

Romeo and Juliet for Two: Shakespeare During the Financial Crisis in Greece

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Abstract The Greeks have appropriated Shakespeare for a vast array of reasons, including resorting to him in times of need, the recent financial crisis being one such time. In December 2012, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* premiered in the 3rd Low Budget Festival at the Michalis Kakogiannis Foundation. The performance, tellingly titled *Romeo and Juliet for 2*, featuring only two actors impersonating all the characters of the play, offered the obvious benefit of drastically cutting down expenses. At the same time, though, what it lacked in extravagance was compensated for in creativity. The performance combined features from Grotowski's poor theatre and the carnivalesque. The particular production is indicative of a trend towards low budget productions, the need for laughter in the face of adversity, and a trend even if minoritarian, to respond to the seclusion and despair that stem from the crisis with collective interactive ventures and artistic creativity.

Keywords: Greece, financial crisis, Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare, adaptation.

'The miserable have no other medicine // But only hope'.

William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure* (Claudio 3.1)

Shakespeare has been constantly present in Greek theatres since the mid-19th century, when the Greeks first received his works on page and on stage in their own language. They have appropriated him for exigencies ranging from nation-building to linguistic, and from literary to financial, since his symbolic capital was bound to secure a steady flow of paying audiences. It would seem that the Greeks have also resorted to him for inspiration in times of need. A case from the past that readily comes to mind is the staging of *Henry V* by the National Theatre of Athens in 1941 in the midst of World War II to boost patriotic feelings and construct Anglophile sentiments at a time when England was one of the Allied Forces (see Krontiris 41–66). It can come as no surprise then that they turned to him once again during the recent financial crisis.

On 16 December 2012, an experimental adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* premiered in the 3rd Low Budget Festival at the Michalis Kakogiannis Foundation. The performance, tellingly titled *Romeo and Juliet for Two*, featured only two actors playing all the main characters, nineteen altogether. The adaptation was the outcome of the collaboration of director and musician Kostas Gakis with actors Konstantinos Bibis and Athina Moustaka, who identify themselves collectively as the theatrical group *Idea*.

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The practice of actors playing multiple characters is, of course, not unprecedented. We have seen it in Patrick Barlow's 2005 stage adaptation of John Buchan's 1916 novel *The 39 Steps*, in which four actors played the staggering number of one hundred and thirty characters. It is doubtful that the Greek group were influenced by, or even aware of, that performance, but it is highly probable that they were well aware of the very successful staging of Charles Ludlam's *The Mystery of Irma Vep* in Athens in 2011, with two actors, Antonis Loudaros and Gerasimos Genatas, playing all the roles and changing into fifty-seven costumes in the process. And, of course, Kostas Gakis himself had directed and co-performed with the playwright Vassilis Mavrogeorgiou in 2005 in the *Cockroach*, a play in which the two actors played a number of roles with no sets and minimal props and costumes.

What these performances had in common was their low-budget production featuring minimal sets, props, and costumes, the meteoric change of characters played by a very limited number of actors, and the overall jocular tone of the performances. At a time when Greece has been struck hard by the worst financial crisis since WWII, these traits seem invaluable, since large-scale extravagant performances are difficult to support financially and people need to lighten up from the adversities they are facing daily. It cannot be seen as coincidental that out of the 286 performances being staged in Athens during the winter season of 2016, there were forty-one monologues, thirteen stageless theatrical enactments, ten narrativizations, two mimes, three stand-up comedies, and twelve bar performances, all of which had minimal props and casts. But even in other more traditional types of theatrical productions, very few feature large casts of more than five actors (data from Athinorama.gr). On the other hand, the very fact that at a time of such crisis 286 productions are actually being staged in 138 venues in Athens is indicative of the important role that culture plays during critical moments, and how much people turn to art and the theatre in particular for support and inspiration.

SHAKESPEARE DURING THE GREEK FINANCIAL CRISIS

Shakespeare is constantly staged in Greece. During the winter of 2016, in Athens alone, there were nine productions of Shakespeare's plays or adaptations thereof, three *Hamlet*-based productions, a *Twelfth Night* adapted for children, a *Taming of the Shrew*, a *Cymbeline*, re-contextualized in the 1960s, a *Richard II*, a *Richard III*, and *Romeo and Juliet for Two*, a very successful production which is still being staged on and off four years after it first came out.

