



## Where Does the Piano Disappear?

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**Abstract:** *The stage needs story, or rather: however fragmented the presented play, the spectator is always connecting the pieces into a story to find a dramatic logic. Lehmann pointed out the way our Aristotelian thinking is embedded in our everyday perception, with his tic-tac analogy: we hear tic (beginning)-pause (drama)-tac (ending), while in fact there is only one sound. The new Zsolt Láng plays are focusing on relations, atmosphere and character, leaving out conflict and storytelling. In “Bartók’s Piano” tension is given by space and verballity, the play is constructed of mosaic pieces with missing elements that wait the spectator to find them and link them. So: how to tell a story on stage that is not written as a story?*

**Key words:** *poetic, story, storyless, contemporary drama, Láng Zsolt.*

How to tell stories is a theme of research in the Academia, there is digital storytelling, storytelling in applied and community arts, in folkloric studies, in performance, there is oral history and storytelling in health and social care etc. The Cardiff based George Ewart Evans Centre for Storytelling brings together the many modalities of storytelling. At their 2016 conference one of the most touching lectures was on divorced parents children, a true story told through a documentary play, and the most interesting one, because of its theme, was a lecture on storytelling used in criminal justice work. Dramatic structure, story defines our every days. If we were Lego toy, each piece has a story and together they add up building an ever growing big story.

So, what if we have a poetic contemporary play that does not aim to tell a story, instead it creates spaces, re-creates locations that already have their story and history? This way the reader/spectator will know where we are, and instead of storytelling, the play concentrates on atmosphere, on the human element and on relation. In this paper I will discuss one contemporary play and its poetic way of not telling a story: Zsolt Láng’s *Bartók’s Piano* (Láng 2016). The aim is to point out that if today’s performances operate with fragmentation, sequences and mosaics, than plays written in this manner as well, can function on stage.

Lehmann (2009) pointed out the way our Aristotelian thinking is embedded in our everyday perception, with his famous tic-tac analogy: we hear *tic* (beginning)-*pause* (drama)-*tac* (ending) while in fact there is only one sound. This is how thirsty we are of stories, of dramatic events, because this is how we are socialized. If we believe in the human instinct to create/interpret drama/story out of everything, than mosaic like written plays will be built into a dramatic logic by the reader or the spectator, and not neces-



sarily by the author. I like when, as a spectator, I am left with the freedom to connect the missing dots, like in children exercise books where the mouse has to find the cheese. The line is there, in dots, and you need to link them. If there is one thing I learned from professor Lehmann during his workshop on Postdramatic Theatre, is that *void* will help the spectator to an active participation during the reception of what is perceived from the stage. *Void* that the spectator fills in to find the cheese, or at least get in the direction of finding it. This linking is the pause between the tic and the tac, the pause full of tension. This is how you can be in constant dialogue with your public, and offer an invitation to participate in the creative act of the performance. This does not mean necessarily interaction, direct addressing or other kinds of involvement techniques. It is a way to tell a story without having a written one. This is how *Bartók's Piano* fits into this line of contemporary dramaturgy. As the piano in the title disappears into the music it creates and it becomes a tool to enter the space of music, the same way the play disappears into the poetic world it creates on stage.

I believe that theatre wandered out of the theatre institutions so far away and so deep into the daily life jungle, that its coming back into the theatre buildings is imminent. Thomas Ostermeier (2016) pleads for the keeping of the institutionalized theatre as it can be a safe haven to freely create without the financial pressure. Poetic contemporary plays seldom fit outside an institutionalized form, as their reception is less predictable and reach out to less people. Docu-theatre, devised or applied theatre etc. are more to the hand. This paper does not look at poetic contemporary plays as an elite form of theatre, but it states that these plays might be one key element in returning into the institutionalized theatre forms.

The relation between story and space are the base of the old Zsolt Láng's plays. The characters speak differently when they move into different spaces, or when space changes around them. The story is clear, the space helps you follow it. Szabó Róbert Csaba wrote 6 six years ago:

“The finiteness of the space, it being written within borders and the absolute perceptibility of these confines, defines the situations and the conflict. Either that the characters have to face the continuous narrowing of the space (like in *Wintergarden*), either that the space becomes unnaturally bigger and wider yet keeping it's inclosedness (like in the *Crypt Game*), or that a force feeding on fear dominates the space without ever being seen (like in *Rocbird*). The author's notes describe the sizes of the space carefully and with unsparing rigorousness”. (Szabó 2011, translation from Hungarian into English by Patkó Éva)

In the new plays however, written since 2015, focus is on relations, atmosphere and character, leaving out conflict and storytelling, thus getting rid of the necessity of fitting the written space to the stage. By leaving out the story, the plays leave out the finiteness of the space: there are numerous locations (more than 10 in *Bartók's Piano* and *Anna*),



or there is one space that is only a pretext for the metamorphoses of the four women (in *The Makeup Room*). Space was symbolic in the older plays helping the story to develop, in the new plays it is rather a tool for the words to resonate.

