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Light as Invisible Architecture: The Case of Ritsos' Moon Sonata at the Athens Festival

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Light as Invisible Architecture: The Case of Ritsos' *Moon Sonata* at the Athens Festival

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Abstract

The current paper will explore the intangible quality of light to create space which is transient during the performance yet transforms the solidity of space into narrative and dramaturgy, giving the audience the opportunity to connect with the endless theme of loss. The author, drawn by her current practice as a lighting designer, will explore the notion of space and time in a performance in an industrial space which has strong links to the urban memory of Athens (Athens Festival venue in Pireos 260), and how light can transcend time and the space in which the performance is placed in. The paper will present the findings of the 2015 performance at the Athens Festival, directed by Nanouris, music by Xarchakos with Marinella on the lead role, and Alexiadou as light designer.

Moonlight Sonata (1956), the earliest of Ritsos' compositions from the *Fourth Dimension*, has a particular form and atmosphere and is the beginning of a new era that leaves room for light to inhabit a storytelling space with generosity and grace. Inspired by the poet's most personal life and creations, retrieved from the past experiences, anxieties and emotions, the work revisits the wider space of the Left, to which Ritsos is ideologically and politically included and, therefore, creates space for a "void scenography" in which light takes centre stage. The *Moonlight Sonata*, one of Ritsos' best-loved and best-known texts, is a stage monologue, a personal confession, an emotional plea for life and hope, through a flow of symbols that gracefully gives space to abstract interpretation for the lighting designer to create a non-space and time-based habitat for the audience to immerse themselves in the timeless themes of love, belonging, trust and loneliness.

Keywords: lighting design, light as invisible architecture, Ritsos, Athens Festival

Light as Invisible Architecture

Invisible architecture has been a recent trend in the world of architects where the intention of the creator is to hide the building by using and accentuating four elements - air, heat, light, sound - as the art of “nothingness.” As a starting point for the design, we began by exploring this notion of invisible architecture i.e. the sensory elements that exist beyond a built environment but constitute content which in their own right can be distinct of the bigger container they exist in and yet support a narrative open to different interpretations. For example, the smell of a space; the sound from room to room; the natural light and how it changes throughout the day; artificial light and how it can make the walls it contains disappear. The sensory experience of spaces relies heavily on the fact that people come to the theatre with the special experience of the rest of their lives, - what Bachelard (1964) describes in *The Poetics of Space*, - that the rooms of a house may each have their own particular associations and emotional powers. Baugh (2005) argues “that the materials and mechanisms of scenography may have meanings in and of themselves and are not simple servants to the mechanistic needs of scenic representation they are an expression of a relationship with the world and reflect complex human values and beliefs” (p.8). The notion of using light to create memories and scenographic stimuli became the vehicle for the direction of the piece and the beginning of blocking the performance on paper, transforming an empty vast warehouse into smaller or larger emotional spaces open to interpretation by the audience. Our intention was to create an experience for the viewer that would go beyond the mere act of passively attending a performance but by the lack of any concrete and “visible” scenography this would give the audience the opportunity to have a kinaesthetic experience. As Gibson (1983) argues, the eyes should not be thought as cameras but as apparatus for detecting the variables of contour, texture, spectral composition and transformation in light, trying to experience the performance by seeing the sound and listening to the images.

