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“Making Space In-Between Cultures”

The experience of working with others

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Figure 1: “The Journey”, a theatrical event, Varkiza beach, Attica 2014

Abstract

The aim of this educational exchange programme is to bring together applied theatre students and drama school students in order to establish ways in which theatre education and theatre as a performing art can be combined to create a new dialogue on form and content – both on a pedagogical and political level. Since theatre educators often lack performing skills and actors often lack pedagogical skills – the means needed to communicate the content of the play to others, the playing/interacting aspect (if necessary) with the audience – the programme focused on:

- How drama students can find new ways to invent content on crucial issues – a great contribution to creative thinking and dramaturgy, and
- How applied theatre students can focus on the performative, acting, expressive methodology that can develop certain skills on stage.

Held annually, this programme aspires to create a pathway for the integration of drama and applied theatre in society so that actors of the future will be more focused on the needs of the community when on stage and theatre educators will have more aesthetically sophisticated tools when working for the community.

Keywords: *theatre education programme, applied theatre, professional acting techniques, community*

Introduction

Theatre as an educational process has been developed and defined in different ways in Greece in recent years, both in theory and in practice. Looking back over these years, there has always been a need for synergy and complementarity between two fields which, although close in their content, do not overlap.

In Greece, many theatre educators have a background in education and may have completed a postgraduate course combining education and theatre. There are no undergraduate degree courses combining education and theatre, only specialised postgraduate degrees in either education or theatre. Similarly, there is no specialisation in drama schools that focuses on theatre education. Few professional theatre educators come from drama schools, meaning they are trained for the stage and not for the classroom. Performances, stage events, dramatisations and staged ideas by amateur actors are usually limited to “sketching the stage event”, lacking professional theatre aesthetics and methexis. On the other hand, actors and directors who create performances for children or young people and talk to young people after the performance may not be aware of the educational approach to performances and the issues affecting young people. The challenge is how to work pedagogically to encourage young audiences to explore ideas and prompt them through appropriate questions to look for possible solutions. In both cases, the training of professionals does not include skills that will form a large part of their future work. Indeed, the educator often lacks theatre techniques and the actor lacks pedagogical skills. Fortunately, in a few cases, this deficit is compensated by using theatre educators to create educational material to accompany a performance.

The cultural youth exchange programme “Making Space In-Between Cultures: A Cultural Exchange Between Drama Students and Applied Theatre Students (2012–2016)” was launched with the aim of bringing together artistic groups from educational organisations of different focus. The programme was adopted by the Drama School of the Athens Conservatoire (<https://www.athensconservatoire.gr>), the Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts (<https://lipa.ac.uk/>) and the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network (<https://theatroedu.gr/>). With no official funding, the Department of Applied Theatre and Community Drama at the Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts (LIPA) partially funded the costs, while on the Greek side everyone’s participation was voluntary and self-funded.

The programme aims to improve the quality of theatre education activities on the one hand and artistic performances for children and young people on the other. At the same time, it explores contemporary material that concerns the communities of young people in the modern world on a social and political level, using the knowledge and skills of students of university departments of applied theatre – “a broad umbrella term, developed in the 1990s to describe ‘a wide range of participatory, socially engaged, often politically inspired, non-traditional theatre practices’ [...], usually conducted in spaces not designed for theatre, with and for populations that would not typically constitute mainstream audiences” (Jackson & Vine, 1993, p. 10) – and drama students.

The structure of the programme: Aims and activities

The programme is focused on ways in which:

- Secondary school pupils can discover and express themselves on issues of concern through a theatre education process and a creative experience.
- Applied theatre students can focus on performance, acting, stage exposure and develop their stage potential.
- Young actors can derive content for the stage from contemporary social and political concerns, with or without the use of plays.
- All participants can discover new uses for theatre.

The various aims of the programme include:

- The actual experience of the stage, acting, dramaturgy and directing, and the experience of creating theatre through the creative imagination of those involved.
- The creative contact between young people from Europe (but also from other countries in special ad hoc meetings), the exchange of cultural, social and political experiences, the search for personal, social or local and wider political issues and problems that concern young people on a global level.

