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Of Real and Mythic Places

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Of Real and Mythic Places Performing In Archaeological Sites in the Argolid

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Abstract

This paper is an account of my creative experience in mounting the site-specific devised play *Journeys of Water (Five Myths from the Ancient Argolid)* in the archaeological sites of Ancient Mycenae, Ancient Tiryns and the Sanctuary of Asclepius, in Epidaurus. This project was a collective creation by the multicultural Okypus Theatre Company and took place around the Argolid area, in May 2012.

In *Journeys of Water* -a dramatisation of local ancient myths related to water and the site-specificity of both the natural and the architectural environment of the local archaeological sites became central to the creative process. The need to make use of the region's renowned historical heritage provided the company with an outstanding material that shaped this theatrical creation. Hence, all the theatrical components (dramaturgy, *mise en scène*, musical creation, scenographic concept and the interaction with the audience) derived from the selection of these sites, which were finally used as the actual performance spaces. Materially and symbolically separated from urban and daily life, the archaeological sites became a vast stage, radiating the very special energy from the traverse of mythical, historical, sociopolitical and cultural stories through time.

Keywords: Site-specificity, *mise en scène*, scenography, archaeological sites, mythology

Performing in Nafplion and the Argolid Region: Theatre Outside of the Theatre

In recent years, archaeology and theatre have established a dialogue, in order to work with concepts that both disciplines are interested in: the concepts of body, space, object, memory, and narration. Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks have generated this “disciplinary dialogue” in their book *Theatre/Archaeology* (2001). The result of this interaction is, on the one hand, a “hybrid” discipline that uses theatrical methods to examine archaeological material and

archaeological methods to approach the art of theatre. On the other hand, archaeological sites are used for the creation and mounting of site-specific performances: the topography, the special cultural, social, political, and religious metaphors of archaeological sites are used as part of the dramaturgy, *mise en scène*, and performance design.

Finding relevance in “Performing Space 2023”’s theme¹ and in the performative aspects of space, I chose to present my personal creative experience in mounting the site-specific, devised play *Journeys of Water (Five Myths from the Ancient Argolid)*, in the archaeological sites of Ancient Mycenae, Ancient Tiryns and the Sanctuary of Asclepius, in Epidaurus. This project was a collective creation by the multicultural Okypus Theatre Company and took place around the Argolid region, in May 2012.²

Creating site-specific works has been one of the main artistic aims of the Okypus Theatre Company that was founded in Nafplion, in 2006. Okypus means “swift-footed” in Ancient Greek and emerged from the encounter between the Balkans and Latin America: artists from Greece and Croatia, Chile and Argentina, Colombia, Mexico and Cuba collaborate and explore the creative possibilities of cultural syncretism.

In particular, the group’s basic aims are: to make use of the rich historical and cultural background of the region of the Argolid in its stagings, to create performances based on the ideas of interculturalism and multilingualism, and to experiment on staging new, unperformed dramatic texts or devised plays based on world mythology. To sum up the company’s creative urges, I am borrowing the term “glocal”, as it has been defined by Richard Schechner: “the powerful combination of the local and the global” (2013, p. 25).

Serving as the company’s artistic director and due to my background as performance designer, since the beginning of the company’s theatrical activity in 2007, I wished to give a special emphasis on performance space as one of the main motifs in the creation of our productions. A conventional theatre space was considered to be too limiting, and this is the reason for choosing alternative spaces that shape the company’s performances in terms of dramaturgy, *mise en scène*³ and the visual aesthetic.

Towards this end, the company’s base in Nafplion proved to be ideal. The town itself and its surrounding area have been home of major ancient Greek myths and important historical

¹ The conference’s theme focuses on “exploring the mythical, natural and urban landscape of the Argolida” (Performing Space, 2023).

² Creative team: Iliana Pazarzi (stage version), Despina Nikiforaki (Ancient Greek translation), Athena Stourna (direction, performance design), Mariana Kútulas-Vrsalović (musical composition), Myrto Kosmopoulou (assistant designer). Performers-musicians: Savvas Kovlakas, Mariana Kútulas-Vrsalović, Federico Nieto-El’Gazi, Iliana Pazarzi, Alexandros Vamvoukos.

³ I prefer to use the French term “*mise en scène*” and refer to it as a concept reclaimed by Patrice Pavis in his seminal book *Contemporary Mise en Scène: Staging Theatre Today* (2013). Within this theoretical framework, Pavis incorporates the multidisciplinary nature of both theatre direction and performance creation, while the *mise en scène* is considered a form of total art.

events, spanning from the prehistoric period until the present day. Some of Greece's most impressive archaeological sites are to be found in the Argolid. Added to these, the region's capital, Nafplion, is considered a town of important historical significance due to its long history that is still apparent in the well-preserved historical centre. The town has witnessed turbulent historical events, as it passed successively under Frank, Venetian and Ottoman occupation, until it was taken over by the Greeks, in 1822, following the outburst of the Greek War of Independence. Between 1829 and 1834, Nafplion was named the first capital of the newly-found Greek state.