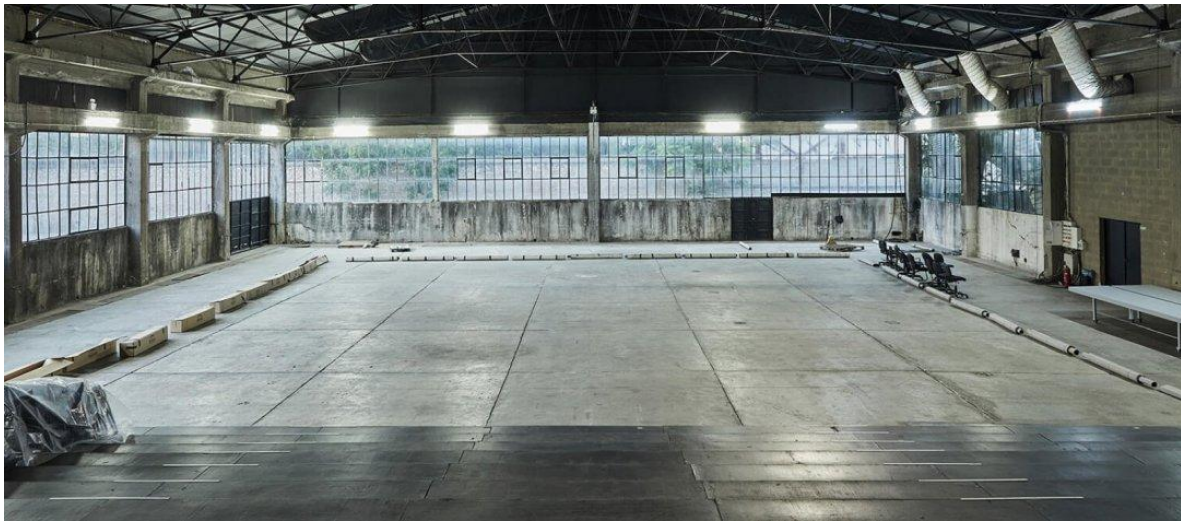
Moonlight Sonata (1956), the earliest of Greek poet Ritsos’ compositions from the *Fourth Dimension*, has a particular form and atmosphere and marks the beginning of a new era that leaves room for light to inhabit a storytelling space with generosity and grace. Inspired by the poet’s most personal life and creations, retrieved from past experiences, anxieties and emotions, the work revisits the wider space of the Left, to which Ritsos is ideologically and politically inclined and therefore creates space for a “void scenography” in which light takes centre stage. The *Moonlight Sonata*, one of Ritsos’ best-loved and best-known texts, is a stage monologue, a personal confession, an emotional plea for life and hope, through a flow of symbols that gracefully gives space to abstract interpretation for the

lighting designer to create a non-space and time-based habitat for the audience to immerse in the timeless themes of love, belonging, trust and loneliness.

The space at Pireos 260 in Athens where the Athens Festival takes place is a former factory (EBME Tsaousoglou) that in the mid-1950s made metal structures for furniture, including metal frames for theatre seats (Figure1). The space, an empty container, led itself gracefully to the idea of liquid light that would create spaces for the story to come to life.

Figure 1

Athens Festival Pireos 260 Hall D, the Empty Hall in Daylight. © Greek Festival.



The play is a monologue by a woman of a certain age who is looking back on her life. She begins by describing the beauty of the moonlight, a light that is forcefully entering from the glass windows at the back of the bare stage and becomes a co-star for the protagonist. Kampanellis (1967), another great Greek playwright, refers to the performances as “believable what ifs”. This solid wall of light at the back, sweet and fragile, will soon disappear, or more precisely, the protagonist will make it disappear with her words. The body of the protagonist, this vertical agony and pain, becomes an integral part of the scenography as its movement in space will transform, through light, the spatial relationship between the story and the performers (Figure 2). In this particular performance the protagonist presents and narrates her character instead of becoming it (Figure 3). In this way she occupies a “gestural space.” She defines the space and creates a dynamic dialogue between light and text (Figure 4).

Light becomes a window or a skylight that does not exist. It reflects and it is reflected. It becomes time and memory. It becomes a companion and a protector, an arm around the shoulder, a lover and the harsh reality of loneliness (Figure 5).

Figure 2

Lead Protagonist Marinella with Light Interpreting Pain. Image by Evaggelia Thomakou.



Figure 3

Lead Protagonist Marinella Emitting Light through ? her Body. Image by Evaggelia Thomakou.

