

O. Afonina

JOHN NEUMEIER'S BALLET "LILIOM": A CULTURAL INTERPRETATION OF THE STAGE MYTH

Relevance of the Problem. *The timeliness of this study stems from the need for a cultural understanding of J. Neumeier's ballet "Liliom" as an interdisciplinary artistic phenomenon, in which F. Molnar's dramaturgy and M. Legrand's music are transformed into a choreographic cultural text capable of representing the existential and moral issues of contemporary culture. Neumeier's ballet addresses the timeless themes of human guilt and responsibility, with the central figure of Liliom – a marginalized, traumatized individual, incapable of love, yet seeking justification. In the context of modern culture, this theme resonates with discussions on toxic masculinity, violence, and social marginality, while also highlighting how art aestheticizes morally complex characters.*

Through his ballet adaptation of Molnar's social drama, Neumeier creates a timeless model of human existence by employing motifs of the afterlife, cyclical patterns of events, and ritualized scenes. Consequently, the study of Neumeier's "Liliom" from a cultural perspective is important for understanding how modern culture and art use stage myth as a means of exploring crises.

Methodological Framework of the Study. *The study employs cultural studies, interdisciplinary, interpretative-hermeneutic, semiotic, musicological, and axiological approaches. The ballet "Liliom" is analyzed as a cultural text and a form of stage myth, revealing the transformation of the dramatic source by Ferenc Molnár into a choreographic work by John Neumeier. Particular attention is paid to the recoding of the verbal text into corporeal-musical language, the synthesis of drama, music, and dance, and the polystylistic features of the music by Michel Legrand, which contribute to the reinterpretation of humanistic and ethical values in contemporary culture.*

The scientific novelty of the study *lies in providing the first systematic analysis of the ballet "Liliom" by John Neumeier as a cultural interpretation of a stage myth, revealing the mechanisms of reinterpretation of the literary source within the context of contemporary culture.*

Practical Significance. *The findings of this study may be used in further cultural studies research on ballet and contemporary choreographic practices.*

Keywords: *hermeneutic interpretation; cultural studies approach; synthesis of drama, music, and dance; symphonism; ballet music; jazz idioms; cinematic expressiveness; orchestra; interdisciplinary analysis.*

DOI 10.34079/2518-1343-2026-16-31-10-17

Це стаття відкритого доступу за ліцензією CC BY-NC-ND 4.0
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode.uk>

Review of Recent Publications. *In the monograph "Musical and Theatrical Performances in Paradoxes and Reflections" (Afonina, 2025), an analysis of selected opera and ballet productions was conducted. In particular, John Neumeier's ballet "A Streetcar Named Desire" was examined through a comparison of its literary and musical contexts (Afonina, 2025, pp. 114–133). This ballet by Neumeier is likewise oriented toward addressing*

complex issues and resonates with the story of *Liliom*. This connection is noted by authors of articles on the ballet “*Liliom*”, including Deborah Weiss (Deborah Weiss, 2025).

There are several individual monographs devoted to the life and work of John Neumeier. One of them is the detailed study “*John Neumeier und Das Hamburger Ballett. 10 Ballette*”, dedicated to ten key ballets by Neumeier. The analysis of his choreography and creative collaboration with the Hamburg Ballet is presented through numerous photographs, some of which had never been previously published. These images reveal distinctive features of Neumeier’s work over half a century. His steadfast, artistically visionary, and unique activity as a dancer, ballet director, and outstanding choreographer characterizes the various creative stages of Neumeier’s artistic personality and his company.

Similar in scope, though more general in its approach, is the publication “*Bernstein Dances: Ballettrevue von John Neumeier; 25 Jahre*”, which focuses on the evolutionary processes in the choreographer’s style and the major productions of that period. The first decade of the choreographer’s work with the Hamburg Ballet is covered in the concise volume “*Neumeier, John – Zehn Jahre John Neumeier und das Hamburger Ballett*”.

Brief information about the production is presented on the theatre’s official website (National Theatre, *Liliom*, 2025).