During the crisis, Shakespeare has been employed as a means to comment on the critical situation in Greece. Georgopoulou ('Hamlet') mentions Elli Papakonstantinou's 2014 production of *Richard II*, which focused on the similarities between the Shakespearean play and the current political situation in the country, and Stella Mari's 2011 production *Hamlet Committed Suicide*, where excerpts from *Hamlet* were employed to comment on the financial crisis in Greece (also see Georgopoulou, 'Hamlet'). Marangoudaki also staged *Hamlet that Punk* (2015), an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which drew analogies between Hamlet's Denmark, Shakespeare's England, the England of punk rock, and the Greece of the financial crisis on the basis that in all these historical contexts there was a pretense of normalcy covering a society that was rotting underneath. In some cases, the choice of play is also indicative of the message. *Richard II* and *Richard III*

are such cases, especially considering that *Richard II* had not been performed on a Greek stage since 1945 (for more on the recent *Richard II* production, see Papakonstantinou). Apart from these productions, though, it would seem that comparatively few productions have directly aimed at addressing the financial crisis (see Georgopoulou).

That said, each new production is informed by the target culture's sociohistorical exigencies. Shakespeare's source text acquires new meaning retrospectively when various theatrical groups and their audiences appropriate his work. In what follows, we will be looking into a particular Shakespeare adaptation, namely *Romeo and Juliet for Two*, in the light of Jerzy Grotowski's analysis on a Poor Theatre and Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque.

Romeo and Juliet for two

Romeo and Juliet for Two was introduced by two actors, one male and one female, portraying the ghosts of Romeo and Juliet (see Figure 1) who were now roaming the world and recounting their ancient story. In that sense, they were dead, but also still among us; they were Elizabethan, as could be attested by the ruffs they were wearing over their all-black outfits, but of the whole world at the same time, since they were telling the story directly to an audience in Athens; they were historical figures, but also in the here and now, very contemporary. The old story is diachronic and transcultural, but can also inform and be informed by the present and the local.

The two actors played nineteen of the play's characters. Since the performance lasted approximately an hour and a half, and there are scenes in the play that demand more than two actors conversing at a time, there were numerous cases in which the two very talented actors got into character within the blink of an eye, merely by donning an accessory, such as a hat (see Figure 2) or a pair of oversized eyes (see Figure 3), or by changing body posture, pitch of voice, and facial expression. This was performatively



Figure 1. Romeo and Juliet's playful ghosts introduce the audience to the story.

very demanding, but at the same time led to all kinds of surprising and comical situations. The unfolding of the play demanded that the parts they played crossed gender divides; thus male actor Bibis, for example, apart from playing the part of Romeo also moonlighted as the Nurse and Lady Capulet (see Figures 3 and 4, respectively), whereas female actor Moustaka doubled as a very macho and street-wise Mercutio (see Figure 5) when she was not portraying the sweet damsel Juliet.

This cross-dressing opened up potential to explore the relation of gender roles and sex to power. In a number of instances, the farcical alternated with the tragic, as in the Nurse's fondling of Juliet, which bordered on the erotic, and the shocking effect that her constant slapping Juliet, supposedly in jest, had on the latter. And, of course, there was the raw, violent outburst of Capulet toward his daughter when she turned down the suitor he chose for her. Probably, the most striking case of gender-crossing



Figure 2. A change of hat signaling a change of character.



Figure 3. Bibis donning a pair of oversized eyes to signify his impersonating Lady Capulet with the help of Moustaka behind him.

meta-commentary was the instance when Bibis-*cum*-the Nurse ‘confused’ his/her own identity in 3.2, baffling Juliet, who in the face of the Nurse suddenly saw her beloved Romeo. The counterbalance to Moustaka’s macho and cool Mercutio was Bibis’ Lady Capulet, who was very feminine with a strong sexuality marked not only by the oversized eyes s/he wore (see [Figure 3](#)), but also by Bibis’ luscious voice, body movements, and posture. His Nurse was also very sexually avid, albeit in an earthy manner (see [Figure 4](#)), characteristic of her lowly social rank, as opposed to Lady Capulet’s upper-class, conceited manner.

Their all-black outfits facilitated the shifts of characters, accentuating the minimal accessories that were characteristic of each hero: a pair of oversized eyes for luscious Lady Capulet, a baseball cap worn backwards for streetwise Mercutio, a suggestive horned hat for Tybalt-*cum*-the Devil highlighted by the strong red light that accompanied his presence, Bibis’ black T-shirt pulled over his head serving as a hump for Juliet’s Nurse. The pitch-black backdrop also made possible the change of settings with the use of minimal props. A white sheet became the Capulet household at the revels, with the actors’ heads popping through cut-outs to mark different characters speaking (see [Figure 6](#)). A door stood in for Father Lawrence’s altar and served as Juliet’s deathbed later. A stepladder and a white umbrella for an awning provided the bare minimum setting for the balcony scene (see [Figure 7](#)), leaving it to the script and the audience’s imagination to concretize the missing pieces. Although the lovers’ passion was consummated in an oversized T-shirt in lieu of a bed (see [Figure 8](#)), their powerful performance made the scene quite convincing.

