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Transformation, Repair, and Change! Scenographic Strategies in Teaching Socially-Engaged Performance

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Student Project within Introduction to Scenography Workshop. Department of Interior Architecture and Design, Faculty of Art and Design of the Technological Educational Institute of Athens. October 2015 – January 2016. Refugee Camp of Eleonas, Athens, Greece.

The Journeys of the Potato, from Andes to Tiryns: Legends and Truths. Department of Performing and Digital Arts, School of Fine Arts, University of the Peloponnese. July 2022. Agricultural Prison of Tiryns, Nafplion, the Peloponnese, Greece.

Transforming sites of ‘lived crisis’ into a scenography of escape

How can scenography and the creation of performance spaces within sites of social isolation provide a current of social change and inclusion, and of agency and artistic responsibility in periods of severe crises? In this paper, I propose a presentation of my work as an educator in scenography, as part of socially-engaged performance workshops in marginal, socially secluded places in Greece.

Over the past fifteen years, Greece has undergone a series of political, social, financial, and sanitary crises. The urgency to hasten towards sites of uncertainty, tension, and trauma and creatively inhabit them, has led to the formation of *in situ* artistic projects with third-year undergraduate students. Two such sites of ‘lived crisis’ have been chosen for two distinct design-based, socially-engaged projects: a refugee camp in Athens and a prison in Nafplion, in the Peloponnese peninsula.

Expanded scenography, the ‘theatre scenography residing within a much larger framework of art, architecture and social practice’, was used in both projects as a point of departure, ‘as the generative element of performance as well as its primary meaning’ (ARONSON 2022: xiv). The emphasis was placed on the visual element and on the different creative uses of space.

In both projects the sites’ indoor recreational spaces were transformed into performance spaces. This was achieved by using the notion of ‘scenographic dramaturgy’: an approach to performance-making that involves a ‘vagabond dance’ between ‘two actively interactive layers – “movement” and “environment”, action and space, dramaturgy and scenography’, as Sodja Lotker and Richard Gough (2013: 4) claim.

Traveling and wandering became the main dramaturgical and spatial element in both performances. Hence, the initial use of space was refigured and redefined, and this ‘transformed space’, as Arnold

Aronson (2018: 149) terms it, allowed for an embodied and spiritual journey to take place. In other words, what was achieved in both cases was a temporary escape that was much needed by both groups – migrant/refugees and prisoners alike.

Selina Busby describes these spaces as ‘gaps for imagination’ (BUSBY 2021: 20) that were ‘created in the drama itself’ (NICHOLSON 2021: xi). Indeed, there is a ghostly-like quality in these sites of social isolation that exist as places apart, on the margins of society, belonging to the Foucauldian notion of ‘heterotopias of deviation’: ‘those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed’ (FOUCAULT 1986: 25). The migrants/refugees are deviant because they are ejected from their natural habitats and end up errant and displaced, whereas prisoners are considered deviant from a law-abiding society.

These sites can also be considered as liminal, in-between spaces of transition from one state to another. Their occupants – migrants/refugees and prisoners – have been stripped bare of their previous identities. They find themselves in a closed waiting space, where they are waiting either for the continuation of an unknown journey that will possibly lead them to a new home, or waiting for their prison sentence to come to its end. And while waiting, their only dream is the moment when they will be able to go back into society with a new identity.

The refugee camp and the prison provided, therefore, a *locus* for performances that took an interest in the actual site, its function, and its inhabitants, and enabled civic engagement. These performances were conceived by the students and were either destined to be seen by the mi-

grants/refugees, or, in the case of the prison inmates, co-created and performed with them. Most importantly, in both projects, these sites of social isolation were transformed into spaces for performance, and laboratories of communication and creativity between students and occupants.

Project 1. Refugee Camp of Eleonas, Athens, October 2015 - January 2016

The first project was carried out at the Refugee Camp of Eleonas, in Athens, right at the heart of the refugee crisis of 2015/2016. The camp had been hastily set up by the Greek state in August 2015, in order to temporarily house the influx of migrants and refugees that had arrived in the Greek capital, after long and traumatic journeys, and lived in the streets under inhuman circumstances. The students¹ of the ‘Introduction to Scenography Workshop’ were asked to create short, visual performances to be seen by migrant/refugee children that did not speak any language other than their own. During the months that preceded the final performance, the Refugee Camp site became the students’ scenography workshop.

However, since the project, apart from its scenographic nature, also belonged to the field of Social Theatre, it was important to take into consideration and present to the students the social, psychological, and relational context of the specific group of displaced children and their par-

¹ Third-year students at the Department of Interior Architecture and Design, Faculty of Art and Design of the Technological Educational Institute of Athens.



Fig. 1: Spending time with the children in the Refugee Camp of Eleonas.
Students: Jo Katsoula and Eleftheria Pappi, *Dangerous Cuisines*.
Student log, 2016. Unknown photographer.

ents. The project's objectives involved the use of the given space and the exploration of its performance potentialities. Hence, the students had to use the recreational space in a way that would enhance interaction between performers and spectators, and create communication and a feeling of welcome.

The migrant/refugee children had experienced a difficult and dangerous journey before arriving at the camp. At the time of the culmination of this project, in January 2016, the refugee crisis had reached a climax. In those days, the country's northern borders at Idomeni were closed and more than 12,000 migrants and refugees were trapped in Greece. Mi-

grants and refugees arriving at the camp had the right to stay for only three days and after that they had to leave, knowing that they had nowhere to go. The chaos and uncertainty that awaited them were felt at the Eleonas Refugee Camp, therefore, performing for them was going to be a carefree parenthesis in their ongoing drama, trauma, and uncertainty.

