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Spectres of Greekness at the time of corona

The notion of contagion is inherent in theoretical and philosophical discourses about theatre, whether referring to its beneficial or damaging effect on the public. During a theatrical performance, emotions and physical sensations spread in space and affect the experience of individual spectators. This contagious nature of the theatrical performance appears to be more than a metaphor at times of epidemics, when theatre venues are shut down in the interest of public health. Unlike what happened during epidemic outbreaks in the past, the closure of theatres due to COVID-19 did not entail the suspension of theatre activity altogether. On the contrary, a glut of theatre festivals and shows became available online, in the form of recordings, live-streamed events or interactive digital projects, offering theatregoers the opportunity to enjoy performances from the safety of their homes. Such experiences appear to be an ironic reversal of Artaud's vision of a theatre that inflicts the spectator with the cruelty and dire reality of the plague (Artaud 1938). In an increasingly mediatized world, theatre experienced online, especially in real time, may well be a shared event, but how is the mediality of performance to be understood when there is no audience to be affected or infected? It is possible to suggest that the ontology of performance defined by the physical co-presence of actors and spectators is in this case replaced by a hauntology. The notion of performance can no longer be taken as fixed but awaits redefinition within a violently transformed cultural landscape.

A theatrical occurrence that presented particular interest during this period was the live-streaming of Aeschylus' *The Persians* by the National Theatre

of Greece on 25 July 2020 (Figure 1). *The Persians* marked the first performance to take place in the Ancient Theatre of Epidauros since the beginning of the pandemic and the first ever live-streamed event from Epidauros (oddly, not accessible from within Greece), two years after the live-streaming of Theodoros Terzopoulos's *Trojan Women* from the Ancient Theatre of Delphi. Whilst Terzopoulos's production was a multicultural project, involving a multilingual cast, *The Persians* emphatically affirmed its reverence to the classical text and the tradition of staging tragedy in modern Greece. As the director Dimitris Lignadis explained, his staging was not postmodern but 'post-classical' (Athens and Epidauros Festival 2020). It is possible to regard *The Persians* by the National Theatre as a hauntological instance in a twofold manner. First, the staging as well as the terms of its production were both haunted by the history of performing ancient drama in modern Greece. At the same time, in the live-streamed event, the spectre of Greekness hovering over Epidauros was dislodged from the materiality of the monument and the communal experience of the performance.

The biopolitical norms that saw a rise due to COVID-19 have produced new cultural ecologies, amplifying the precarity of theatre workers and institutions. *The Persians* was one of the few productions to feature in the so-called 'Yposynolo' ('Fragment') of the heavily curtailed Athens and Epidauros Festival programme of 2020. Whilst the indoor space of Peiraios 260, which usually hosts contemporary and experimental theatre projects, remained shut, the ancient amphitheatres in Athens and Epidauros offered more favourable conditions for theatre and music events at times of physical distancing. Furthermore, as explained by the Minister of Culture (Athens and Epidauros Festival 2020), due to the exceptional circumstances, the Festival's programme relied on state theatre organizations. The theatrical productions that took

Figure 1: TV screen live-streaming the performance of *The Persians* in Epidauros.

place in the Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus were *The Persians* and *Lysistrata* by the National Theatre of Greece and *The Birds* by the National Theatre of Northern Greece. Especially in the case of *The Persians*, the double role of Lignadis as both director of the production and artistic director of the National Theatre was another manifestation of the neo-corporatist institutional logic. It is enlightening to view the choices made by the Festival under the pressure of COVID-19 in historical perspective and link them to certain practices of the past. The Festival reintroduced, if temporarily, the institutionalized use of the Epidaurus theatre, which was a standard practice until the fall of the Greek military junta. The National Theatre had the exclusive right to perform at Epidaurus from the inception of the Festival and all the way until the period of cultural and political reforms that followed the regime change in 1974.¹