The exchange programme starts from the headquarters of each group and sets objectives for a specific topic on which each group will carry out joint research and preparation. The teams then will meet in one of the two countries. This large group also has the opportunity to meet amateur, school or special interest groups and offer them small workshops designed during the week of this joint meeting. The programme includes:

- Homework for all participants. Classics and other selected texts are distributed and participants

are asked to read, think, create the context, the original idea of the action. The selected texts are largely related to the secondary school curriculum and are intended to encourage participants to create teaching scripts and drama education projects for pupils and non-professionals.

- Theatre workshops led by programme leaders.
- Workshops and masterclasses (talks/lectures) by specialist scientists and artists.
- Lectures by scientific collaborators and academics, who are experts on the theme of the year.
- Joint visits to places of special interest related to the different themes. Attendance at performances and discussion with contributors.
- Creation of site-specific performances, i.e. performances that are designed and performed in specific spaces related to the content of the performances.
- Educational visits to schools and other educational institutions.
- Joint workshops with groups with similar interests (amateur groups, activist groups, school groups, etc.).
- Evening outings: social gatherings with the aim of exchanging cultural and social experiences and recognising the common European culture.

Participants and implementation process

The programme is based on both the educational process and its artistic outcomes. The main participants of the programme are third year students of LIPA's Applied Drama and Community Theatre Department and second year students of the Drama School of the Athens Conservatoire. The main facilitators and designers of the programme are Brendon Burns, director, Georgina Kakoudaki, theatre theorist and director and Iro Potamoussi, theatre teacher and sociologist. The exchange programme is divided into the following phases:

- Mutual acquaintance and interaction between the two dynamic groups consisting of 40–45 people in a meeting of an average duration of seven days with joint workshops by the main facilitators.
- Meetings with students at all levels of education, but also with groups of young adults, focused on each year's central theme. A key feature that has been maintained throughout the years of the programme is that the workshop meeting of the team members is always tested in real conditions, within a school or relevant workplace.

The severe financial crisis that has hit Greece has led to an increased marginalisation of the arts in the educational system, a decline in humanitarian

values and heightened insecurity in the lives of citizens. However, there is space to reverse this situation through the power of theatre, which has the potential to empower young voices. Incorporating it into the school curriculum can provide significant support both in strengthening the educational process and in shaping a better future. For schools and young people, the strengthening of education is linked to specific cultural, social and political choices: on the one hand, the acceptance of values imposed by economic and political pressures, and on the other hand, the search for humanitarian values and freedom that are considered fundamental to the human existence (Giannouli, 2016).

The programme is supported by the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network (TENet-Gr), in terms of providing theoretical support and developing partnerships with schools and other educational organisations involved in social intervention. The first invitation and meeting of the groups took place in the framework of the 7th International Conference "Theatre & Education: Bonds of Solidarity" organised by TENet-Gr. Their contribution was crucial at this point, as they have a large group of facilitators and designers of theatre education projects that have been applied in formal and non-formal education. It is worth referring here to one of the first materials of the TENet-Gr research group in relation to the meeting of theatre teachers and actors on stage (Giannouli & Potamoussi, 2011).

The programme's timeline

Under the general title "Building Bonds of Solidarity" [November 2012, Athens], the group explored the limits of storytelling and the different manifestations of myth on stage. The workshops focused on stage communication, contact, the creation of original stories and different theatrical techniques, the invention of a movement language through non-verbal communication techniques and the management of gesture and human expression. The programme concluded with a presentation entitled "Building Bonds" at the 7th International Conference organised by TENet-GR through edited scenes of improvisation and text.

Inspired by Italo Calvino (2010), the programme was implemented under the title "Mushrooms in the City: Exploring the City I Live in and the One I Would Like to Live in" in 2013. The group explored the ways in which theatre education material can be produced from textbook texts, using dance movement and the narratives and experiences of the city we live in through documentary theatre techniques. The programme ended with a performance walk in the centre of Athens, as a conclusion to the joint workshop,



Figure 2: "Demosion Sema" (Public Cemetery), a street performance, Kerameikos, Athens 2015

entitled "A Walk in Athens – A True Myth in a Site-specific Performance". In the same exchange, the group collaborated with the Art School of Gerakas, and more specifically with the 1st grade of gymnasium (lower secondary school), in the framework of the experimental teaching of literature and held a joint experiential workshop with the contribution of the school's philologist Alexandra Vassilopoulos and the participation of 70 students.

