



## “PORN” – A THEATRICAL PROCESS OF TESTIMONY

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**Abstract:** *When the testimony of horrific and tragic events that occurred in one's life become poetry, a theatre performance born from this premise is in many ways sensitive and multi layered. The responsibility of presenting a willingly exposed personal account becomes a burden and a privilege at the same time. “Porn. The Story of my Wife” by András Visky tells about a true story that occurred in the author's family.*

**Key words:** *testimony, performance, communism, politics, pornography.*

This paper aims to examine and present the methods of personal testimony through the artistic making of a theatre performance. *Porn* by András Visky had its English world premiere with the title *PORN (1989. A butterfly)*<sup>1</sup> at Theatre Y Chicago, USA, in November 2012. As a child Visky experienced the life in a Romanian labor camp, and later, until the fall of the Iron Curtain, Visky and his family were kept under observation and his poems were scarcely aloud for publishing. He has memories of the communist regime's Secret Service methods, who intervened even in people's most intimate moments, listened into their sexual lives, into their matrimonial beds. The director – author of this paper - was only seven when the dictatorship ended, but a child's memories are lively and can be relevant in a creative process. The American actors – whom we collaborated with - followed on television the so called revolution, and the play itself, *Porn*, reveals in a theatrical language and style real scenes that happened during those times.

Since I submitted the abstract for the conference entitled *From Secret to Confession*, the title of this contemporary play changed: from *Porn* into *Porn-The Story of My Wife*. The title of the play is already a powerful testimony and the provocativeness of the word *porn* immediately changes. The reader and later the spectator of the show intuitively search the link between the title and subtitle. And this change brings a whole new aspect to the play and the author's relationship to it. The way of speaking about personal tragedies in a postmodern theatrical environment is outstanding in our vision.

Venus Zarris writes in the Chicago Stage Review, that

“[...] Visky's stylized visions are impressionistic interpretations of autobiographical horrors. You are watching a historically violent reality through

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<sup>1</sup> More information on the official website: <http://www.theatre-y.com/porn-1898-a-butterfly/>



the surprisingly lovely filters of a poet; surprising because of the tenderness that he employs to render his harsh stories”. (Zarris, 2012)

*Porn* by András Visky was produced on stage for the first time at Theater Y in Chicago USA, in the English translation of Erzsébet Daray. When the creative team started to work on the play in the summer of 2012, we did not know about the subtitle. The author very wisely, kept us away from the information that this is his true story. We knew that during the communist regime there was an actress (the leading character in the play) who performed for street children in Cluj when she could perform nowhere else anymore. The play also projects a very powerful story of a child who could never be born because of pure political (and not professional) decisions made in a hospital. Approaching this story as the story of a semi fictional character gives lots of freedom for theatrical interpretation. If we were to approach the same story knowing it is someone's who we closely know, it would have probably paralyzed us and pushed us towards a rehearsal method where documentarism would exceed, and we would lose the freedom to create any new elements that have nothing to do with the true story.

The author protected us from this knowledge and creative drawbacks giving us the freedom to make a fictional story. Few days before the premiere, when the show was ready and we were in previews already, the author visited us from Romania and revealed us the subtitle of the play, giving thus a new perspective to the performance. Without the need to make last minute changes, the story of the show deepened within every performer, helping all the creators to make it even more their own story. This gesture, of when and how to reveal an information that otherwise might burden the creative process, was one of the most outstanding pedagogical gestures that I encountered within my professional carrier so far.

I asked some of the actors to share their experience of personal testimony through the artistic making of the theatre performance. Leading actress and artistic director of Theatre Y Melissa Lorraine, tells about this burden:

“I have been working on true material because of András Visky for a long time now. With *Juliet* (a play also by András Visky telling the story of his mother and her seven children in the Romanian labor camp, the author being the smallest of them), with *Juliet* the thought was almost paralyzing and I had to forget that she was any woman besides me. Before I made the decision to produce it, I had spent months, perhaps even years trying to collect stories from anyone who would talk, images, facts. But there comes a moment when none of these things will touch the way they need to and the truth of this person is the same as the truth of any fictional character you might play.

At the end of the day the most powerful weapon you have to tell the truth is the child that you were, the child who is able to believe that these events happened to you. It can sometimes hurt too deeply love the person that you



play, or even worse to respect them. They must be flawed, and you must be able to play. Facts and saints obstruct both of those things at times.

The biggest gift I receive from a play being true is the deep desire to tell it. My relationship with it as truth is most potent when I discover the play and decide it must be done. After that moment I must almost forget that it's 'true'. I reclaim my relationship to it as truth after the play is over and I begin a discussion with the audience about the facts. (Theater Y organizes open discussions with its public after each performance!) Then again I become a historian very determined to offer up only the truth of things. For me any other approach to autobiography is a lie. I will never have experienced the things I have not experienced. Either my imagination is powerful enough to climb in and make a new truth from my own being, or it isn't. Research is the foundation on which your imagination can dwell; you will find particular details to be extremely provocative and others incomprehensible. But everything that paralyzes you must be removed from the room."<sup>1</sup>

The title *Porn* also reflects on the political pornography practiced during the Communist regime in Romania. It is enough to recall the images of the communist dictators kissing on the mouth other dictators (most famous being Brezhnev), as an icon of this absurdity. Listening into the lives and inescapably into the intimate life of couples under the observation of the Secret Service (Securitate) was also a surveillance method used with success. Neighbors, friends, even members of the family were successfully recruited to spy and inform on their keen.

