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Ibsen's Transformations: The performance *Europeana* by Rafika Chawishe

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the music theatre performance *Europeana* by Rafika Chawishe which was staged at the Alternative Stage of the Greek National Opera in 2019. The performance is inspired by Ibsen's play *Little Eyolf* (1894) about a disabled child that is neglected by its parents and loses his life in the sea. In the case of *Europeana*, which was constructed based on multiple interviews from teenage refugees, the main theme is the uncertain life and dreams of young refugees who leave their home and arrive in Greece and other Mediterranean countries. The performance, socially engaged and politically informed, does not use the approach of documentary theatre but chooses a postdramatic aesthetic in order to portray its message. In the article I look into the creative adaptation of Ibsen's play into a modern theatrical saga on teenage migration and nightmarish statelessness. At the same time, I examine the sociopolitical connotations of the performance which touches upon harsh contemporary reality in order to promote the need for inclusion, cultural plurality and social integration in Europe.

Keywords: Refugee Crisis, Community Theatre, Postdramatic Theatre, Minority Theatre, Ibsen.

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1. Introduction

The article at hand is the result of my ongoing scientific research on theater performances that focus on themes of statelessness and minorities. Specifically, the depiction of the refugee crisis in *Europeana* drew my interest because of the political aspect it possesses as well as its postdramatic aesthetics. My study achieves a series of contributions connected to contemporary theatre. Firstly, it continues my examination of Greek theatre performances that showcase the refugee crisis (Nikitas, 2016b) and expands the catalogue of such theatre pieces in Europe (Wilmer, 2018). Secondly, it records and “decodes” a political theatre piece that has been overlooked in current bibliography. According to my findings *Europeana* promotes a counter-hegemonic narrative within the culturally dominant paradigm of western society, a strategy which is often in contemporary political theatre (Aragay, Botham, & Prado-Pérez, 2020, pp. 1-12; Kelleher, 2009, pp. 54-65). Thirdly, the study illustrates the use of postdramatic aesthetics in recent performances in Greece and expands my research on the subject

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(Nikitas, 2016a; Nikitas, 2018) implementing the suitable tools (see Lehmann, 2006). My findings make clear that Chawishe constructs a postdramatic opera. Finally, the study contributes to the bibliography on community theatre (e.g. Van Erven, 2001) and minority theatre (e.g. Gonzalez & Laplace-Claverie, 2012) that has not been implemented systematically in the Greek case. In order to address these multiple research gaps, I utilize the appropriate existing bibliography on contemporary theatre in Europe and apply it in the Greek paradigm. The sections of the article examine the *mise-en-scène* of the performance, the refugee crisis that inspires the performance and the theatre pieces in Greece and Europe with a similar theme, the use of the method of community theatre in order to collect material for the performance, the transformation of Ibsen's *Little Eyolf* within *Europeana*, the aesthetics of a postdramatic opera in the performance and, finally, the aspect of minority theatre and the message for social responsibility that prevail in *Europeana*.

2. Methodology and research questions

The article examines the performance *Europeana* and specifically its thematic, ideological and aesthetic connotations. The research questions posed by the article are the following: How is the dramaturgy constructed and which are the seminal symbols? What is the sociological context of the refugee crisis and which are the performances with similar themes? How is the method of community theatre used in the performance? In what way is Ibsen's play mirrored in *Europeana*, through which common threads? Which are the aesthetic tools that form a postdramatic opera onstage? How does the performance correlate with minority theatre? In terms of methodology, the theoretical framework employed in the critical analysis draws from various sources in order to achieve the hermeneutic framing of the performance. Specifically, the theories of community theatre, postdramatic theatre and minority theatre are all used in various points of the analysis. Additionally, the concepts of esteemed philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze and Paul Virilio are also employed when necessary. It is important to underline that the article aims to bridge the existing research gap on fields such as minority theatre in Greece. This gap includes both a knowledge gap as well as a theoretical gap. These two kinds of gaps are often in research fields that remain largely untapped (Jacobs, 2011, pp. 125-142). For example, although the aspect of statelessness and minorities has been addressed in relation to European and global theatre (e.g. Wilmer, 2018; Gonzalez & Laplace-Claverie, 2012), it has not been explored in detail in Greece. The detection and analysis of performances such as *Europeana* illuminate this field and correspond to a vital desideratum of contemporary theatre in Greece, which is none other than the informed examination of political theatre(s). The article uses extensive bibliography in order to frame the performance in the proper terminology. The analysis is achieved through a multifaceted investigation that combines aesthetic analysis, performance theory and sociological data.