The very spartan staging foregrounded the role of the text in the performance. According to the group, the script used was the translation of Dionysis Kapsalis, but they also consulted other translations, both in order to have better access to the play and to find the version that would work best for them on stage. Additionally, they added a



Figure 4. Bibis as the nurse with his all black T-shirt thrust over his head to signify her bodily deformity.

few odd lines, mostly in the form of asides and direct addresses to the audience, thereby creating an alienating effect from the tragedy, modernizing the play, promoting a comical effect, and creating a feeling of complicity with the audience. There were a number of allusions to Greek history, its recent deplorable condition, its art, and its mores. For example, at some point, Gakis, who was constantly present somewhere at the far side of the stage providing the sound effects and music of the play with his guitar, commented on the detrimental effect of money on people's lives. In 2.6, when the two lovers got married, they anachronistically sang a wedding song that is typical of traditional Greek weddings and the bride threw her bouquet to the audience, a practice normally seen in modern weddings. Even lines by the classical Greek poetess Sappho were interpolated within Shakespeare's text. All these anachronistic interventions created a distancing effect, in the sense of Brecht's *Verfremdung*, strengthened the comic character of the



Figure 5. The duel scene between Mercutio and Tybalt in 3.1.

production, which at times counterbalanced the strong tragic moments, and modernized the production to make it more meaningful and appealing to a contemporary Greek audience.

The same results were achieved by various other modernizing interventions. Mercutio, for example, was portrayed as a streetwise rapper wearing a baseball cap backwards. When Bibis confused his identity as the Nurse with his identity as Romeo, he very anachronistically shared his concern with the audience that he might be suffering from bipolar disorder by asking whether there was a shrink in the house, an aside that was as hilarious as it was contemporary. Allusions to *Angry Birds* and to *The Matrix* during the duel scene between Tybalt and Mercutio, with the players simulating the slow-motion technique from the rooftop scene, are yet more examples. There was even the usage of a video-camera handled by Bibis, who zoomed in on different parts of Moustakas' face, made up differently to portray three roles simultaneously in 4.1, namely those of Count Paris, Juliet, and Father Lawrence, with Bibis projecting the feed on a screen displaying only the respective portion of Moustaka's face corresponding to the part she was playing at that moment.

The underlying themes that the particular production seemed to be promoting was the undermining of all kinds of stereotypes, essentialisms, hierarchies, and power control on the one hand, and the promotion of love, integrity, and following one's heart in the face of all adversity, a praise to freedom on the other. In the context of not only a financial crisis, but also a social and ethical crisis, the play became more meaningful.

The choice of play cannot be seen as coincidental, either. One can draw direct analogies between the two feuding families of Verona and the polarization of the Greek society, which stemmed from the deepening not only of the financial, but also the socio-political crisis in Greece. The polarization in society has been such that it has been



Figure 6. Masks at the revels at the Capulets' house.

compared to the civil war that followed WWII in Greece. This polarization peaked with the 2015 bailout referendum that split the Greeks between those favoring the YES and those the NO, which was reminiscent of the feud between the Capulets and the Montagues. Of course the analogies are only superficial since in the case of the Greek controversy, the split was much deeper than that of the Veronese families whose basis was rather flimsy. The overall approach of the adaptation was to recount the story of the star-crossed lovers and communicate the message that love (and art) can defeat even the greatest obstacles.

GROTOWSKI'S POOR THEATRE: CREATIVITY AND ETHICS

As already discussed, the frugal staging obviously contributed significantly to cutting down expenses during times of austerity. At the same time, though, apart from the financial benefits that this option offered, it also constituted a conscious artistic decision on the part of the group. In an interview I conducted with the group on 12 January 2015, Gakis characteristically said, 'The play used to be staged with a lot of costumes and many players in the past, but we don't have any sponsors. I feel that this brings out a kind of essence, finesse, a nobler quality than if there were a large cast; just two people with ten hats telling the story.'

This claim reverberates Grotowski's experimentations regarding what he called a Poor Theatre. Despite the fact that the particular adaptation could definitely not be seen as associated with the Poor Theatre *stricto sensu* (Grotowski himself staged a mere four productions in that vein), there were strong elements that reflected the philosophy of Grotowski's approach. What lay at the core of his method was the shift of focus from extravagance in theatrical productions to what was truly theatrical, and the strong relationship between the actors and the audience.