Individual articles on the ballet and monographs about the choreographer do not provide a comprehensive understanding of the ballet production in its artistic synthesis. Therefore, **the aim of our publication** is to identify the specific features of the interdisciplinary synthesis of drama, music, and choreography in John Neumeier’s ballet “*Liliom*” as a cultural text, based on press materials.

Presentation of the Main Research Material. The production “*Liliom*” was created for the Hamburg Ballet (2011). John Neumeier explained his interest in the plot of “*Liliom*” by his fascination with the musical “*Carousel*” by Rodgers and Hammerstein. He perceived the literary work much more deeply than its Hollywood interpretations. Born in America and interested in the tradition of musical comedy, Neumeier considered creating a musical version of the work, taking into account his experience staging “*West Side Story*” and “*On the Town*” in Hamburg. The decisive factor, however, was his return to Ferenc Molnár’s original play, whose poetic and dramatic power revealed to him the true depth of the plot.

Choreographer John Neumeier described how he selected the musical design for the ballet: a chance meeting with Michel Legrand, who had previously seen Neumeier’s ballet “*The Lady of the Camellias*” in Paris, led to a collaborative project. According to the choreographer, the semi-realistic story of “*Liliom*”, with its magical elements and carnival atmosphere, created a unique cultural space in which Legrand’s music became not merely accompaniment but a means of expressing the symbolic and socio-cultural contrasts of the production (Deborah Weiss, 2025).

Another author, Claire Klingenberg, in the article “*Premiéra Baletu ND: Liliom – příběh touhy po vykoupení*,” focuses on Ferenc Molnár’s play “*Liliom*” (1909), the action of which unfolds during a festive fair in Budapest and which belongs to the most renowned works of twentieth-century European drama. The authors of various publications (Claire Klingenberg, Deborah Weiss, Gisela Sonnenburg) note that the play gained international popularity thanks to the musical “*Carousel*” by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein (1945).

From interviews with John Neumeier, it is known that he drew both on Molnár’s original source and on its musical adaptation, while creating an independent ballet interpretation. In his version, the choreographer transferred the plot to the period of the Great Depression and set the action in the stylized amusement park space of American Playland.

At the center of the story is *Liliom*, a charismatic yet self-destructive carousel barker. Julie falls in love with him despite his dark nature. She loses her job but cannot leave her

beloved. Liliom, however, is unable to support his family, which leads to violence, robbery, and ultimately his suicide. On the metaphysical plane, Liliom is given a chance to atone for his mistakes: he meets his son Louis and makes a final gesture toward Julie, giving the story tragic depth and a fragile sense of hope (Claire Klingenberg, 2025).

According to John Neumeier, Michel Legrand's passion enabled the music to reveal deeply the inner world of the characters and to grant them emotional fullness:

"The music is conceived as an original dialogue between the orchestra in the pit and a big band on stage. At times their voices alternate, at times they compete, and at key moments they sound in perfect harmony. This innovative musical architecture underscores the contrasts of the story—between reality and dream, love and violence, fall and hope"(Claire Klingenberg, 2025).

A condensed summary of the production is necessary for understanding its key ideas. What follows is our own shortened version based on the ballet program text (Program→Ballet, 2011).

In the Prologue, "Playland in Ruins", Liliom returns to earth after sixteen years in purgatory. His return is connected with the opportunity to perform a good deed. He brings a heavenly star to his son Louis, but the boy does not recognize his father and refuses the gift. Overcome with anger and despair, Liliom strikes him. Julie, Louis's mother, perceives the blow as a manifestation of love. She recalls her beloved Liliom, Louis's father.

In the first scene, "Playland", the audience is introduced to the central figure, Liliom. He works as a carousel barker for Mrs. Muscat and is also her lover. Julie works as a waitress at Playland. When a drunken sailor begins to harass Julie, Liliom defends her and wins the fight, despite provocation from the criminal Ficsur. A jealous Mrs. Muscat confronts Julie and ultimately dismisses Liliom.