3. A dark tale in a western city

The performance takes place in an imagined playground of some unspecified city of the modern western world. In the opening scene a teenage girl, wearing a pink dress and a red cardigan, is sitting alone at a swing and plays with her phone. She then moves, idle, in some bench on the bare stage and is accompanied by two cold and faceless grownups, possibly her parents. But behind this image of western prosperity and family dynamic of the prevailing western world, a nightmare about the unsafe and fearsome teenage refugees of the Mediterranean Sea is starting to take place. Specifically, through a dimly lighted slide, a series of children wearing orange life vests fall lifeless on the stage, amassing a pile of bodies. The antithesis between the structured secure family and the drowned refugees is more than obvious. During the performance the young western girl starts to wander on stage, in a dreamlike fashion, meeting with the drowned children who appear to be lost souls, without destination or shelter. In this way, she gradually becomes one of the teenage refugees, leaving behind the safety of her family and disappearing in the nameless children who are wearing dark clothes. In a haunting image the crowd of the drowned children finally "devours" the parents of the young girl. In the end of the play, the stage has transformed from a carefree western playground into a purgatorial heterotopia.

Another seminal symbol of this postdramatic piece is a mysterious superhero that appears throughout the quite short, forty-five-minute, performance. This masked figure looms on stage wearing a superman-like costume and a cape and seems to toy, at times, with the teenage refugees by

promising help he does not deliver. His power, however, does not last. He is also destroyed by the enraged crowd at the end of the performance and his costume is shredded into pieces. This hero, inspired by Nietzsche's Übermensch and Marvels' heroes (for the connection of these superhuman figures see: Burke, Gordon & Ndalianis, 2019, pp. 63-78), seems to represent the western system of control and manipulation that tries to overshadow and silence the urgent geopolitical crisis of the teenage refugees. Through these symbolic elements, the atmospheric music and the chorus of teenage boys and girls that sing united while the action takes place *Europeana* stresses more the haunting burden in Europe's collective unconscious due to the drowning of unprotected teenagers rather than the pragmatic details of the refugee crisis. The message of the performance is daunting and quite clear: the western world cannot overlook the tragedies of statelessness and migration in the Mediterranean Sea for long before some poetic justice brings stark consequences to the rest countries of Europe.

4. The refugee crisis on stage

The thematic core of *Europeana* is the refugee crisis in Europe and more specifically the troubled experience of the unaccompanied minors that fled from war zones and hostile environments into the Aegean Sea and Greek islands such as Lesbos. In multiple interviews Chawishe stressed this recurring theme mentioning refugee camps (Bozoni, 2019). Reality becomes the basis for the performance's dramaturgy that draws from recent geopolitical events. After the EU-Turkey agreement in March 2016 Greece became an epicenter of the refugee crisis as more than 60.000 refugees were trapped in the country. Multiple refugee camps as well as shelters were formed across Greece and the greater area of Athens and the unaccompanied minors and refugees that populated them experienced feelings of trauma, loss, insecurity as well as discrimination incidents from the local population (Stathopoulou, 2019, pp. 165-185). Under these circumstances children such as the ones depicted in *Europeana* become a hard-to-survey mass, a lost voice within the flow of changing policies. The refugee crisis became an urgent phenomenon that led to wider changes in the European political landscape deepening political polarization in the West. The crisis led to conflicting responses from EU members and concerns connected to the asylum policy and the state of sovereignty of the countries (Goularas, İpek & Önel, 2019, pp. 7-9). *Europeana*, taking into consideration this political backdrop, touches on the total response of western society to the crisis rather than focusing solely on the Greek reaction to fleeing refugees.