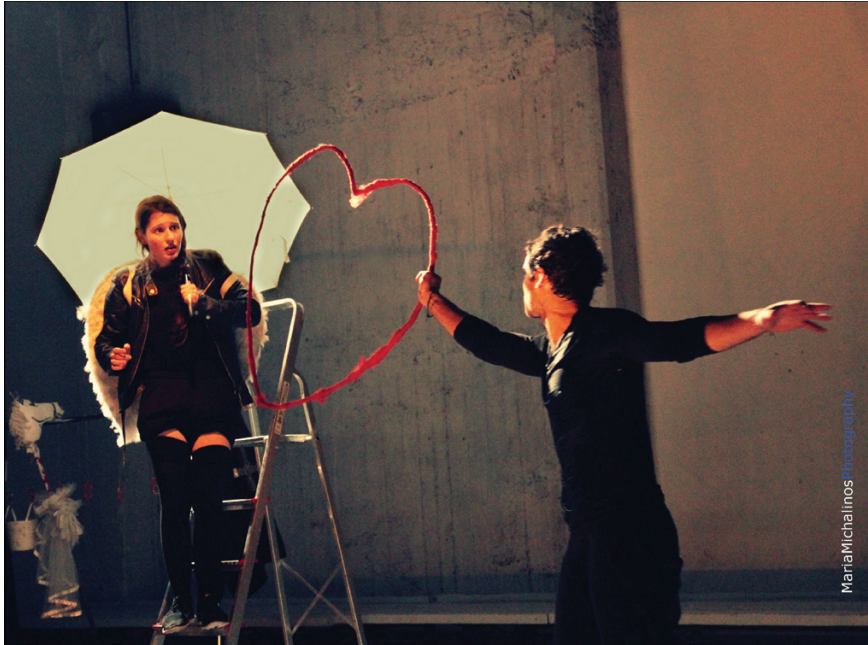


Figure 7. The balcony scene of 2.2 with minimal props; a stepladder, an umbrella for the awning, and Romeo's oversized heart.

In his attempt to investigate the true nature of theatre, Grotowski discarded lighting, makeup, costumes, music, and sets, so that the actors, through their vocal and physical skills, could transform empty spaces and basic items into imaginative realities. In Grotowski's words:

By gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous, we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc. It cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, 'live' communion. This is an ancient theoretical truth, of course, but when rigorously tested in practice it undermines most of our usual ideas about theatre. [...] No matter how much theatre expands and exploits its mechanical resources, it will remain technologically inferior to film and television. Consequently, I propose poverty in theatre. (18–19)

This focus on bodily performativity as opposed to props and technology was at the core of *Romeo and Juliet for Two*. There may have been some elements that would be unacceptable in a Grotowskian production, like the video camera and the music that formed an important part of the production, but the otherwise very frugal staging opened up tremendous potential for experimentation and creativity and led to a strong focus on the performance of the actors, who gave life to an imaginary universe through their bodies and a set of minimal props. Poor in means does not mean poor in quality;



Figure 8. The consummation of the two star-crossed lovers' passion in 3.5. with an oversized T-shirt in lieu of a bed.

quite the contrary, it means rich in creativity since the focus is on bodily performativity instead of on extravagant spectacle. In the words of Peter Brook: the Poor Theatre 'is perhaps the only avant-garde theatre whose poverty is not a drawback, where shortage of money is not an excuse for inadequate means which automatically undermine the experiments' (qtd. in Grotowski 11). Brook is referring, of course, to Grotowski's Poor Theatre, but it is readily applicable to all similar ventures in which art and creativity substitute for a lack of resources.

Grotowski's methods were highly experimental. He completely broke down the distance between actors and audience; indeed, in a number of productions the audience was seated among the actors as physical witnesses to the total act unfolding before them. His theatre was strongly communal, not in the sense that the audience actually participated in the performance, as he thought that that was not possible in modern theatre (see Grotowski in McCaw 196), but in the sense that their presence was a *sine qua non* for the total act to be complete.

The focus of Grotowski's interest was the actors; his ulterior goal was to promote 'not a collection of skills but an eradication of blocks' (17), an 'attempt to eliminate [the actor's] organism's resistance to his psychic process' (16), in other words an attempt to liberate the actors from all the blocks that society had built on them and to enable them to tap on their own creativity through what he described as the *via negativa* (16). To achieve his vision for the theatre, he needed to forge a new kind of actor and to cultivate new interpersonal relations with them, as opposed to imposing his views on them in a hierarchical, authoritative, and authoritarian fashion (McCaw 189–190). Instead of imposing his own approach to acting, he used individualized exercises so that the actors found their own paths to creativity. He was a facilitator rather than a despot.

Cultivating an alternative ethos in the actors through the intense physical, plastic, and vocal training they underwent was indispensable for Grotowski:

This act cannot exist if the actor is more concerned with charm, personal success, applause, and salary than with creation as understood in its highest form. It cannot exist if the actor conditions it according to the size of his part, his place in the performance, the day or kind of audience. (262)

Very much in that spirit, the group *Idea* promoted an alternative kind of ethos. The fact that the group acts as a collective, attributing the *mise en scène* to all three of its members, is definitely part of an alternative ethics that prioritizes the collective over the individualistic, self-interested motives that dominate modern society and especially the arts.

