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**GREECE**

## **WHO IS THERE?**

### **THEATRE FESTIVALS IN SEARCH OF A POSTMODERN AUDIENCE**

#### **Where is the audience? That's the Question**

Among theatre people in general and festival administrators in particular, most of the discussion is about the audience: Where is the audience? What is wrong with the audience? Etc. To have an audience, of course, it presupposes a (given) world out there to address. To reach out for a bigger audience means to embrace bigger chunks of the real. And the question is: how does one go about locating the real? What is really real and what is really an other? Who is an other? We look around and the only thing we see is uncertainties and shifting performative subjectivities. The old but never dated motto of the Elizabethan bard "all the world is a stage" and its hi-tech version all the world is a procession of simulacra, have made the stage/world dialectic all the more perplexed and perplexing. I do understand the anxiety of festival administrators at the box office, yet to handle festival politics one has to handle identity crisis as well. Simply put: the issue is not just economics: it is also ontological and ideological. As Blau beautifully makes the point, an all pervasive post-Derridean dissemination of anti-essentialism reifies the statement with which we start, about the reality of the world and the reality of our audiences (Blau 2004: 253).

Recent postmodern decenterings have turned everything upon its head, merging the real with the hyper-real, the left with the right, the viewer with the viewed, shadowing each other always. We have mixing and ghosting of all kinds. A new world seems to be in the process of emerging and the problem is that it does not stay put long enough to understand and eventually act. It constantly acquires the qualities of phantoms of the brain. Seeming, seeming, Blau says; the impelling substance in most of Shakespeare's plays, the ghosting extensions of life experienced by Hamlet and Macbeth (2004: 255), is now casting its shadow upon our lives. The target is spilled upon the ground. Who can really tell the dancer from the dance?

In the old days, things had a clearer, I am not saying better, focus. The question of Schiller, What can a good stable theatre actually achieve?, had a tight hold on the Enlightenment principles of moral education: the State as a moral institution and the theatre house as a national assembly. In the years that followed most festivals were used as a showcase of what a country really wanted or dreamt about; that

is, as part of her imaginary that contributed to the national narrative. In which case the festivals operated as sites of struggle, as a platform where players and audience could enact conceptions of identity and community. The hosting country became both the subject and the consequence of artistic and cultural negotiation (also Klaic 2008: 217-27 and Wilmer 2008: 9-19). Not any longer.

The problem of contemporary theatre (or theatre festival) is that it does not know where it stands vis-a-vis the new world order; it does not know what its deeper social role is. Of course I do not have the illusion that theatre (or any festival for that matter) can change the world. The pulse of all nations is now registered in its TV iconography, its reality shows, its talent shows and its freak shows. The unity of people comes much faster and easier through the new electronic media than through watching a two-hour live performance (also Klaic 2008: 226-27). Who really cares about theatre practice and theatre attendance today?

Despite all odds I strongly feel that there is still some room left for Dionysus as a bastard art to step in and make an impression, bring back some balance and effectively criticize the faults, shortcomings and anxieties of our era. Theatre festivals, when they have a clear vision, and are seriously connected, can help expand a bit the geographical, aesthetic and intellectual boundaries of practitioners and viewers alike; in other words, they can operate as perspective bringers. And I guess this is one of the major problems of many theatre festivals in their relationship with the real world out there: they lack a clear perspective. They either pretend being popular while they cater mostly to national elites and/or hordes of tourists who are trying to get a taste of the cultural life of the place they visit before they fly back home to tell their friends colorful stories about local people, or they cater to the masses providing low quality entertainment, like shopping malls cloned by dozens every year. It is no accident that every city, every small town is setting up its own festival showcase, to the point that festivals lose their meaning and social purpose.

Greece, for example, a country of less than eleven million people, has 26 (small and mid size) summer festivals, most of them sponsored by local municipalities and manipulated (indirectly or otherwise) by local politicians and other interested parties. Of course there are theatre people on their boards, but who really listens to them? I know that from within, since I happen to be on two festival boards organized and sponsored by the Municipality of the city of Thessaloniki.