Figure 1

Performance at the Archaeological site of Tiryns. The gods Hera and Poseidon fight over the protection of Argos. Performers: Savvas Kovlakas and Iliana Pazarzi (Photo: Angelos Gounaras)



When the company was formed in 2007, the only option for staging plays in Nafplion was the historical building Trianon, an old mosque at Syntagma square, turned into a cinema in the 20th century and now housing the town's only covered theatre. Back then, I had felt that the conversion of a historical monument into a proscenium arch theatre was a kind of "wound" to the building and, for this reason, I looked for alternative spaces. Indeed, Nafplion is a vast open-air museum and home to numerous museum foundations, with different thematic areas.

Hence, museums became our alternative theatre spaces; for example, our company performed a devised play for children based on myths from Latin America, at the Museum of Childhood in 2009 and a contemporary Greek play, *Berlin* by Stamatis Polenakis, at the

National Gallery a year later. In this paper I will focus on the use of local archaeological sites as outdoor performance spaces, in a project that took place in 2012.

Brief Presentation of the Project *Journeys of Water (Five Myths form the Ancient Argolid)*

Ancient Greek mythology became the source of inspiration for the project titled *Journeys of Water (Five Myths form the Ancient Argolid)*, a dramatisation of local myths related to water and the aquatic element. The devised play was performed in May 2012, on the grounds of the main local archaeological sites: (i) the sanctuary of Asclepieion, an ancient healing sanctuary devoted to Asclepius, the god of medicine, which includes the Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus; (ii) outside the fortified citadel of the Ancient Mycenae, and (iii) alongside the prehistoric fortress of the Ancient Tiryns, both of them being the two most important cities of the Mycenaean civilisation. Performances were scheduled to be presented to pupils of local primary schools.

Figure 2

Performance at the Archaeological site of Tiryns. Perseus rescues Andromeda in Ethiopia. Performers: Federico Nieto El' Gazi and Mariana Kútulas Vrsalović. (Photo: Angelos Gounaras)



The narrative thread of the story is as follows: The gods Hera and Poseidon both claim to be the protectors of the city of Argos (Figure 1). They set up a contest in which the three local river gods, Inachos, Kyfisos and Asterion, are invited to choose the winner. While waiting for the rivers' judgment, Poseidon accuses Hera of mistreating her priestess Io, daughter of river Inachos, with whom Zeus had fallen in love. In order to protect Io from the wrath of his wife, Zeus transformed her into a white heifer. Tormented by a gadfly sent by Hera, Io fled from

Argos and wandered across Europe and Asia, crossing the Ionian Sea (named after her), swimming the strait that was later called Bosphorus -meaning ox passage and eventually reaching Egypt. Her descendants ruled there for many generations, and one of them, Danaos, returned to Argos and became king.

Back to the two gods' dispute, we learn that Hera wins the contest and so, Poseidon punishes the area with drought. Danaos sends his daughter Amymone in search of water. Poseidon, once he had rescued Amymone from the clutches of a satyr, leads her to the spring of Lerna, and she, in gratitude, agrees to couple with him. And thus, is born Nafplios,⁴ whose son, the brave warrior Palamedes, later offered important technical innovations to humanity. Lastly, we follow the course of Perseus, who slays Medusa and journeys as far as Ethiopia to rescue Andromeda. He later becomes King of Tiryns and founds Mycenae (Figure 2). The play ends when Poseidon accepts having lost the protection of Argos and departs in sorrow.

The Archaeological Sites as Places with a History and a Life

In *Journeys of Water*, the site-specificity of both the natural and the architectural environment of the archaeological sites became central to the creative process. In dramaturgical terms, all of the myths' dramatic places refer to the selection of these sites that were finally used as the actual performance spaces: Tiryns, Nafplion, Mycenae, and Argos could be seen in their present state and perceived through their mythical existence throughout the performances.

Hence, these open-air sites became a vast stage, radiating the very special energy stemming from the traverse of mythical, historical, sociopolitical and cultural stories through time. According to Yannis Hamilakis and Efthimis Theou, archaeological sites are "Materially and symbolically demarcated from the space of daily life" (2013, p. 181). On top of that, the project offered a different use for these spaces: archaeological remains are usually populated by hordes of tourists, guides, and guards, during opening times, and are deserted as soon as darkness falls. In this case, the performance became part of the site's "daily life" with the invasion of tourists (and even animals) (Figure 3).

Added to this, the weather conditions offered an unpredictable element to the experience, since the performances took place in daytime, just like in ancient times: the hot morning sun, the strong wind, a cloudy sky, or a rainy day altered and shaped each performance, calling the actors-musicians for constant readiness and alert.

The sites of Ancient Mycenae, Ancient Tiryns, and the healing sanctuary devoted to the God Asclepius in Epidaurus became the setting, where the five local ancient myths related to water and the aquatic element revived the history of the region. The aim was to raise water-related issues that have been a serious threat for the region of the Argolid since the prehistoric

⁴ The city of Nafplion is named after him.

era and are still devastating the area nowadays, in various forms: floods, water-shortage and poisonous water.