Grotowski had an ambivalent approach to the plays he chose to stage. On the one hand, he had the utmost respect for them and aimed at finding the core ‘myth’; on the other, he wanted to destabilize any apparently universal truths in them and check their validity in the here and now, through what he called a confrontation:

A confrontation is a ‘trying out’, a testing of whatever is a traditional value. A performance which, like an electrical transformer, adjusts our experience to those of past generations (and vice versa), a performance conceived as a combat against traditional and contemporary values (whence ‘transgression’)—this seems to me the only real chance for myth to work in the theatre. An honest renewal can only be found in this double game of values, this attachment and rejection, this revolt and submissiveness. (Grotowski 122)

It is such a confrontation that the group wanted to achieve with all the various interjections, the modernizing allusions, and the attempts to recontextualize—that is, to check what the ancient story might mean for a modern Greek audience, undermining, destabilizing, yet at the same time deeply respecting the story without fossilizing it.

THE BAKHTINIAN CARNIVALESQUE: A POPULARIZED PERFORMANCE WITH A COLLECTIVE SPIRIT

As much as one could see the experimental and creative character as well as the ethos of the Poor Theatre in the production, there were also aspects in which the performance strikingly diverged from it. To begin with, it was not outright hostile to the use of technology. A video camera was indeed used, a medium that was counter to all that the Poor Theatre stood for. Lighting effects were also employed, albeit sparingly. Even more importantly, music played a critical role in the performance. Where the most striking divergence could be found, though, was in the popularized jocular spirit of the particulars of the staging. In contrast to Grotowski’s strong somber approach, this performance was much closer to the playful spirit of the medieval carnival. Unlike more traditional theatrical arrangements of the proscenium type, this production showed great interest in interacting with the audience, turning them from passive spectators into active participants. The medieval carnival was a zone of freedom in which all walks of life participated, the rich and the poor, the young and the old, men and women, people from all faiths and persuasions. In the type of performance exemplified by *Romeo and Juliet for Two*, there may not have been participation of all members of the audience as in the medieval marketplace, but there was a definite attempt to reclaim some of that

participatory feeling of the carnival and to move away from the stilted dramatic performances of the previous century in which the audience had a completely passive role.

Shakespeare's text was an ideal vehicle for that goal, since the carnivalesque elements are already embedded in the text. Bakhtin considered theatre to be inherently monological because it presents only one worldview, as opposed to the novel, in which 'every experience, every thought of a character is internally dialogic, adorned with polemic, filled with struggle, or is on the contrary open to inspiration from outside itself' (Bakhtin, *Problems* 32). Nevertheless, he singled out Shakespeare, after whom 'everything in drama became trivial' (Bakhtin, *Speech Genres* 171, Note 11), precisely because the Bard tapped into 'the diverse genres and forms of speech communication, in the forms of a mighty national culture (primarily carnival forms) that were shaped through millennia, in theater-spectacle genres (mystery plays, farces, and so forth), in plots whose roots go back to prehistoric antiquity, and, finally, in forms of thinking' (Bakhtin, *Speech Genres* 5). In his 'Additions and Changes to Rabelais,' again Bakhtin relates Shakespeare to the carnival tradition, saying that

[...] he could take any plot, from any time and people, could remake any kind of literary work, if only it was at least faintly connected to the main topographic stock of folk images; he actualized that stock; Shakespeare is cosmic, liminal, and topographic; that is why his images—topographic by their nature—can develop such extraordinary force and lifelikeness in the topographic and thoroughly accentuated space of the stage. (Bakhtin, 'Bakhtin' 528)

Apart from Bakhtin's own general acknowledgement that Shakespeare's works are 'a direct legacy of the medieval theater and forms of public spectacles' (Bakhtin, *Speech Genres* 181, Note 11), Knowles also presents an elaborate analysis of how the carnival and the medieval festive culture are paradigmatically expressed in *Romeo and Juliet* by means of three Bakhtinian categories: the body, the bawdy, and the banquet (36). I will only mention in passing his discussion of Romeo's metaphorical 'dewcrowning' as a Petrarchan poet, the popular feast in the revels at the Capulet household with both upper and lower classes involved, the portrayal of the Nurse as typical of the carnivalesque grotesque body, innumerable obscenities, bawdy language and indecent puns, references to the material body lower stratum, and last but not least a very solid discussion of the carnivalesque representation of the cycle of life, with death as birth in the womb of the Earth, depicted in the death of Romeo and Juliet.