Within the play, "Porn" is the code name given to the actress whom the Secret Service was keeping under observation. "Porn" becomes a woman whom we never find out her real name, but also "Porn" becomes a human being we want to know about. Her story begins with her playing for street children, then falling in love with the wrong man (the son of Secret Service Chief Officer). Their love overcomes any obstacle, but the somber suicide of the beloved tragically ends this relationship. Often the homicides committed by the Secret Service forces were disguised as suicides. The child to be born, the fruit of their love is never born as the hospital employees are not allowed by higher authorities to help the woman in need. Death of the innocent is undeniably the highest price to pay for one's thoughts and spirit.

Chicago Reader's theater reviewer Tony Adler also reflects on the problematic of the title:

.... yes, the title is misleading with regard to the familiar commerce in orgasms. Yet it's apt in lots of other ways. What's really pornographic about

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<sup>1</sup> Melissa Lorraine Hill – artistic director of Theatre Y, lead actress in *Porn*, Theatre Y, Chicago. Written confession sent via email on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December 2012.



Porn is the death-in-life Visky's heroine is forced to endure as a subject of Nicolae Ceaușescu, the Romanian communist party boss who became the unlikely focus of a Stalinesque personality cult. It's autumn, 1989; Ceaușescu will be deposed and executed by the winter solstice. But in the meantime he's exercising all the paranoid prerogatives of a classic 20th-century despot. Porn is kept under observation by a creepy neighbor known as Skunk, whose reports to his handler increasingly paint her as a dedicated subversive rather than the creative spirit we see before us. Her lover is disappeared. And when she makes the mistake of having a troubled pregnancy, she becomes the prisoner of a medical establishment such as might've been imagined by Kafka's cruder, meaner, more down-market twin.” (Adler, 2012)

Adler also questions whether exposing to the audience (in the program booklet) that this is a personal story, and that the ill-fated pregnancy is the true story of the author's wife, would help the audience or will just produce sorrow and empathy. It is a question that audiences attending can answer, for, the creators of the performance this information coming at the end of the creative process added a lot to the deepening of our artistic message. Here is what actor Evan Hill, playing the role of the above mentioned Skunk, confessed:

“I think that the theater is always immediately involved in a reality which is not real, and so actors grow accustomed to conceiving of reality apart from considerations of historicity or factuality. The actor instead is concerned with the sense of significance (or the significance of sense) within the factual, those a-historical powers within history that precipitate it—some residue of life which, properly speaking, we could call virtual. For Marcel Proust, the virtual refers to that which is real but not actual, ideal but not abstract. The scholastics used the term *virtualis* to speak about potential, which as opposed to possibility is real and immanent, yet unactualized. It is not fiction which the actor indulges in, but the unplumbed reservoir of the real, potentials of the body and the soul which dissolve the artificial boundary of possibilities he believes mark the circumference of his self. The actor frees these potentials to multiply himself and, in the aesthetic closure of the play, free of threat and consequence, to give this freedom to others. The actor, like the writer, strives toward the reconciliation of the universal and the singular, the private and the public, the known and the unknown. A possible world can sprout from the peculiar arch of an eyebrow. I think that it is impossible to believe that a writer is more aware of his life than the actor who plays it out. After all, he writes in order to learn what is unknown about his life, to extract and dramatize those latent, unconscious, and virtual perspectives that converge around the impersonal nature of events—events endowed with some uncertain and animal meaning. It is this perspectivism, this irreducible trans-individualism of the



theater, which allows the actor to move in place of another, to make someone else's confession by making their own. The writer keeps back his own secrets, intentionally or unintentionally, as does the actor; the inexhaustible asymmetry of persons and their internal landscapes, however, is not a limitation for the actor, but the condition of his creativity. Moreover, it would be entirely wrongheaded to believe that a writer's confession is in any way pure—the writer is always unequal to what he has to confess, and the act of writing is his way of becoming equal to his own witness. It is only because the actor knows that the writer is not omniscient that he is free to explore those virtual forces at play in the margins of the text and that he can give witness to something nascent or unobserved within the writer and his characters.”<sup>1</sup>

The conclusion that can be drawn is that we can approach working with a true story within a play/performance in 3 major ways, combinations of these methods or the developing of new methods can also be a viable option:

1. to regive each detail possible, to incorporate each detail possible. This was the method used by Theater Y with the performance *Juliet* by the same Andrés Visky, where the looks, even the clothing of the actress was a conscious and later unconscious attempt to revive the author's mother on stage.
2. The second method would be the one our team used, to incorporate the fact of true story, of true events only in the last phase of the making of the performance, when the structure, the form is completed already.
3. The third approach is the most commonly encountered. Like with *Hamlet* or *Richard the 3rd*. We know that there was a Hamlet, and a Gloucester, but since it is so far back in time we can easily forget about it while creating the performance.

Either method or would be used, it should not radically change the essence of the performance created.

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<sup>1</sup> Evan Hill- actor in role of Skunk in *Porn*, Theatre Y, Chicago. Written confession sent via email on the 12th of December 2015.