It is important to underline that *Europeana* is one of multiple performances on the migration crisis in Europe during the recent years. Similar events inspired many other theatre performances that focused on refugees using different aesthetic and textual approaches in order to highlight themes of statelessness, asylum and dispossession. In Greece, for example, the performance *Case Farmakonisi or The Justice of the Water* directed by Anestis Azas explored in 2015 a judicial incident between refugees and the coastal police through documentary theatre (Nikitas, 2016b). In 2017 a series of stories written by teenage refugees entitled *Monologues across the Aegean Sea* were published and subsequently performed in various Greek schools. In 2018 the TYA performance *The Journey* directed by Sofia Vgenopoulou investigated on stage the life of refugees using techniques of improvisation (Nikitas, 2020). All these performances used aspects of community theatre in order to examine the personal viewpoint of the refugees and convey their feelings and trepidations to the Greek audience. Across Europe the subject of the refugee crisis was also negotiated extensively through multiple performances in Germany, France and Britain. Writers such as Elfriede Jelinek, performance artists such as Christoph Schlingensiefel and artistic groups such as Théâtre du Soleil and Fluxus brought onstage adaptations of ancient tragedies (e.g. Aeschylus' *The Suppliants*), fictive and non-fiction accounts in order to tackle themes of nomadic subjectivity, transnationalism and asylum (Wilmer, 2018, pp. 1-10).

5. Community theatre

The use of the method of community theatre was decisive in the process of forming the outlook of *Europeana*. Community theatre emphasizes local and personal stories that are transformed through improvisation and then lead to a newfound theatre piece. At the same time this form of theatre includes community residents who take on active roles in the creative process and illuminate the final decisions on the performance (Van Erven, 2001, pp. 1-13). It is also important to point out that

the aim of community theatre is often the implementation of social change in marginalized groups such as the youth, immigrants and ethnic minorities. The performance genres employed vary (e.g. forum theatre, workshops, dance, agitprop, puppetry) while the common goal is performing democracy, challenging structures of authority and empowering the individual (Headicke & Nellhaus, 2001, pp. 1-24). These characteristics reinforce community theatre as radical cultural innovation that promotes sociopolitical engagement towards the achievement of change in specific communities. In a way this form of theatre is an “oppositional performance” that strives for a counterculture that boosts cultural intervention against the dominant social paradigm (Kershaw, 1992, pp. 13-21). In the case of *Europeana* both the inclusive process and the sociopolitical targets of community theatre are used in order to challenge the indifference of the prosperous western society in relation to the cruel ongoing refugee crisis.

Chawishe, an artist and an activist, used extensively the community theatre methodology in order to collect material for her performance. Specifically, three years prior to the final result, she implemented a research visiting Refugee Reception Centers across the Mediterranean in order to collect one hundred and fifty interviews from teenage refugees and examine the experiences of unaccompanied minors. In addition to the collection of the interviews, she also realized theatre workshops with the participation of teenagers of different ethnic background in order to explore aspects of identity and multiculturalism. The real-life material that was gathered from this extensive research informs the fictive onstage presentation of the theme of teenage refugees in Europe through a series of ways. Firstly, selected excerpts of the documented testimonials are projected on a screen during the performance. For example, one of these texts reads “when the war begins everything suddenly changes” and another “I am petrified by the water, I am so afraid of the sea”. Through this fragmentary narration the performance stresses the hopes and fears of the refugees during their time in war zones or travelling in sea. In this way the postdramatic approach is connected to documentary theatre aspects. Secondly, *Europeana* illuminates the experiences of the teenage refugees, collected in the interviews, through the choreography. Instead of describing in words their journey in the sea the performers enact the agony and troubles of the experience using tools of postdramatic aesthetics. Thirdly, the performance stresses the aspect of social integration and cultural pluralism by featuring sixty teenagers coming from different communities and artistic backgrounds who either perform or sing collectively.