Before going on to investigate traces of the carnivalesque in the performance, I would like to cite a comment made by Gakis himself that is Bakhtinian through and through. He said that '[t]he actors tell a story through the bioenergy of their bodies; our performances are strongly gesticulatory; they belong to the *lower body*' (from my interview of the group, emphasis added). Bakhtin discusses the upper and lower parts of the body topographically thus:

Such is the meaning of 'upward' and 'downward' in their cosmic aspect, while in their purely bodily aspect, which is not clearly distinct from the cosmic, the upper part is the face or the head and the lower part is the genital organs, the belly, and the buttocks. These absolute topographical connotations are used by grotesque realism, including medieval parody. Degradation here means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that

swallows up and gives birth at the same time. To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 21)

Apart from the very bodily character of the performance, the strong mixing of genres already present in Shakespeare's text allowed for the comic and the tragic to blend in one complete whole, much as it is with life itself. The farcical elements, though, where exaggerated, bordering on parody at times to a point that would allow us to speak of a generic shift from romantic tragedy to romantic tragicomedy. The episodes with Moustaka as Paris, who was literally and symbolically shortsighted and could not see beyond the tip of his nose in the hunting expedition with his would-be father-in-law, produced a number of ludicrous situations and by extension hearty, liberating laughter among the audience. The comical asides to the audience functioned as distancing interludes offering relief from the tragic parts of the story, engaged the audience in an interactive dialogue, and produced an overall comical effect. The players did not spare themselves from the parody and the ridicule. Before setting off for Father Lawrence's chapel, the would-be groom Romeo was both vain and insecure, asking the audience about his looks in an address that was as comic as it was self-deprecating.

For Bakhtin, the use of heteroglossia, that is the use of various discourses, as well as the use of comic elements and parody, unhinge the official language of the status quo. The serious, official language is static, reproduces monological views, and uncontestedly perpetuates a static view of reality. The comic elements, on the other hand, undermine hierarchy and bring people together. Bakhtin speaks of 'merry fearlessness'; 'total fearlessness,' he says, 'cannot be anything but merry (fear is a constitutive moment of seriousness), while true merriment is incompatible with fear' (Bakhtin, 'Bakhtin' 524). In other words, there is something inherently irreverent, provocative, liberating, and potentially subversive in collective laughter.

To make an image serious means to remove its ambivalence and ambiguousness, its unresolvedness, its readiness to change its meaning, to turn itself inside out, its mystifying carnival essence. (Bakhtin, 'Bakhtin' 526)

The particular production was heteroglossic in the sense that other discourses broke through Shakespeare's text to re-contextualize it in a more distant past (Sappho's poetry), Greece's more recent tradition (the marriage ritual), and today's globalized present (*The Matrix*), in what Kristeva, elaborating on Bakhtin, later described as intertextuality.

Scene 1.5 at the revels in the Capulet mansion had probably the most traces of the carnival, including the banquet, the punning, and, of course, the masked faces of the participants, features which are already present in Shakespeare's text. But the use of a white sheet as a prop out of which the actors' heads popped out as they switched characters was also reminiscent of another form of age-old folk entertainment actually linked with carnivals in Greece, that of the traditional shadow-puppet theatre *Karagiozis*, a spectacle that has its roots during the Ottoman period.

The carnivalesque grotesque body was especially evident in the form of the hunch-backed Nurse, with Bibis pulling his T-shirt over his head to serve as a hump and crossing his eyes to portray her grotesque deformity. Furthermore, her semi-playful lust and violence toward Juliet, as well as her avid sexuality and garrulity, portrayed a very

well-rounded, earthy, popular character. All in all, the swift character changing of the actors of necessity became a vehicle that symbolically portrayed the various ambivalent elements existing in all human beings, reminiscent of Bakhtin's discussion of grotesque realism:

In grotesque realism [...] the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. [...] the body and the bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed this is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable. (Bakhtin, Rabelais 19)

Lady Capulet's oversized eyes were a carnivalesque, exaggerated mask, symbolic of her lusciousness, but also constituted situational irony, given her inability to actually 'see' what was good for her daughter. The oversized T-shirt that stood for the couple's bed was also a larger-than-life element effectively communicating the couple's love.

Despite the strong love story of the star-crossed lovers, a definite carnivalesque feature of Shakespeare's play is the challenging of romantic love by the playwright, as in the bawdy language employed by the Nurse's husband in (2.41–3), the mock-Petrarchan style used by love-struck Romeo for Rosaline in (1.1), and Mercutio's vulgarities in (2.1.37–8). These episodes are extensively discussed by Knowles (43), who says that

The dramatic interplay of such references serves to compromise, if not undermine, the evident partiality of a purely romantic response created by traditions of performance from Garrick to Franco Zeffirelli, in which most of the comedy was cut to emphasize romance and pathos.

In *Romeo and Juliet for Two*, the play's bawdy elements and heavy punning with sexual allusions were retained to some extent, since the performance used Shakespeare's text in Kapsalis' inspired translation. Of course, the fact that the text was seriously truncated led to many of the subplots being excluded, downplaying Shakespeare's mocking of romantic love. The consummation scene was enacted on stage in an artistic, idealized manner. Thus, the performance did not fully challenge the mainstream romantized reading of the story. Apart from the benefit of appealing to broader parts of the audience by doing so, it also promoted the theme of love and art as powerful vehicles of freedom.