During the various visits at the Refugee Camp, the students were informed of the given circumstances surrounding the migrants'/refugees' situation, and how the camp functioned. They collaborated with the volunteers and translators and spent time with the children who watched their rehearsals (Fig. 1). Since language could

not be used, they found a way to communicate basic information related to the stories performed, such as using placards with basic titles translated into Arabic, Farsi, and Pashto (Afghan). However, as stated before, the main language was the image.

In order to make the vast tented recreational space work, a solution had to be found to make it more inviting, to find a way to include the children spectators in the performance process and enhance communication without words. The concept of ‘scenographic dramaturgy’ came to the students’ aid. They used the idea of travel as the main thread that would unify the different visual performances that took place at the different spots within the space.

The children and their parents were guided from one spot to the next one: this was a different kind of journey to the traumatic one they were experiencing – it was a journey of joy and delight. Each spot was a kind of station where they would pause and see a performance full of colour and movement. Each performance was based on a simple story (a myth, a story from a children’s book, a devised story) that had to do with the concepts of love, of friendship, of sharing and belonging (Fig. 2, 3, 4).

Project 2. The Agricultural Prison of Tiryns, April–July 2022

The second project took place in 2022, at the Agricultural Prison of Tiryns, outside the city of Nafplion, in the Peloponnese. The students² enrolled on the module

² Department of Performing and Digital Arts, School of Fine Arts, University of the Peloponnese.

Social Theatre, participated in a series of theatre workshops, and co-created a site-responsive performance together with the prisoners.³ The performance was titled *The Journeys of the Potato, from Andes to Tiryns: Legends and Truths*.

In this project ‘scenographic dramaturgy’ had to do with the site-specific nature of the devised performance. It consisted of using the idea of a spiritual journey in time and space through the story of the travels of the potato, from the Andes through Europe and finally, Greece. The reason for placing the potato at the centre of the narrative thread had to do with the past use of the prison site. In fact, the Agricultural Prison is standing at the very same spot where, around 1830, the first Governor of modern Greece Ioannis Kapodistrias founded the new state’s first Agricultural School of Tiryns. Kapodistrias is known to have introduced potato cultivation in Greece, in order to feed the starving population. Indeed, some of the first cultivations of potatoes in Greece took place at the Agricultural School, so agricultural work had been ongoing at Tiryns for almost two centuries.

At the beginning of the workshops, the prisoners had been reluctant to engage with us; for that reason, it was important to include them in the creative process. For example, they asked us to add songs in-between the episodes – it was evident that singing helped them destress and express themselves. In addition, simple,

³ The project at the Agricultural Prison of Tiryns was co-taught with the actress and director Ioanna Lioutsia, a PhD candidate at the Department of Theatre Studies of the University of the Peloponnese, with the valuable assistance of Dina Kalogeropoulou, a member of the Pyli Politismou Nafpliou (Culture Gate of Nafplion) – the co-organiser Association of the project.



Fig. 2: A slapstick between a mean cook and a clumsy cook. Students (left to right): Eleftheria Pappi and Jo Katsoula, *Dangerous Cuisines*, final performance, 2016. Video still.



Fig. 3: A slapstick between a mean cook and a clumsy cook. Students (left to right): Eleftheria Pappi and Jo Katsoula, *Dangerous Cuisines*. Teaser still, 2016.



Fig. 4: *The Sun in the Land of Fairytale*: the end of the performance.
Students (left to right): Myrto Koutli and Christiana Papanastassopoulou.
Unknown photographer.

colourful handmade props made of paper provided the visual world of the play. The prisoners, with the help of the students, fabricated handmade paper boats. These represented the ships that supposedly carried the potatoes from Latin America to Europe, when they were first introduced by the Spanish *conquistadors* in the 16th century. Each one of them was named after a beloved woman in the prisoners' lives that they had left behind.

The performance ended with the reading of the poem 'Ode to French Fries' by Pablo Neruda and a recipe for a potato salad that was especially conceived for the project by the professional *chef de cuisine*, Georgia Koutsoukou. The prisoners were invited to prepare the salad sometime later and share it with the other prisoners as a reminder of the

performance. According to one inmate, this spiritual travel through imagination related to food and traveling, together with the power of theatrical expression was a means of escape from the static life of incarceration.

An expanded scenography of the margins

In both projects, an expanded scenography in the social margins became the means of transformation of spaces and people, activated by the urgency to resist inhumanity and exclusion. It also provided an artistic tool for students that enabled them to show agency and responsibility and to remain active and creative as both citizens and artists.



Fig. 5: Inmates and students participated in theatre workshops and presented the performance *The Journeys of the Potato, from Andes to Tiryns: Legends and Truths*. Instructors: Athena Stourna, Ioanna Lioutsia with the assistance of Dina Kalogeropoulou. The Agricultural Prison of Tiryns, April-July 2022. Photo: Dina Kalogeropoulou.



Fig. 6: Inmates and students at the end of the performance. The Agricultural Prison of Tiryns, 1 July 2022. Photo by the prison's guard.

Béatrice Picon-Vallin (2022: 10) highlights the importance that the notion of repair has taken recently, in theatre, in performance, and elsewhere. Whenever it is impossible for society and politics to offer solutions when damage is done, there can be a corrective action in the form of the care offered by socially-engaged theatre practice in marginal contexts and spaces. With this in mind, the basic approach in both student projects was to inhabit these gaps, and infuse them with imagination. The idea of travel and transformation offered an ephemeral escape into a more beautiful and vivid world. We regarded this artistic and civic engagement as an act of repair.

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