### **Back to the community**

Schiller's statement about theatre as a moral responsibility may sound like a swear word today; yet I feel that theatre still has obligations to its people, a social duty to perform, and I do not care what word one attaches to this duty (moral or anything else) (also, Straub 2007: 35). Contemporary times

may not be very supportive, yet theatre festivals should fight back against all the pressures from politicians, market gurus and sponsors that want them to be mere entertainment venues for tourists or for local elites. This is very difficult but it must be attempted. Theatre festivals should constantly try to excavate with one goal in mind: to discover new artistic channels in order to provide food for thought to the community. It is their duty to convince a good number of people that a theatre festival is not a cultural event intended for and attended by those who seek culture or sensationalism. Theatre festivals cannot compete with television or other technologically advanced media, but at least they can offer people a different experience, an experience they cannot have elsewhere. Which means that festivals must try and cultivate a sense of common affiliation on the grounds of something unique; that is, operate as a thread in the dream coat of alternative society.

Theatre has gone a long way celebrating individualism and realism. We seem to forget that theatre is a collective experience that transcends average days and individuals; it has always been like that. Now it is time to revisit its roots, when people got around a campfire to tell stories of what it means to be part of a community (Levitow 2002: 27). Now that the alienating electronic media work towards a new "posthuman" world, theatre has to project its communal spirit, to celebrate the "dynamism, energy and sound of life" and to truly show us what it means to be human again and alive (Levitow 2002: 27). We may have forgotten all this, but we can still learn the vocabulary from scratch; learn to appreciate things, learn exactly what Emily finds out in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* when she looks at the living from above: that people live a life without really understanding it.

Roberta Levitow is right: what we need is not theatre festivals that are simply avant-garde in style but theatre festivals that are avant-garde of truth (2002: 29). Only then can theatre festivals be a productive human adventure and not a mere commercial or narcissistic showcase. Only then can festivals convince those who are not directly involved that they can come and live an intense and unexpected experience. Only then can festivals show people how to be free and what it means to be free. Even difficult projects can be people oriented. Creative and popular at the same time. It all depends on those who sit behind the helm. How committed they are to look for the real behind the illusory. That is the only way to figure out what audiences theatre needs and where to find them.

### **The Greek Paradigm**

Kruger argues in her book on national theatres, that the literal place of performance or exhibition "plays a role in the cultural recognition of theatre or art" (1992: 12, also Reinelt 2001: 385). And I have no better example to support this statement than Athens festival, now called Hellenic Festival.

For many decades Greece's biggest festival was held in places already loaded with significations, places that attracted a particular caste of people, usually middle and upper middle class, educated, conservative, people whose ideas about the accepted and the unaccepted, about right and wrong in the productions of classical theatre inevitably had an effect on the range of issues addressed, the kind of material produced and which audience it develops. For them the obligation of a national festival realized at the ancient site of Epidaurus is to claim the unifying force of language and culture; an attitude that explains why every summer these people react so loudly with boos and hisses against anything they think disrupts the essentialist unity and the aesthetics and ideology concerning the interpretation of classical drama they have in their mind. Their claim is that a festival of this nature and orientation should be a meeting point of outstanding works and not ground for unchecked experimentation and amateurism. Experiment anywhere you like, why here? has been their counterargument for years.

I will not pick up the issue here because it will lead us astray. What I would like to point out in relation to the topic of this symposium is that although Athens, a city of about 3,5 million people, has a very colorful and exciting theatre season, with an average of 500 productions per year (distributed among 200 professional companies), it has faced over the years many problems setting up an equally vital and promising summer festival. It is only in the last three years that there has been a radical change in the ideology of its major festival, thanks to the new artistic director Yiorgos Loukos, who has tried from the beginning to introduce less rigid patterns with the hope to make the Hellenic Festival more hospitable to the new, the polyvocal and the unexpected and thus more attractive to people, local and foreign.

Loukos and his administration saw that the limited appeal of the Festival mostly derived from the fact that it was in reality divorced from the community in which it played. It operated as if it had no social responsibility or better, as if its sole responsibility was to prove again and again the grandeur of the classics through productions that were mostly re-staging of the same old recipe. I am not saying that there weren't landmark productions all these decades. Of course there were quality productions that garnered critical and (inter)national acclaim, establishing the Festival's legacy as the leader in the field of classical drama. The problem is that the Festival failed to keep up with the changes taking place inside the theatre itself and in the world in general. The end result was the gradual alienation of the young from its activities. There was very little for them to see and appreciate. The Festival instead of maturing with the passing of time got older and thus less inviting.