In the second scene, Marie and her friend Julie wait on a park bench. Marie's boyfriend Wolf appears, followed later by Liliom. Julie and Liliom are left alone but are unable to confess their feelings. In the Interlude, the criminal Ficsur attempts to persuade Liliom to join him in his schemes. The following scene depicts a crowd of unemployed men, including Liliom and Ficsur, competing for available jobs.

The fourth scene shows preparations for the wedding of Julie's friends, Marie and Wolf. An unemployed, angry, and frustrated Liliom observes the scene. In sharp contrast, the next episode portrays Liliom humiliating and striking Julie. The arrival of his former employer, Mrs. Muscat, adds further tension – especially as Julie confesses to Liliom that she is pregnant.

The climactic scene, "The Wedding of Marie and Wolf", unfolds as Ficsur and Liliom leave the celebration while a shy young man dances with Julie. Liliom and Ficsur naïvely attempt to commit a robbery, but the crime goes awry. Liliom tries to escape, yet the failed situation leads to his suicide. Julie mourns Liliom.

In the following scene, set in the afterlife, the Balloon Man accompanies Liliom on his journey. Liliom appears before the Gatekeeper and must confess to his violence against Julie. Devils appear, but the Balloon Man defends Liliom, recalling the earlier fight with the drunken sailor in which Liliom protected Julie without harming the sailor. As a result, Liliom is granted a chance at redemption, although for the next sixteen years he is unable to see his son.

Liliom's son, Louis, lives near the ruins of Playland, while the now prosperous Marie and Wolf move with their son Elmer to a better district. The Balloon Man reappears with Liliom, who is finally allowed to see his son. Naturally, Louis does not recognize his father, although Liliom tries to give him a star stolen from the heavens. The boy refuses the gift. Frustrated and outraged by the rejection, Liliom strikes Louis. Julie appears; picking up the star, she senses Liliom's presence.

The stage structure of the ballet is constructed as a myth of the impossibility of redemption, in which the Playland space functions both as a social environment and as an allegory of a ruined world of illusions. The fair can be compared to a modern version of a *locus ludens* – a place of play, temptation, and temporary happiness – which gradually transforms into ruin, both physically and morally.

The figure of Liliom represents the antihero of an urban myth. He is charismatic but internally broken, incapable of the language of nonviolent love. His constant attempts to “do good” result in aggression, which acquires a paradoxical significance: the blow is perceived as a form of feeling. Thus, violence within the stage myth is less a moral justification than a tragic symptom of social and emotional immaturity.

The afterlife dimension introduces the motif of judgment and purification; however, unlike in classical myth, it does not guarantee salvation. Purgatory does not change the essence of the hero but only postpones the repetition of his mistake. The figure of the Balloon Man functions as a mythological mediator between worlds, emphasizing the conditional nature of moral justice.

Liliom’s final return to his son with the heavenly star concludes the myth with a gesture of failed value transmission: the sacred gift proves unacceptable to the new generation. Playland in ruins becomes a symbol of historical memory, in which trauma is conveyed not through words but through bodily experience. In this way, the stage myth of “Liliom” unfolds as a drama of inherited trauma, social determinism, and the limits of human redemption, leaving open the question of the possibility of true purification.

The ballet has a distinctive musical foundation that is organic to the performance. The music for the ballet was composed by the world-renowned French composer, conductor, and jazz pianist Michel Legrand. Its originality lies in the fact that the composer created a dialogue between the orchestra in the pit and a big band on stage: their voices alternate, compete, or merge in harmony. This musical architecture emphasizes the contrasts within the ballet – reality and dream, love and violence, downfall and hope – and gives the characters emotional depth, as noted by J. Neumeier.

For example, one of the most famous scenes in the ballet depicts the conflict and mutual attraction between Liliom and Julie, who are unable to openly express their feelings. Liliom hides his insecurity behind a masculine bravado; when he learns of the forthcoming child, he is overwhelmed with joy and a sense of responsibility, which leads to a failed robbery and his eventual suicide. After Liliom’s death, Julie turns to him, acknowledging his mistakes but affirming her love. Legrand’s music in these moments underscores the psychological depth of the scene: the contrasts between lyrical-romantic and dramatically tense episodes form a musical “dialogue” between the characters’ inner worlds and the external dramatic action, giving the ballet an additional cultural dimension as an exploration of human emotions and moral dilemmas.