The staging of *The Persians* offered an eclectic mix of a contemporary aesthetic with references to the Greek Orthodox Church and folk traditions. The Byzantine-sounding music was reminiscent of the efforts to reconstruct ancient music at the Delphic Festivals, the first ancient drama festival in Greece, whilst the folk musical instruments and singing evoked Karolos Koun's view of ancient drama as a lived experience embedded in modern Greek culture. It is also notable how the production treated Aeschylus' original text, fragments of which were embroidered on the costumes of the chorus, the Messenger, Darius and Xerxes alongside the modern Greek translation. The costume-designer Eva Nathena conceived the embroidered text as a thread running across the extended arms of the performers, meant to maintain the necessary 1.5 metre distance on stage. According to Nathena, this imaginary thread bridged the distance between past and present, whilst also restoring the intimacy of the bodies in theatre which has been lost due to physical distancing (Vasileiadou 2020). The delivery of lines from the original, spoken in the Erasmian pronunciation, reminded of the controversy over performing ancient tragedy in modern Greek, dating back to the beginning of the previous century. This pastiche offered in Lignadis's production paid homage to key instances of the Greek theatrical tradition but, through them, it reaffirmed the master narrative of Greekness that was pervasive in the project of 'reviving' tragedy. However, some elements of the imagery were redolent of darker instances of classical reception in modern Greece. The lit replica of the Parthenon that was placed on the orchestra and lifted by the ghost of Darius was meant to glorify Athenian democracy, the small city-state that defeated the great Persian empire. During the ovation at the end of the performance, the director knelt and kissed the replica before the official state agents in attendance (Figure 2). The kissing of the prop was a moment of banal nationalism, but it also prompted associations to 'the other Parthenon', built by the inmates in the concentration camp of Makronisos (Hamilakis 2002). The practice of building replicas of the Parthenon and other ancient monuments was used by the authorities of Makronisos as a means to inculcate the ideology of Hellenism in the dissident communists.

The Epidaurus Festival as a whole can be defined as a larger cultural performance of nationhood constituted by the participation of the audience and the active reactions to the stagings. It is an opportunity for Greek audiences to celebrate the connection between ancient and modern Greece, whilst performatively reproducing modern identity on the basis of continuity. Due to the highly ideologized status of Epidaurus within the Greek collective imaginary, productions that deviate or openly contest the narrative of continuity tend to receive strong negative responses, as in the case of *The Persians* by

1. Even the much-celebrated appearances of Maria Callas in the productions of Bellini's *Norma* (1960) and Cherubini's *Medea* (1961) by the Greek National Opera were decried by the director of the National Theatre, Emiliios Chourmouzos, at the time. See Georgia Kondyli (2012): n.pag. On further controversies about the use of Epidaurus, see Eleftheria Ioannidou (2011).

Figure 2: Screenshot of the director Dimitris Lignadis kissing a replica of the Parthenon during the ovation at the end of the performance of *The Persians*.

2. Aeschylus, line 402. See Aeschylus 1939: 39.

3. Ironically enough, line 405 from the same passage featured engraved on the rocks of Makronisos: 'nyn hyper panton agon' ('Now all is on the stake!'). See Aeschylus 1939: 39.

4. Based on the reviews, the audience did not applaud at this point on Friday. See George Sampatakakis 2020.

Dimiter Gotscheff in 2009. Gotscheff's dismantlement of Athenian supremacy and mockery of power caused walkouts and enraged responses that nearly interrupted the performance. In sharp contrast, Lignadis's staging adhered to a long-standing tradition of delivering the famous lines of the Messenger 'o paides Hellenon ite' ('Now, sons of Hellas, now!...')² in the original, yet without using the Erasmian pronunciation this time.³ Furthermore, the rendering of the text by the actors emphasized the play's references to Athenian democracy. Such moments elicited rounds of applause from the audience, at least during the Saturday performance.⁴ It could be argued that the live-streamed *The Persians* was, in and of itself, a performance event, yet distinct to the one attended by the on-site audience. In the individualized bubble where the live-streaming was experienced, the nationalist sentiments transmitted from Epidaurus appeared all the more spectre-like.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified the debates about theatre's future that have been triggered by the emergence and growing dominance of digital media. One of the recurring issues in these discussions is that the remediation of performance negates the conditions of co-presence and collective spectatorship upon which most definitions of theatre rest. In that regard, remediation poses a similar challenge to that of technological reproduction, which undermines the unique and unrepeatable nature of the performance event. There is definitely something clinical about watching theatre in isolation. However, the sense of co-presence remains a crucial factor for audiences

attending a performance remotely. In the example of *The Persians*, the memory of co-presence that returned during the live-streaming was anchored in the laden history of Epidaurus. Haunted as it may have been by this memory, the live-streamed event afforded a distanced spectatorship, offering the possibility to imagine a collectivity that is less susceptible to the Festival's endemic nationalism.

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