In a journey through time and space, ancient gods and mythical figures revealed the timeless human effort to tame nature, to improve living conditions through innovation, social and political organisation and wise governance, as well as to fight for love and justice. Moreover, the mythological material unveiled the way in which the local populations merged with foreign ones, travelled and migrated all over the world, from Argos to Bosphorus, Caucasus, Egypt, and Ethiopia, thus exchanging political, economic and cultural elements.

Figure 3

Performance at the Archaeological site of Mycenae. The invasion of tourists and animals as the site pursuits its daily life. Performers: Federico Nieto El' Gazi, Iliana Pazarzi and Mariana Kútulas Vrsalović. (Photo: Angelos Gounaras)



The original musical compositions⁵ outlined this journey: the musical instruments comprised of ancient Greek ones (in reconstruction), such as the lyre and the *pandura*, and their descendants (guitar and bouzouki) as well as instruments from the countries visited by the heroes in the play, such as Indian and Egyptian musical instruments. Music helped to create an acoustic scenography, where the different settings and situations of the play were designated by distinctive sonic environments, performed by the actors-musicians.

This cultural syncretism, formed by local and global elements, was used by the creative team, comprised of Greek, Croatian and Latin-American artists, who brought in their own distinctive cultural and artistic backgrounds, thus embodying and re-inhabiting the ancient myths and historical sites. In this way, borders were shifted and boundaries were lifted, underlining the political dimension of space as a *locus* for dialogue, exchange, diversity and the acceptance of a plural identity.

⁵ Composer: Mariana Kútulas Vrsalović.

These elements of cultural pluralism acquired a political tone due to the contemporaneous political developments in Greece, at the time of presenting this work for the first time. Indeed, the performances took place a few days after the general elections of May 2012, right in the middle of the country's financial crisis. It was the first time that a neo-Nazi political party – The Golden Dawn – entered the Greek parliament. The party's fascist and xenophobic rhetoric was a threat to our international and multicultural theatre company that treated Ancient Greek Mythology as a cultural gift belonging to all. The political meaning of space, and particularly the meaning of performance space was underlined, since the archaeological sites became a meeting ground between us and our young audiences in especially difficult political times.

Kathleen Irwin, in an unpublished text about *Journeys of Water*, enhances the correlation between politics, society, space and performance and the development of important issues through time:

Furthermore, the performance simultaneously reflects a mapping of the ancient travel ways plied for trade and defence and suggest the newer routes of contemporary pilgrims, refugees (1.5 million) and tourists alike (17 million annually), who cut other paths, cut across the land. Indeed, the performances, staged as they are amidst the wayfarers that flock to these sites, require us to consider the complexities of tourism in a time of economic downturn. While mass tourism contributes 15% to the nation's Gross Domestic Product, the influx of wealthy Europeans, Chinese and Japanese (among others) to these historic sites serves as much to protect and preserve them as to trample and destroy them. In addition, the summer surge of thirsty visitors to mainland Greece and its islands is particularly problematic in regards to a seasonal scarcity of water and a changing climate – such circumstances are catastrophic to agriculture and fundamental quality of life (Irwin, 2014).

Indeed, Irwin tackles how significant matters regarding human life and nature are echoed in the ancient myths (migration and water-related issues), while she presents how they are mirrored in the present condition of the archaeological sites where the performances took place.

Vestiges of a Past Life

Archaeological sites have a rich “past life”, which is still visible in the ruins – the vestiges of human and natural activity rounded off with the passage of time. According to Paul Allain and Jen Harvie “(...) heritage sites invoke the site constructively as a memory trigger for events that happened there; more problematically, they suggest that the sites' meanings transcend both time and change.” (2014, pp. 175-176). In fact, it was very important for the company to underline this continuity in time and space, not necessarily as a linear one but as a circular one, under different circumstances and new developments throughout history.

By the very title of this paper, “Of real and mythic spaces”, I owe debt to Michel Foucault and his seminal lecture of 1967 “Des espaces autres” (Of Other Spaces), which did not appear in published form until 1984. I will thus conclude by referring to his notion of “heterotopias” – real places that function as counter-sites that challenge the social order of human engagement. I am thus considering archaeological sites as heterotopias, which, like museums and libraries, function as “heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time”, in which “time never stops building up and topping its own summit” (1984, p. 26). While libraries and museums function as general archives that “enclose in one place all times” (p. 26), the archaeological sites do not count on a diachronic accumulation of objects, but rather testify the passage of time by the way it is traced on the space itself.

Through performing in these sites, the Okypus Theatre Company proposed an alternative way of reinhabiting them, while their past life, both mythical and real, tangible and phantasmatic, was resuscitated and circulated among the ruins and the bodies of the performers and the young spectators. This was an affective type of theatre outside of the theatre that exemplified, as Kathleen Irwin suggests “the complex relationship between performing body, site and spectator” (2014).

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