Composer Michel Legrand employed the classical system of leitmotifs, using instruments themselves as leitmotifs for individual characters. For example, the accordion accompanies the character Liliom throughout his love life.

The existence of two orchestras brought many challenges, as choreographer Sonja Thinnies recalls: “The timing and spatial distance between the orchestra and the big band are complicated.” There are also differences in conducting styles: while the big band responds directly to the conductor’s hand signal, the Hamburg Philharmonic always starts playing one beat after the conductor’s cue (Gisela Sonnenburg, 2012).

In addition, there is a performance aspect: “Since the volume of the swing music on stage is so high, the orchestral sound needs to be amplified so that the dancers can hear it clearly.” In this way, the coordinated professionals demonstrate that they take seriously the art of a world-class production (Gisela Sonnenburg, 2012).

The ballet music of *Liliom* is rich with a variety of melodies characteristic of Legrand's work. For example, the relationship between Wolf and Marie is conveyed through a harmonious, world-filled melody, albeit with jazz elements. Eastern melodies and dances in the amusement park add colorful musical variety to the existing palette.

The musical characterization of the main character functions as a semiotic code of his existential state. The predominance of accelerated tempos and jazz-band rhythms embodies the archetype of an impulsive urban antihero, whose energy is directed toward action but lacks inner stability. In scenes of crisis, the music shifts to a heavy orchestral texture with low timbres and slowed motion, symbolizing the character's disintegration, social and moral deadlock. The final combination of the orchestra and band in harmonious sound acquires a transcendent significance, forming a mythological image of hope and partial reconciliation, which, however, does not negate the tragedy of the hero's fate. One review notes that "the jazz riffs add an anxious undertone" (Tony Frankel, 2014).

In the stage myth of *Liliom*, Julie's music functions as a mythological marker of the character's inner space. The lyrical, flowing orchestral language at the beginning embodies the archetype of feminine submission, anticipation, and silent love. Changes in tempo, timbre (for example, string solos, bassoon, or clarinet), and the appearance of jazz dissonances in moments of crisis symbolize the pressure of social and emotional circumstances under which the heroine exists. In the finale, the synthesis of jazz and classical elements signifies Julie's mythological transformation – not a radical rebellion, but an inner maturation and partial acquisition of subjectivity. The music becomes a means of revealing her journey from a passive victim to a bearer of memory and moral resilience within the stage myth.

The duets between *Liliom* and Julie are constructed as a mythological space of interaction between opposing forces, where the musical combination of the jazz band and lyrical orchestra reflects the simultaneous attraction and irreconcilability of the characters. The merging of themes while maintaining their instrumental autonomy symbolizes the impossibility of complete unity. Love seems to exist, yet does not reach harmony. In conflictual episodes, abrupt tempo shifts and contrasts between musical layers function as a dramaturgical "mirror," exposing the characters' emotional instability. The symbolic music of the scene where Julie meets her son, associated with the image of a star, forms a transcendent dimension of the myth. This space represents potential reconciliation and a new beginning, which remains more a possibility than an accomplished salvation.



Фото зроблене з програмного буклету,
2025, Прага

The multilayered musical score, featuring two orchestras and an accordion, creates a symbolic space where different levels of reality coexist, emphasizing the importance of social, emotional, and transcendent elements. The contrast between fairground music, chamber episodes, and elevated passages conveys the mythological dynamics of downfall and hope. The leitmotif of love functions as a refrain, a musical sign of memory and recurring fate, permeating the dramaturgy of the performance despite differences

between the characters in the literary source and the ballet (for example, the replacement of Liliom's daughter with a son in the ballet). The dynamic ostinato of the two orchestras in the employment agency scene, evocatively reminiscent of Maurice Ravel's *Boléro*, transforms into a ritualized image of collective tension, in which social despair acquires a mythic dimension.

