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As Strangers. From the Collective to the Personal. Awaking Memory and Trauma in the Streets of Kalamata

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As Strangers.
From the Collective to the Personal.
Awaking Memory and Trauma in the Streets of Kalamata

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Abstract

The subject of this paper is the civil war in the region of Kalamata and the relation between memory and trauma, both on a collective and personal level, as it is reflected through the research of the walking documentary performance *As Stranger*, which was presented for the first time in Kalamata, in October 2023. The main research issues that will concern us are, firstly the role of the performing arts - and more specifically the theatre of reality -, its relation to the collective trauma of societies that have experienced intense and traumatic situations and how this is a field of research in the dramaturgy, direction and visual aspect of the performance. Secondly, the use of research practices of ethnography and autoethnography and how this is reflected in the direction and dramaturgy. Finally, the emergence and use of public space through walking as an integral part of the performance: a space that is transformed into a place, with memory and trauma as its axis; with the audience being transformed from mere spectators to bearers of experience.

Keywords: theatre of reality, documentary theatre, ethnodrama, walking performance, site-specific, collective memory, collective trauma, ethnography, autoethnography,

The Begging of the History and Micro-History

In 2018, once again looking for a shelter in the streets of Kalamata, I found myself in the garden of a detached house at the junction of two main streets of the city. The owner of the house began to tell me a story about a "border" that existed in that part of the city, during the German occupation and the years of the Civil War. The "frontier" that separated the urban Kalamata from the area of Fytia, where Maniates, poor people and Communists lived.

I am writing in my diary in 2021:

Today we went to look at a house to rent. The landlord, when we sat in the garden, said to me, 'Here my girl it was all orange groves and there was a border. This was Fytia and during the Occupation and the Civil War, the upper Kalamata people didn't cross the border and the Fytians didn't go to upper Kalamata.

Four years later, after research, interviews, study of historical archives and many walks in the neighbourhood of Fytia, this first meeting served as the beginning of the walking show that ended up in this neighbourhood. A performance with a main theme, the city of Kalamata as a living landscape and a vector of memory. A memory that sometimes brings joy and sometimes the emergence of trauma. An itinerant performance, in the form of documentary theatre, that approached concepts such as collective memory; collective and personal trauma; truth and lies; and love and war, putting the concept of trauma and its relationship with memory at the basic core of research. "The past in documentary theatre is related to the present and answers questions concerning contemporary society" (Zoniou, 2017, p. 46).

The Traumatized Memory. A Walk into Time and Space

The aim was for residents and visitors of Kalamata, wandering through the streets of the city, which they may walk every day, to take part in a theatrical experience that will make them reconnect with the place where they live and with the public space. The aesthetic space often turns into an emotional space. The aesthetic space which, as Boal mentions, "is the theatrical/dramatic space that is characterized by particular qualities that make it capable of producing knowledge about the world and about the self: a space that is bifurcated, tele-microscopic, malleable". (Boal, 1994).

The main theme was the search for and the connection between the history of the Civil War in Kalamata and the present, and more specifically, the connection between personal history. How do we go from history to the micro-history of individuals and how do personal stories highlight social traumas? In order to explore this theme, techniques and tools from theatre of invention, documentary theatre, ethnodrama, site-specific techniques, walking techniques as a form of performativity, as well as the basic methodology of ethnography and autoethnography were used.

Autoethnography is useful research because through it the author connects his personal experience with something of interest to the community. It helps readers to learn about situations in other people's lives and to transfer some of those situations to their own personal circumstances. (Verdis, 2008, p. 792)

Central questions are: *How do you approach the concept of trauma through art in the public realm? How can the theatre of reality handle a traumatic event so as to awaken memory?*

Memory is the synthesis, creation, imagination and construction of the past. It is based on the retrospective processing of personal experience that reacts with other memories, such as family, cultural, national. Memory is a dialectical experience that regresses between past, present with future.” (Jodelet, 1992, pp. 239-256).

The differentiation of social, individual and historical memory has been the subject of study by many social scientists and is a field that is still being shaped today. As Anna Mantoglou (2008) says "Social memory is the reconstruction of the past by the average practical man, while historical memory is a scientific reconstruction of the past by the specialist".

Figure 1

Images from “As Strangers” performance, Kalamata, GR



Based on Halbwachs' theory of collective memory and its connection with the individual, an attempt was made to highlight the subject of the Civil War through the personal memories of the individuals who took part in the project. and her own individual memory, reaching to use tools of autoethnography. Halbwachs thus links social memory to the notion of individual, group and social identity which are shaped and defined/determined by memory

or memories. Choosing as categories of analysis, memory, history, trauma; and placing them on two parallel axes capturing the collective and personal levels, I arrived at the following scheme. In place of the red continuous arrow that crosses all levels is the dramaturgy.

Memory and trauma, two definitions that are directly related. As Nikos Demertzis says:

For one and the same traumatic event, such as the Greek Civil War, there is, on the one hand, the demand 'to leave everything behind us' in the name of 'national reconciliation'; on the other hand, however, there is the exhortation 'to preserve our historical memory'. (Demertzis, 2015, p.97)

Conclusion

The notion of trauma, collective memory and their connection to the personal level seems to be something that could be captured in the representation of trauma through the theatre of reality in public space. The function of the audience, as a free audience that can walk around to react to what is happening and perhaps also leave, was an important new element of dramaturgy for the future. Having performed only five performances in Kalamata, a key post-performance was set for the future to offer a wider perspective of research as new historical data emerges not only for Kalamata but also for other places that bore the *name Little Moscow* and played a key role in the Civil War period.

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