6. Ibsen’s transformations

Europeana, which was awarded in 2017 the prestigious Ibsen Award that promotes modern adaptations and reconfigurations of Ibsen’s plays in contemporary contexts, is inspired partly by the play *Little Eyolf*. In the Norwegian’s play Alfred and Rita neglect their handicapped child, Eyolf, and the boy follows some folk enchantress and drowns in the sea. The two parents, who had neglected Eyolf in the past as well, are haunted by guilt and finally decide to dedicate their life to looking after some poor children that live by the sea. This new mission will possibly absolve what happened with their intelligent but partly paralyzed son. Ibsen’s play centers around personal responsibility (it is characteristic that Alfred writes a book entitled “Human Responsibility”) and functions as a kind of moral account of a maladjusted family. At the end of the play Rita finally faces her responsibility to educate and discipline herself (Arestad, 1960, p. 140). The play also includes themes of metamorphosis, mostly through the character of the Rat Wife who leads *little Eyolf* to his drowning in the sea (Weinstein, 1990, p. 293). These aspects add to the play an element that goes beyond the strict realistic approach.

In *Europeana* the parallels with *Little Eyolf* are multiple. Eyolf, a single child, is replaced by the crowd of the teenage refugees who are neglected by society and follow a fantastic superhero (who replaces the Rat Wife) into the sea and drown. Much like Eyolf these unaccompanied minors have no one to turn to. They strive to survive without any guidance before their inevitable demise in a cruel and indifferent western society. These children are not crippled by some physical problem like Eyolf but by their ethnic and economic descent that leads to rejection. In the beginning of the play the three-member family that appears on a bench seems also like a reference to the three-member family of *Little Eyolf*. Even the girl with the red cardigan in the performance that seems safe ends up, just like Eyolf, lost and disoriented. *Europeana* is inspired by the themes and plot of *Little Eyolf* but transforms Ibsen’s play into a much more symbolic and at times surreal performance that speaks through music and

movement, not words. It is also important to point out that personal responsibility is morphed into social responsibility in *Europeana*. The one who needs to be educated is not a parent like Rita but the whole western society who turns a blind eye to the woes of the teenage refugees. Finally, I should mention that the end of *Europeana* is darker than that of *Little Eyolf*. There is no glimpse of instant remorse, just a heavy burden left on the shoulders of Europe and a pending demand for political change.

7. A postdramatic opera

Europeana is a postdramatic opera for contemporary refugee crisis. With the chilling music by Stavros Gasparatos and the touching libretto by Alexandra Zelman-Doring, the performance was presented at the Alternative Stage of the National Opera of Greece under the genre of opera. Instead of choosing the tools of documentary theatre to address this real life subject, the performance uses elements of music theatre combined with a postdramatic aesthetic. The performance strives to create a “scenic poem” that combines music, text, gestures and physicality. This approach is very characteristic of postdramatic theatre and creates both a lyrical and an epic effect as the onstage fragmentation of the actions turns the focus on the performers while also promoting a mixture of visual and performing arts (Lehmann, 2006, pp. 111-113). The performance is constructed by parallel actions that are accompanied by music and projected text in a post-Brechtian approach. For example, the action of refugees in life vests falling down a slide is taking place while the chorus of teenage children sings in tune and fragments of texts are projected on two screens on the opposite sides of the stage. This is clearly a deconstructed opera that calls for the viewers perception to reconstruct it. More than that the political semantics though the emergence of the socio-symbolic law (e.g. via the superhero of the dominant hierarchy) and the intercultural aspect reinforces interpretation over representation. The narrative autopilot is pushed aside as it is often the case in postdramatic theatre (Nikitas, 2016a, p. 83).