If we look at András Visky's plays<sup>1</sup> on the other hand, he creates spaces where one can talk to or with God, the words create a verbal space, there is no story, as the only existing Story already happened in the past (Salvation), and everyone waits for it to happen again. The barrack dramaturgy<sup>2</sup> offers an enclosed space that widens upwards, and only here a relation or non-relation with God is possible. And this relation does not involve story.

Working on *Bartók's Piano* made me realize that the more opened the space can stay, the more you can lead the actors to be in constant relation with the space *they* are creating. The words create the context of the location, without the need to visually show it, the spectator knows exactly where we are. With the actors we build the relation between characters and the constant relation to the space, and this gives the strong presence of the actor on stage and the infinite simplicity of bodily expression. In *The Makeup Room* the four women turn into trees at the end of the play. There is no A point towards B point movement, there is atmosphere and there is a space created by the women, space of the body and word, where relationships unfold, old stories are told. In *Bartók's Piano* and *The Makeup Room* tension is given by *space and verballity* (and not conflict), the plays are constructed of mosaics with missing elements that wait the spectator to find them and link them. The pieces are only a pretext to talk about the power of love, this being the ultimate summary of the two plays. It thickens in a final gesture that avoids verballity: Péter's cry (in *Bartók's Piano*), and the metamorphosis of the four women (in *The Makeup Room*). A final gesture that synthesizes everything. So if there is a story, it is compressed in a gesture, in the body of the actor.

*Bartók's Piano* follows Péter and his new friend Rita in a quest around the city. Péter hunts love and is hunted by love, he follows illusionary tracks to find his dream-girl who barely looks at him. Their adventure leads us into mosaic scenes that are excerpts, cross-sections of a small town's daily life with new characters appearing in each scene: policeman exercising corruption at the Police station, the town's leading figures making politics at a garden party, a Godfatherly figure deciding on others life in his office etc. We see the two youngsters relating to each situation given, the author does not let them this way to react to each other. The technique of bringing newer and newer locations, characters and situations takes the primary attention off the two main characters. 17 mosaic scenes precede the last cry of Péter, who discovers his new self when finding and losing love at the same time. It is a tragic moment. A today's idea of a Romeo and Juliet, where the mentality of the surrounding world will leave blind the boy until it is already too late, and the girl dies.

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<sup>1</sup> Contemporary with Láng, poet, playwright, lecturer, the artistic director of the Hungarian State Theatre in Cluj.

<sup>2</sup> Term invented by András Visky.



Panna Adorjáni examines in her essay the inner structure of the play and its aesthetics. She points out that *Bartók's Piano* breaks away from the typical Hungarian psychological realism and operates with poetic rhythm and form, and functions as an opened partiture. Fragmentation is observed, than the essayist turns into the reader of the play and connecting the dots, tells the story of the play. Panna Adorjáni states:

“In Zsolt Láng's play drama is rather form than genre, and this difference [...] is very important. The way the text is written and its power of creating a special world come more into view, at first glance the text does not seem theatrical, still [...] this direction is the most productive. It might be because this play [...] does not start from a supposed performance: the text and the author's notes do not foretell a way of creation, the author does not really give directions to the future creators. The play is self-identical as a textual creation and at the same time functions as a partiture, but it remains opened from the standpoint of form and execution.“ (Adorjáni 2016, page 3, translation from Hungarian by Patkó Éva).

As the play is written in a style where the reader/spectator has to link the mosaic elements, the same structure applies for the theatre makers (actors, directors, set designers, composers etc.): from the few instructions written, they have to tell the story of the characters, the performance, the space, the sound etc.

My conclusion is that story-less plays challenge each participant, both the creators and the receivers, to make up a story for the stage, as stage cannot function without story. Void is used by the author to expel story out of the play, so that the reader, the spectator and the theatre maker can create it.

We are used with space defining the parameters of action, that are easily recognizable for the spectator. Elizabethan theatre defines space with words, and here words create a *verbal space*, tension is achieved by the relation of actor and the verbal space, the well defined location becomes part of the actor's play. The actor has to play this tension, and this will become the actual conflict, where the spectator is driven towards something that is not a momentum of a story, but a direction everything leads to. Of course our mind, shaped by the Aristotelian thinking, will want to create a story, and this is a good contract to sign with the spectator. This is also what instinctively the actor is doing, especially the Hungarian actor who is schooled in a theater of the thought before the action. Writing these kind of plays is a good provocation for the ones doing and enjoying poetic contemporary theatre.

Visky and Láng write story-less plays in two totally different styles, but they both invite you to a shift on stage. Rather than following a story - and story is always a safe partner to be with - you need to look at something different, be that the creators of the performance or the ones who watch it. With Visky you just cannot avoid the relation with the God that is missing, and Láng leads to the discovering of the self through the world.



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