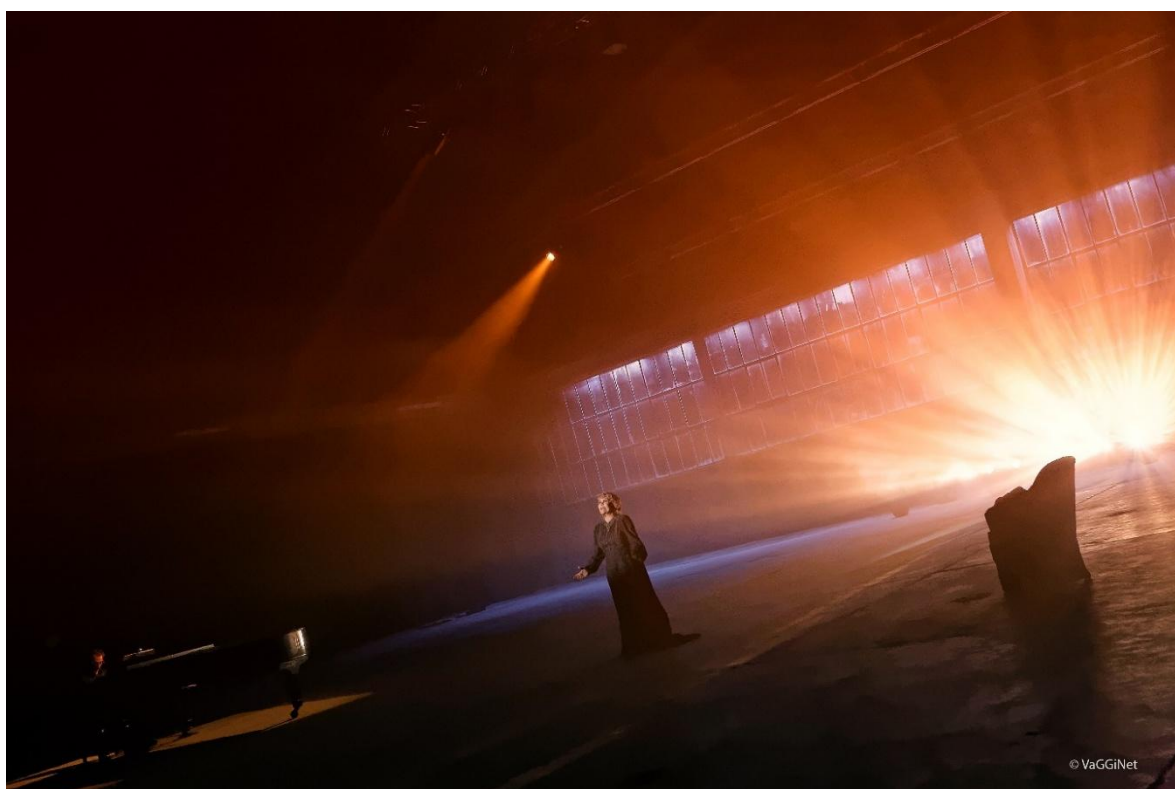


Figure 4

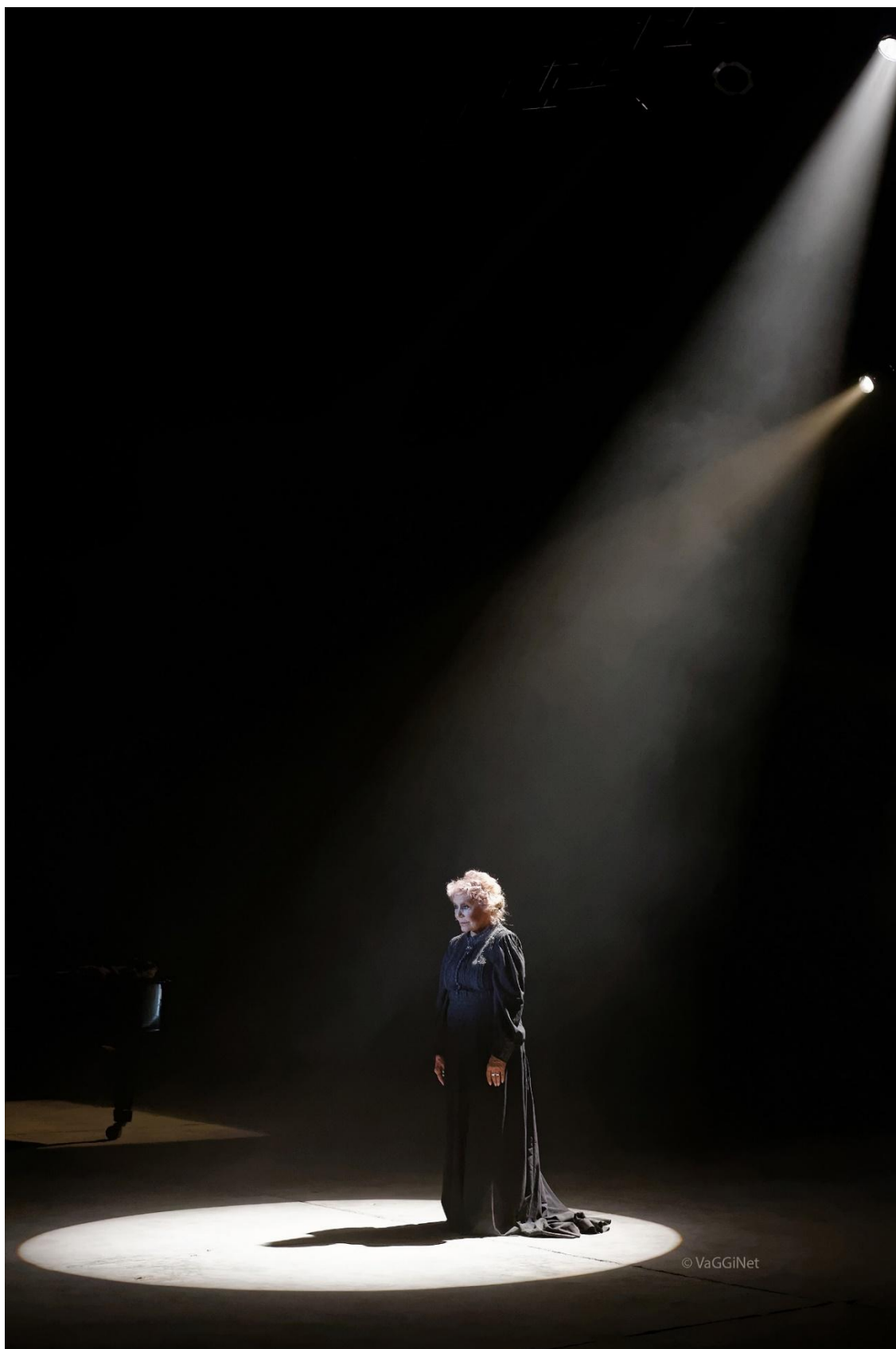
Lead Protagonist Marinella in Conversation with the Light. Image by Evaggelia Thomakou.



Moonlight Sonata gave us the opportunity to explore Newton's theory of *absolute space* (1687), in its own nature, without relation to anything external, always remaining similar and immovable. Relative space is some movable dimension or measure of the absolute space, which our senses determine by its position in relation to bodies. The bigger container that is the building itself proves to be an invaluable ally in experimenting with the fluid nature of the lighting design, and its flexibility of its form and its vastness into the space. It manages to create a kinesthetic experience for the audience in the absence of an immobile and descriptive scenography, adding another layer of free will in the interpretation of the theatrical practice from the audience's point of view.

Figure 5

Lead Protagonist Marinella Embodying Loneliness through Light. Image by Evaggelia Thomako.



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