So, the first thing the new administration did was to exploit the Festival's potential to invigorate a re-examination of national identity in relation to the global context without creating a new

chauvinism. Loukos' first move was to reshuffle the roster of participants. The decision of the administration was clear enough: no one would have access to the Festival unless s/he had something original and fresh to propose. This bold move inevitably left out many artists and ensembles that for many years showed up at Epidaurus or Herode Atticus irrespective of the quality of their current work.

The administration also looked early on into the matter of space. The general belief was that the Festival should not be restricted to two or three known places and that geographical diaspora would help it embrace more people, enrich its diversity and help revitalize the economy of different areas. So Loukos went on and opened two new theatre venues (with two stages each) in Athens' industrial area. This change had as a result a radical shift in the aesthetics of the productions hosted there, but more importantly a radical change in the make up of the audience. The old spectators of course continue to attend performances of classical plays at Epidaurus (in Peloponese) and in the Roman theatre of Herode Atticus in down town Athens, but new and much younger spectators are showing up in the new venues which have by now become popular sites of experimentation and get togetherness. For the first time the Greek Festival has won dedicated fans who plan their summer vacations in accordance with the Festival summer schedule.

To further increase the public appeal of the Festival, the administration has kept ticket prices low enough so that they are accessible to all. Given the impressive and pressing popularity of the new stages, it has also reduced the number of those who could have free admission (about 20% of those attending the performances), in order to increase the availability of seats and thus improve the Festival's income margins. The change of policy worked unexpectedly well. The press welcomed the changes, and so did the general public.

To reinforce the links with and among people, the new administration took advantage of recent technology to sell its product to larger segments of the population, local and international, young and old. It changed the booking system which now operates electronically, thus giving people, wherever they are, the chance to book their tickets in advance by charging their credit card. It has also reduced the duration of the Festival from a five-month marathon to a two-month productive adventure, thus giving it more density, more dynamism and a better focus.

Another audience-oriented innovation introduced has to do with the marketing of the scheduled events. Prior to the Greek premiere of a foreign production the Hellenic Festival covers the traveling expenses of journalists (or critics) to attend the scheduled performance abroad, with the

agreement that when they come back they cover the event with reviews, interviews and other material that would help promote the production back home. Thus far, this tactic has paid off.

Given the changing norms and demographics of Greek reality, one of the Festival's main goals has been, from the very beginning, to address issues on multiculturalism (immigrants make up 10% of the local population). Last summer the Festival hosted a cycle of seven plays under the thematic umbrella "The Foreigner" Two of the events were co-productions (a Greek-Turkish production of *The Persians* and a Greek-Dutch of *The Suppliants*).

Workshops (free of charge) have become an essential part of the Festival's promotion tactics. Now in their third season, workshops provide a solid intercultural platform for practitioners to meet and work together with established local and foreign artists, like Vasiliev, Langhoff and Grauzinis who are also given a chance to direct one of the major productions of the Festival. The aim of the new administration is to get people, particularly younger people involved not only through workshops but also by providing access to rehearsals, by running educational programmes, by hosting plays that appeal mostly to their age group (raw and violent) and by having lower and thus more attractive ticket prices. Also special attention is paid to the disabled as well as to drug addicts who are in rehabilitation centers. The goal is to get them to stay together, to know each other, work together, discuss, in short create a theatre community.

The idea of a well organized apprenticeship/internship program although discussed is not realized yet. If it ever gets off the ground it would surely offer more opportunities to young artists and administrators and at the same time allow the Festival to operate with lower production and administration costs (something successfully tested by the International Film Festival in Thessaloniki). Furthermore, the presence of young theatre people can make things happen and grow. Getting them involved it can eventually help turn the Festival into a place to exchange ideas and confront issues. After all, what counts for a contemporary festival is its ability to represent the diversity of the present and draw on that energy, strength and ideas. And where else can a Festival find a better source of inspiration than among the young people?

### **Sponsors and Patrons**

We all know that in a consumer society art is always already commodified. Which means that any production is linked to modes of consumption (Reinelt 2002: 384-86). Of course we are not bearing gifts to Athens with this statement. Theatre has always been like that: inextricably linked to the

wider culture. The thing is to find the best way to turn festivals into creative and deconstructive cells of the real and not into shopping malls, as mentioned earlier, that last for five or six or ten days and then disappear from view or erased from memory. Of course this is more easily said than done.