Having said that, the group did add their own farcical touch by tampering with the phrase 'You kiss by th' book' (1.5.737). Since they could not make up their minds as to what it was that Shakespeare actually meant by that, they empowered the audience to decide for themselves, having as their vehicle a puzzled Romeo, who kept asking for clarifications: 'Do you mean I kiss well?', 'Do you mean I kiss unoriginally?', and so on, in a kind of hands-on example of a Barthesian writerly text. This not only functioned as an alienating device, but was also very unconventional and produced ample giggles.

Finally, a very carnivalesque touch was the presentation of Tybalt as a devil, a figure that was very popular in medieval morality plays, and even more so the addition of

the two playful ghosts introducing us to the story. They were a version of the fools and clowns that were the heart and soul of the medieval carnival. At the same time, they symbolically portrayed the cycle of life and death. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin discussed death as ‘inseminating mother earth and making her bear fruit once more’ (327). The recounting of the story to the audience by the playful ghosts is precisely an expression of this continuation of life after death; the impregnation of history with the seeds of the past, Bakhtinian dialogism of present texts with classical texts that preceded them in different chronotopes; a glimmer of hope within despair. According to Knowles, in his discussion of death in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, ‘carnival surrenders to tragedy at the close’ (49), ‘[b]ut carnival can never really be defeated. It finds new life in new forms as long as there is comedy’ (58). Laughter is the triumph of life over death, and the playful ghosts of *Romeo and Juliet* are iconic of precisely that, two young lovers defying all power and authority and actually vanquishing it with their sacrifice, which is also a new birth, as their spirits live on.

Apart from the jocular, carnivalesque character discussed above, the particular production clearly attempted to popularize Shakespeare, to appropriate him for the lower social strata from any elite versions of the past. Shakespeare has always been in the middle of a tug-of-war between higher and lower classes in Greece, and this production definitely belongs to the latter. This was not a mummified decontextualized staging, but a very lively re-contextualization of the old text in a different socio-historical environment. The fringe venues in which it was staged can be seen as the modern analogues of the medieval marketplace where the carnival took place. The anti-elitist, anti-commercial manner in which they staged a canonical script by a playwright of Shakespeare’s caliber was nothing short of a playful sacrilege.

The particular, frugal staging was proof that there can be creativity in the face of austerity and offered a convincing alternative to mainstream extravagant spectacles. The performance offered iconoclastic and liberating laughter to the audience, which was prompted to join in the ‘carnival’ through interactive addresses. It may be that after the performance was over everybody went home with nothing having changed, but only after they had sampled the alternative collective spirit of an anti-commercial, popular form of art.

The whole staging was strongly improvisational and interactive with the audience. The improvisation was partly the result of necessity, dictated by the numerous changes of venues in which the adaptation was staged, but it was also a conscious decision to make every performance unique each consecutive night. In one performance, for example, right after the balcony scene, Bibis opened the venue’s doors, which gave direct access to the street outside, and realizing that it had started to rain during the performance, he interspersed a comment naturally in his lines. The interaction with the audience was more than a technique to keep the audience interested; it was meant to engage them in the performance, attempting to break down the detachment of the players from the spectators to make them all participants in the ‘carnival’.

The introductory ‘warming up’ exercises in which the players encouraged the audience to hold the people sitting next to them, especially if they were strangers, were reminiscent not only of one of Bakhtin’s fragmentary comments: ‘Physical contact, the

contact of bodies, as one of the necessary elements of familiarity' (Bakhtin, 'Bakhtin' 524), but also of Grotowski's stated goal:

I am trying to create a theatre of participation, to re-discover factors which characterise the origins of theatre. Place actors and spectators close together, in a new scenic space which embraces the entire room, and you may create a living collaboration. Thanks to physical contact, the spark can cross between them. (ctd. In McCaw 194)

Finally, the overall theme that informed the particular performance, to challenge all hierarchies and power relations in favor of a utopian egalitarian alternative, is definitely carnivalesque in spirit. The lingering ghosts linked the past with the present and offered a glimmer of hope for the future in the face of all adversity. Furthermore, the audience received the subliminal message that tragic things have always happened in the past, but people persevered. So there is hope for a better future. In McCaw's words:

The divisions in Rabelais and His World are categorical: there is the feudal darkness, seriousness and unfreedom of officialdom, that which is elevated and associated with the past, and there is the laughing, familiar, unofficial and popular which looks forward to the future. The marketplace is where the people can mingle shoulder to shoulder, on the same level, and this 'carnavalesque crowd' is 'not merely a crowd', but 'the people as a whole', 'organised in their own way, the way of the people'. It is a place of political and cultural assembly. (54)

RECEPTION

The production was extremely successful, among other reasons thanks to the word of mouth in the social media, the fringe, and online promotion in regional and minor online papers, the enthusiastic reception by critics, and the numerous interviews with the theatrical group. The performance managed to bring in large audiences at times of scarcity: the fringe venues in which it appeared were packed. Apart from the various venues in Athens it appeared in, the performance toured a number of other Greek cities, as well as travelling abroad: to Cyprus in 2013, where it gained a distinction from the Theatrical Organization of Cyprus; to Serbia in 2014, where it received an award at the first World Shakespeare Festival; to Spain in 2016 where it received yet another award at the Almagro Off Theatre Festival, which specializes in theatrical adaptations of canonical plays; and in April 2016 to Portugal, at the Jangada Theatre in Lousada. After *Romeo and Juliet for Two*, the group embarked on another adaptation, this time from classical Greek antiquity, titled *Oedipus' Tree*, and an adaptation of Aristophanes' whole oeuvre titled *Aristophaniad*, which again was strongly carnivalesque in spirit.