The content of the ballet is originally presented in the program booklet. The visual image from the poster of the ballet "Liliom" is constructed through a combination of fairy-tale attributes and melancholic symbolism of decay. The central figure is a solitary male, depicted from behind, holding bright balloons. The contrast between the dark silhouette of the hero and the vibrant colors of the balloons emphasizes the internal conflict between hope and loss. In the background, the image of the fairground world emerges – a carousel. This symbolism is associated with the illusion of happiness and its ruins. The barely visible carousel horse reinforces the motif of the cyclical nature of fate and the repetition of mistakes. The cold blue-violet color palette conveys a sense of detachment and timelessness, transferring the plot into the realm of stage myth, where reality, memory, and the beyond coexist in a single image.

Conclusions. The ballet "Liliom" by J. Neumeier represents an example of stage myth-making, where the classical literary work by Ferenc Molnár (the literary source) is transformed into a contemporary choreographic narrative. At the center of the ballet are the mythologized figures of Liliom and Julie, whose emotional and psychological dialogue becomes a symbol of human weaknesses, passions, and social roles.

The musical score by Michel Legrand combines two orchestras and an accordion, creating a distinctive two-layered sound space. One orchestra emphasizes the dramaturgical lines and the internal states of the characters, while the big band complements the external, symbolic, and mythological background. The accordion adds a folkloric-urban nuance, bringing the scene closer to a popular aesthetic.

Legrand's system of leitmotifs conveys the characters' emotional states, allowing the audience to follow, without words, the psychological changes of Liliom and Julie, as well as their interaction. These musical "keys" support the mythologization of the action and allow for a new interpretation of the classical dramaturgy.

The characters Liliom and Julie in Neumeier's ballet are archetypes: Liliom embodies the contradictions of male nature, the pursuit of power, and weakness in the face of fear; Julie's character is full of self-sacrifice, devotion, and transformative potential. Their dialogue, both on stage and musically, highlights the conflict between individual choice and social constraints, between life and myth.

J. Neumeier's "Liliom" demonstrates how contemporary choreography reshapes a literary text into a stage myth, using a synthesis of music, choreography, and theatrical symbolism. This production shows that a classical literary source can retain its core motifs while acquiring new cultural significance through the interaction of musical structures, stage time, and choreographic expression.

Бібліографічний список

- Афоніна, О.С., 2025. *Музично-театральні вистави в парадоксах і рефлексіях: монографія*. Суми: ФОП Цьома С.П., 162 с.
- Frankel, T., 2014. 'Los Angeles / Regional Dance Review: *Liliom* (Hamburg Ballett at Segerstrom Hall in Costa Mesa)', *Stage and Cinema*, 9 February. Доступно за адресою: <https://stageandcinema.com/2014/02/09/liliom-hamburg-ballett/> (Дата звернення: 1 May 2026).
- Klingenberg, C., 2025. 'Premiéra Baletu ND: *Liliom* – příběh touhy po vykoupení', 10 March. Доступно за адресою: <https://www.narodni-divadlo.cz> (Дата звернення: 1 May 2026).

- Neumeier, J. та Flügel, J., 1977. *John Neumeier und das Hamburger Ballett: 10 Ballette*. Hamburg: Hans Christians Verlag, 96 с.
- Sonnenburg, G., 2012. 'Liebe zwischen Himmel und Hölle: Neumeiers Ballett *Liliom* in Hamburg', *Oper & Tanz*, № 5. Доступно за адресою: <https://www.operundtanz.de/archiv/2012/05/tanz-neumeier.shtml> (Дата звернення: 1 May 2026).
- Weiss, D., 2025. 'Emotion motivates movement: John Neumeier in Prague', *Bachtrack*. Доступно за адресою: <https://bachtrack.com/review-john-neumeier-prague> (Дата звернення: 1 May 2026).
- Liliom* – John Neumeier (без дати) Hamburg Ballet / Hamburg State Opera. Доступно за адресою: <https://hamburgballett.die-hamburgische-staatsoper.de/en/program/ballet/610-liliom> (Дата звернення: 1 May 2026).
- Zehn Jahre John Neumeier und das Hamburger Ballett 1973–1983* (1983). Hamburg: Christians Verlag, 223 с.