In a neoconservative era like ours, with politicians dismantling the foundations of the welfare state, the old left out of sight and the arts-funding dried to a trickle, it gets all the more difficult to operate as a productive, let alone transnational zone of mixture and cultural creativity without relying on corporate money. The fear of many is that as long as corporate money has a strong say in any festival, the future is bleak. In the US, for example, many companies and festivals are tailoring their program to suit separate sponsors. Corporate support often fails to come back and theatres are left flat.

As far as I know, the Hellenic Festival has not tried to this day to co-produce anything with corporations. Its administration seems to be more comfortable, in a way "safer", with the State than with the corporate money. They do not believe that corporate money will help them attain greater financial stability. On the contrary, they feel that once festivals are determined by the corporate logic of the market, they will never be the creative site they want them to be. Decisions will be mediated by the demands of the market place (or the funding foundation) and the product will inevitably be compromising, if not slick and superficial. Their claim is that the job of a good theatre festival is to operate as an alternative to globalizing media and economics. It should explore relationships of peoples and cultures and not relationships of interests and power. Which means, it should remain on the side of the unexpected. And to be able to do so it must find financial solutions to liberate and not imprison creativity. By giving itself away either to the patrons of high art or big corporate money or local politics it only leads to a dead end.

I understand the reasons why the Greek administrators hesitate to embrace the logic of postmodern (corporate) economics, yet I would agree with Matthew Maguire, the American playwright, who says that all money may be tainted, but not all money is the same. There is money more tainted than others. And theatre festivals, to stay in the game, can accept donations at least from progressive corporations and not from harmful corporation such as tobacco industry that can buy silence with grants, in the sense that "having accepted the money, many artists who might otherwise speak out against the criminal effects of the company's product on the national health are silent". (Maguire 2002: 199). It happens all the time. A good example is Humana Festival that has never produced a play that is critical of health maintenance organizations. Despite Jon Jory's claim that he was fortunate not having ever received a good play criticizing American health system, which as we know is far from being perfect, it is easy to speculate that Jory, his assistants and advisors did not

want to anger the Humana Corporation. At the same time, however, we have to note that without the Humana Foundation committed support, the future of the Festival at Louisville would have remained uncertain, to say the least, and the board's play selections might have been heavily influenced by popular taste (as opposed to other options, more daring). A real Catch 22.

As Reinelt very well points out, "Now is the time for theatre in general to redress the balance, fight for artistic virtue and value and reflect upon the faults of society" (Reinelt 2001: 234). Collaborations and/or co-productions through corporate money might not be a panacea, yet they can, once in a while, help festival activities to stay alive for longer periods of time and thus give the opportunity for more people (and of course artists) to see. When a festival production plays for a limited time those interested hardly have the time to find out what is happening, let alone reflect on what is going on. Also these collaborative ventures can open up new economic horizons since they help the companies (or festivals) find support from foreign sources as well. In this way the products of a festival are internationalized and become the property of a larger community of consumers. After all, one of the main jobs of a festival is to help its productions travel as much as possible, isn't it?

### **Commissioning plays**

One idea not realized yet but frequently discussed on the board of the Hellenic Festival, is the commissioning of plays. That would indeed be very useful in more ways than one. My feeling is that theatre festivals are in need of a new dramaturgy that would help develop new forms of theatrical representation in a position to open up the experience of transnational viewing. They are in need of dramas compatible with multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-ethnic and hi-tech audiences. I know of very few plays that do address successfully the vision of a new Europe and its peoples. Most plays when they are not simple-minded and market-oriented, are convenient representations of human life. We hardly ponder over their meaning beyond the moment we watch them. And it is not only the writers to blame.

With production expenses going up, producers have become more careful. They do not take risks easily. Spectators are also hesitant. With tickets prices climbing high all the time, not many are willing to take risks either. On their part they demand consistency in cultural representation. And producers know that and act accordingly; and of course authors know that and act accordingly as well. For reasons of marketability they focus on the cliches and globally recognizable culture. To sell their work they write low budget plays that rarely involve more than three or four characters. There are no deuteragonists or minor characters anymore. There are no secondary or minor plots supported by smaller roles. Theatre is losing its multi-layered physiognomy. Few plays that are

produced today really reflect the perplexities of the new world order or the demands of the new audiences. Commissioning might solve the problem, or partly.