GROTOWSKI, BAKHTIN, AND CONTEMPORARY THEATRE: A FEW AFTERTHOUGHTS

The approaches of Grotowski and Bakhtin, elements of which were manifested in *Romeo and Juliet for Two*, seem to me to complement each other in a very productive manner. Grotowski focuses on a new kind of actor and on non-hierarchical relationships within a theatrical group, with an aim at liberating creativity in a total act. But his approach focuses on each individual actor (see McCaw 196) rather than on any participation by the audience, which he considers impossible. Bakhtin, on the other hand,

focuses on dialogism, heteroglossia, and the communal, participatory, utopian spirit of the carnival. Both share a great interest in the body and find knowledge through bodily sensation as more authentic and unmediated (McCaw 12), which in the case of the theatre becomes tangibly expressed.

The actual participatory process in a theatrical production that nurtures human communication can be a vehicle to an alternative, communal kind of experience.

The fact is that when the listener perceives and understands the meaning (the language meaning) of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude towards it. He either agrees or disagrees with it (completely or partially), augments it, applies it, prepares for its execution, and so on. [...] Any understanding of live speech, a live utterance, is inherently responsive, although the degree of this activity varies extremely. Any understanding is imbued with response and necessarily elicits it in one form or another: the listener becomes the speaker. (Bakhtin *Speech Genres* 68)

Bakhtin discussed why it is that ‘great works continue to live in the distant future’ only to reply that they acquire new meaning in their afterlives. ‘We can say that neither Shakespeare himself nor his contemporaries knew that ‘great Shakespeare’ whom we know now. [...] [H]e has grown because of that which actually has been and continues to be found in his works, but which neither he himself nor his contemporaries could consciously perceive and evaluate in the context of the culture of their epoch’ (Bakhtin *Speech Genres* 4). Grotowski, on the other hand, aimed at using the text confrontationally in order to find what it means for a modern audience. In McCaw’s words: ‘Grotowski insisted upon ‘confrontation’. He uses the image of putting on the ‘ill-fitting skin’ of old myths to perceive the relativity of our problems, their connection to the ‘roots,’ and the relativity of the ‘roots’ in the light of today’s experience’ (198–199).

As we have seen, theatre informs and can be informed by previous works and situations. In that sense, this performance is in constant dialogue not only with Shakespeare’s England and Romeo’s Verona, but also with the Greek history and experience that mediates the reading of the play by the theatrical group and the audience. Shakespeare’s symbolic capital offers an excellent opportunity to modern theatrical groups to provide their own reading to the old stories and make them meaningful for modern audiences through their art. The crisis and the lack of state support in the Greek context present obstacles, but also constitute a challenge that enhances creativity and improvisation. The strong focus on the performative aspects of theatre, as well as the relationship between the actors and the audience, can be interpreted in terms of creativity, collectivity, and ethics.

The fact that the financial crisis has constrained extravagance necessarily shifts the weight onto creativity. This creativity and need for artistic expression is also apparent in other art forms. For instance, Karen Van Dyck has just edited an anthology on Greek poetry during the financial crisis, titled *Austerity Measures: The New Greek Poetry*, in which she maps the bloom of poetry during the crisis. The anthology includes an impressive number of young poets who have strived to find ways to express themselves outside the mainstream publishing industry, from Internet blogs to regional and fringe magazines. In the introduction to the collection, Edmund Keeley draws a comparison to the bloom of poetry in the 1930s and then again during the Dictatorship of the Colonels in the

1970s. The new collective ethics is also expressed in other forms of non-commercial and anti-market social interaction, from soup lines to bartering of goods outside the official routes of market economy. The crisis and the failure of old forms of politics and social values has led to the need for a reevaluation of priorities for a number of people, even if only in a minority of them, and to exploration for alternative forms of social interaction outside the limits of market economy.

As perhaps the most collective form of art, theatre can constitute a space that not only entertains, but also raises a series of questions in a collective, interactive manner. As long as the performance lasts, reality is on hold. Within it, alternative values are presented and cultivated. After the performance, the audience returns to the grim reality, but only after having caught a glimpse of a utopian potential alternative. Shakespeare's plays can constitute canvases on which those glimpses are stitched.

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