Two more postdramatic characteristics are seminal in *Europeana*. The first is the “textscape” of the performance that crates a “theatre of voices” (Lehmann, 2006, pp. 148-149). Instead of a central narrative that is guided by the performers’ voice, this opera is a soundscape of disorienting voices that come from different directions, recorded and live. The sense of disillusionment that is critical in the psyche of teenage minors (and *Eyolf* in Ibsen’s play) is transmitted through the fragmentation and redistribution of voices and sounds. The second characteristic is none other than the use of the postdramatic image of the body. The “decomposition of the human being” and the “self-dramatization of physis” (Lehmann, 2006, pp. 162-163) that are part of the postdramatic aesthetics are evident in this performance as well. Specifically, all physical catastrophes and deaths, from the drowning of the refugees to the onstage destruction of the superhero are translated into metaphorical actions through bodies that embody agony instead of expressing it vocally. The refugees become their mere bodies, physical entities in fear and pain, rather than literal representations. Their childhood emerges as a space of uncertainty. It is also important to point out that *Europeana* abides to a social and political turn and the “performing of urgency” which is not uncommon in contemporary theatre (Malzacher, 2015, pp. 7-21). The political outlook is also a common thread in the use of the postdramatic aesthetics (Jürs-Munby, Caroll & Giles, 2013, pp. 11-30). It is safe to say that *Europeana* strives for a global aesthetic and an ideology that confronts the refugee crisis as something much more than a local Greek problem. The performance that was presented in Europe was constructed in a way that could connect to international audiences.

8. Conclusion

In times of globalization theatre often becomes a space for difficult conversations that do not take place within the dominant discourse of society (Svich, 2003, p. 174). Themes that portray the struggles of minorities become the center of performances that challenge hegemonic western culture while promoting the need for inclusiveness. These theatre pieces, which form the genre of minority theatre, use diverse aesthetics and question the power of the majority. As a result, they dispute what Deleuze calls the “power or despotism of the invariant” (Deleuze, 1997, p. 247). Minority theatre illuminates social concerns that appear marginalized and raises political and cultural questions that argue against the prevailing consensus (Gonzalez & Laplace-Claverie, 2012, pp. x-xv). At the same time,

it explores the construction of identity in response to marginalization (Brasseur & Gonzalez, 2012, pp. ix-xvi). *Europeana*, a performance that addresses the lost voices of unaccompanied minors that fight for their lives in the European refugee crisis is a characteristic example of minority theatre. This theatre piece rejects the narrative teleology of western society that presents modern family structure as a haven for children immersed in consumerism in order to raise awareness for young refugees without food and shelter. The cryptic symbols and the dark omens that populate this musical theatre performance produce a performative manifesto against the stale stability of political correctness.

One of the most characteristic scenes of *Europeana* takes place a few moments before the final curtain. Dozens of dark clothed children form a line and follow the mysterious superhero who plays a flute. Much like the enchanting Rat Wife in *Little Eyolf* the superhero leads the lost children, who represent teenage refugees, into the darkness. However, unlike *Little Eyolf*, the children come back onstage one last time and circle the dominant superhero. Like wandering souls seeking revenge they approach and overpower him. The stage becomes full of small red clothing stripes that come from the torn costume of the superhero. A kind of cruel justice, as *Europeana* seems to insinuate, is at last awarded. The performance ends with this note. As it became clear in my article the performance that I examined does not approach reality in a literal way. At the age of social media and avalanche of news that serve a post-truth society, *Europeana* chooses a different, much more introspective, almost existential, viewpoint. The demand for social and personal responsibility does not lead to an onstage manifesto but a subtle lyrical (yet harsh) depiction of a future looming while Europe averts its eyes from self-inflicted catastrophes. At times when speed leads to the blind emotional synchronization of the masses through technology promoting frantic “dromomaniacs” according to Paul Virilio’s “dromology” (Redhead, 2004, p. 54), *Europeana* demands from the spectator to take, slowly, a step back. It demands a moment of silence and personal thought on the events that haunt the conscience of Europeans.

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