We all know that commissioning is a complicated, risky and at times consuming matter. It can be plagued by personal preferences and tastes, biases and individual concerns. Yet it is worth the trouble. A big festival can commission five or six plays per year in order to choose one or two. This policy can help a festival develop and nurture an ongoing and long term relationship with several playwrights, local and international, and at the same time it can help redirect contemporary writing and increase its marketability and international exposure. I have once again the Humana Festival example in my mind that nurtured and developed playwrights over a long period of time, helping the theatre's reputation as a leading supporter of new play development. Once a festival proves to be a loyal supporter of new writing, playwrights will always give their work for the "first look".

In short: theatre festivals do not have to be solely product-oriented. They can also be process-oriented. And my feeling is that the Hellenic Festival is still in need of mechanisms for the development of new works, not just presentation of completed works. After three years of successful turns, the Hellenic Festival looks more confident to go forward into more daring and at the same time popular territory and form which, in turn, will bring more attention and recognition. It remains to be seen where the festival will go given the increased competition, higher budgets, bigger expectations, changing demands and trends of professional theatre and the new demography.

A good sign is the recent Prospero agreement that brought together six major European companies --Theatre de la Place (Belgium), Emilia Romagna Teatro Fondazione (Italy), Schaubuehne (Germany), Centro Cultural de Belem (Portugal), Tukkivan Teatreityo Kestos (Finland), Opera de Rheine (France). Also the decision of four major Mediterranean national festivals to collaborate (the Hellenic Festival, Avignon, Istanbul and Barcelona) and the decision (2006) of Southeast European countries to set up their own festival are good indications. These links will hopefully reinforce cultural dialogue, increase potential transnational viewers, help realize annual productions and tours, support new directors with seminars and collaboration with one or more of the participating parties and help establish a European research and training center for new actors. In short, all these intercultural decisions can further help the connection with other cultures and eventually mobilize and engage the senses and provoke feelings of recognition, in the service of a more progressive image of a new world. As Reinelt argues, this collaborative piecing together of new linkages may tempt more people and more diverse groups to enter the field and turn theatre from a marginal art that it is today into a more powerful platform of interrogation and intervention in the struggle to invent a New Europe or a New World (2001: 386-87).

## **In conclusion**

Some say that MacDonald's is successful business because it is predictable and theatre is unsuccessful because it is unpredictable. I do not think the argument holds. People love the cliché of their everyday life, since they feel that they play on safe home turf, yet these very same people are ready to travel far to experience the uncommon and the unusual. The more surprise-proof people are the more open they are to the unexpected. The less we know about something (sports, cultural events etc) the more curious we are to find out. In the end, it is all a matter of smart marketing.

To better their marketability contemporary festivals should resemble huge workshops rather than isolated artistic ventures patronized by fractions of the middle or upper middle class. As long as festivals insist on flirting with the acceptance of a web of people in and around theatre or of tourists in search of cultural excitement they will never develop into popular sites of intervention and truly radical imaginings. That means festivals should not only work closer together, creating a stronger network with shared beliefs as to their social role in a postmodern and ever changing environment, but they should also throw open the doors of possibility, encourage boldness and stage the anxieties of people about their national and cosmopolitan identity. Festivals should stir friction between the past and the present. And they can do it as long as they operate as a serious responsible enterprise.

Greeks appropriate the classics the same way Irish appropriate Beckett and the French appropriate Molière. I think in all festivals that call themselves international there is a kind of nationalist appropriation of the event. Personally I do not care how one calls a festival as long as it asks questions, it is intellectual, it appeals to both the senses and the intellect and somehow retrains audiences to get back to the theatre. I agree with those who say that there is too much mobility to allow the development of a solid citizenship. I agree that citizenship has acquired a more abstract flavour (Klaic 2008: 222-27). Yet festivals to be effective at all must produce plays of value to the individuals in their respective societies. That is the only way to touch people and through people to persuade the State to change its cultural policy. Without a sense of community we lose the sense of what needs to be done.

So, back to our original aporia: who is out there? People, of course. The issue is to what extent theatre festivals (and their sponsors) are willing to question the very philosophy of their own concepts –which will mean a radical shift of their focus and policy-- to reach out for all these mixed (and perplexed) peoples?

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