References

- Afonina, O.S., 2025. *Musical and theatrical performances in paradoxes and reflections: a monograph*. Sumy: FOP Tsoma S.P., 162 pp. (in Ukrainian).
- Frankel, T., 2014. 'Los Angeles / Regional Dance Review: *Liliom* (Hamburg Ballett at Segerstrom Hall in Costa Mesa)', *Stage and Cinema*, 9 February. Available at: <https://stageandcinema.com/2014/02/09/liliom-hamburg-ballett/> (Accessed: 1 May 2026).
- Klingenberg, C., 2025. 'Premiéra Baletu ND: *Liliom* – příběh touhy po vykoupení', 10 March. Available at: <https://www.narodni-divadlo.cz> (Accessed: 1 May 2026) (in Czech).
- Neumeier, J. and Flügel, J., 1977. *John Neumeier und das Hamburger Ballett: 10 Ballette*. Hamburg: Hans Christians Verlag, 96 pp. (in German).
- Sonnenburg, G., 2012. 'Liebe zwischen Himmel und Hölle: Neumeiers Ballett *Liliom* in Hamburg', *Oper & Tanz*, no. 5. Available at: <https://www.operundtanz.de/archiv/2012/05/tanz-neumeier.shtml> (Accessed: 1 May 2026) (in German).
- Weiss, D., 2025. 'Emotion motivates movement: John Neumeier in Prague', *Bachtrack*. Available at: <https://bachtrack.com/review-john-neumeier-prague> (Accessed: 1 May 2026).
- Liliom* – John Neumeier, no date. Hamburg Ballet / Hamburg State Opera. Available at: <https://hamburgballett.die-hamburgische-staatsoper.de/en/program/ballet/610-liliom> (Accessed: 1 May 2026).
- Zehn Jahre John Neumeier und das Hamburger Ballett 1973–1983*, 1983. Hamburg: Christians Verlag, 223 pp. (in German).
- Дата першого надходження статті: 01.03.2026 р.
- Дата прийняття статті до друку після рецензування: 20.03.2026 р.
- Дата публікації: 29.04.2026 р.

О. Афоніна

БАЛЕТ «ЛІЛІОМ» ДЖОНА НОЙМАЄРА: КУЛЬТУРОЛОГІЧНА ІНТЕПРЕТАЦІЯ СЦЕНІЧНОГО МІФУ

У статті розглядаються зміни класичного драматичного тексту, драми Ференца Молнара в балетному жанрі, де балет всесвітньовідомого хореографа Джона Ноймаєра є ілюстрацією до переосмислення літературного першоджерела засобами танцю. Балет «Ліліом» є прикладом перекодування вербального тексту в тілесно-

музичний. Вивчення балету «Ліліом» дозволило розкрити міждисциплінарний синтез (драма – музика – танець); осмислити балет як культурний текст, що реагує на екзистенційні виклики сучасності; показати роль хореографії у переосмисленні гуманістичних цінностей.

Музика М. Лєграна передає емоційний та смисловий простір балету. Поєднання симфонізму, джазових інтонацій, кінематографічності, тобто специфіка полістилістичної культури пізнього модернізму, дозволяють глядачу легко сприймати складні етичні проблеми. Наукова новизна роботи полягає в першому системному аналізі балету Джон Ноймаєр «Ліліом» як культурологічної інтерпретації сценічного міфу, що виявляє механізми переосмислення літературного першоджерела в контексті сучасної культури.

Ключові слова: балетна музика; джазові інтонації; герменевтична інтерпретація; кінематографічність; культурологічний підхід; міждисциплінарний аналіз; оркестр; симфонізм; синтез драми, музики і танцю.