in the dialogues between Vladimir and Estragon.

In the second chapter of the third part I have tried to delimit the concepts of theatricality and performativity – performance as designating all cultural and public or other event. The process of theatricality requires the recognition of theatricality as such and may be described by the mechanisms of presentation (showing, ostentation). I have used the concept as a relational concept in which the preliminary condition in the birth of theatricality the spatial division of two spheres are defined: these two spheres may be the playing area vs. the acting area, private sphere vs. public sphere, the space of the self and of the other, of the spectator vs. the actor etc. – theatricality itself is created in the moment of separation. I have tried to define the performativity of theatricality and during this search I have not considered the social or identity forming aspects of theatricality – those aspects that point beyond questions of art. Theatricality in its performative function might still point beyond the questions of art since it is capable of showing the political on stage. In its unique, unrepeatable character performance may be easily separated from the phenomenon of the theatrical event – however they may always only present themselves in the combination of the two. Realizing the force of theatricality in creating a distance, Marvin Carlson suggested a focus upon pleasure in the display of exceptional skills instead of the emotional identification and sympathy – in this reversal values of identification and distancing also reverse. However, if what is displayed is politically problematic and may not give pleasure at all, distance again serves as a secure position from which, this time, joy would hardly arise.

In the third chapter I analyze a play by Miklós Mészöly and I am trying to answer the questions of how he has transgressed the system of theatrical conventions and how he has theatricalized the mechanisms of political performativity. In the history of Hungarian literature Miklós Mészöly has not only had an effect on the development of narrative texts but his role as an initiator is also apparent in the history of Hungarian drama. In 1963, his first

play, *The Window Cleaner* had a scandalous career both in press and on the stage – both in print and on stage it has been immediately banned. In this chapter I have suggested that the motive or cause behind the scandal was exactly the staging of the theatricality in political maneuvers which Mészöly has presented through certain distancing devices. Enjoying theatricality in a dictatorship, however, has risks: the skills that have been offered for viewing – in this play this skill might be the skill of observation and voyeurism – in a dictatorship that undermines the feelings of belonging by constantly observing others would not give joy to the spectator but show the perversity of this enjoyment. The immediate and intruding observer will create situations and will rearrange relationships and seeing these mechanisms might cause pain or even nausea – they may no longer be overlooked. Besides the play written by Mészöly has not only cited mechanisms of political actions but it almost literally brought it about – it was not this play that made political leadership rely on civil spies but this play has presented a turn in the mechanisms of politics in advance.

### **Further Research**

The subject of further research might be the further analysis of the plays by Miklós Mészöly and the comparison of his theatre with the theatre of Samuel Beckett. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák has expressed his suspicion that Beckett started to write in French because of the inspiration of his French partner, Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, and there do exist pieces of writings that may be considered their collaborative piece. We might also suspect that Miklós Mészöly and Alaine Polcz did also have a creative dialogue in writing works. The writings of Alaine Polcz owe just as much to the help of Mészöly as is the case vice versa. Their names do not appear as collaborative writers, however, in the works of both writers we may always find the voice of the other. It might also be useful to examine Mészöly's concept of theatre that seems to be much closer to the characteristics of performance art and the open air performances of the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore it would be possible to examine Eastern-European plays, for instance, Estonian plays that have provided a critique of the political by the means of theatricality.