In 2014, the programme, which again focused on the use of school textbooks and the creative assimilation of European literature as material for theatrical experience, continued with the theme "Floating Worlds – The Borders of European Identity: From the Aegean to the Atlantic, Myth and Reality". The workshops were based on three texts with a common theme: the journey, the concept of limits and borders and the search for individual identity. Excerpts from the fourth book of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1999), Rhapsody V of Homer's *Odyssey* (Samara & Topouzis, 2013) and Kafka's "Silence of the Sirens" (2009) were used. The programme concluded with an experiential street performance entitled "The Sea" based on the triptych "I – my destination – myself" on the Varkiza promenade (Figure 1). The theatre group of students and graduates of the General Lyceum (upper secondary school) of Vari par-

ticipated in the programme as part of the International Development for Reconciliation through the Arts (INDRA) project, coordinated by Betty Giannouli and Iro Potamouli.

Under the general title "Public Cemetery – Suppliant or Deceased: An Old Dilemma of the Modern World" (2015), the programme focused on the re-reading of works of ancient Greek literature. The workshops were based on the Funeral Oration by Pericles (Spyropoulos, 1981) [from *The History of the Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides], which is taught in the Greek school, and *The Trojan Women* by Euripides (415 B.C.E./1972) – works that stimulate public debate about the State, its institutions and the position of citizens within it. Participants practised public discourse and rhetoric and explored the responsibilities and rights of citizens in ancient and modern democracy. The team visited a number of schools with smaller groups of participants (5th Gymnasium of Agia Paraskevi, 12th Primary School of Kallithea), as part of "it could be me – it could be you", a project organised by TENet-Gr and the UNHCR. The programme concluded with a promenade performance at Demosion Sema (public cemetery), the place where Pericles is said to have delivered the funeral oration as a tribute to the fallen at the end of the first year of the Peloponnesian War (Figure 2). From the



Figure 3: Guided tour of the ancient cemetery, Dipylon gate, Athens 2015

amphitheatre on the pedestrian street of Ermou (at the Dipylon, the ancient gate/entrance to Athens), a dramatised route was taken through the main streets where the cemeteries of the Peloponnesian War were located, now embedded in buildings, ruins, remains or fenced-off archaeological sites (Figure 3).

In 2016, with the aim of exploring how news informs and shapes, and sometimes misleads, public opinion, the programme, under the title “Headlines”, was based on reading everyday politics, the impact of overwhelming political events on our fast and confusing daily lives and linking today with the function of the messenger in ancient tragedy. The programme took place in Liverpool at a time of economic crisis and questioning of the European idea, just before the 2016 referendum on the UK’s membership of the European Union. The workshops were based on group activities, little theatre and community theatre techniques, and the archetypal relationship of the messenger (the external informer of one’s misfortunes) from ancient tragedy to today’s digital world. The programme concluded with a performance/presentation in the auditorium of the Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts entitled “Yes or No/Remain or Leave, Grexit/Brexit” (Figure 4).

In 2017 and onwards, the programme evolved into more of a workshop project with the aim of bringing groups of students together with groups with special characteristics. Under the title “The Citizen Artist: Focusing on the Political Voice in Times of Uncertainty”, the groups met in alternative spaces in Athens (such as the Myrtillo café/expression space) and addressed issues of identity, social and interpersonal relationships, and youth culture in a time of change.

In 2019, for the 8th meeting of the programme, the student groups collaborated with accommodation facilities for unaccompanied refugee minors in Athens. Under the theme “Youth Solidarity”, they

organised workshops on applied theatre and visits to Home Project facilities hosting unaccompanied refugee minors aged 6–17, where they held workshops with the children and shared experiences through art. There were three meetings over three days in the facilities, which housed young children aged 6–12, girls aged 13–17 and underage mothers and boys aged 13–17. The groups of participants and students evolved with the experience of each visit. This opportunity for people from different countries and cultures to work together with these institutions opened up new horizons. Theatre can also have value and contribute off stage, and it is very important for a future actor to have many different experiences and stimuli.

After a pause in 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic, the programme returned with a purely workshop character, focusing on “Democracy as a Public Good” (2022) and “Hamlet, today” (2023), with an emphasis on the iconic phrase “to be or not to be” and how it is analysed in our current modern experience. The programme ended in 2023 after a total of 10 co-organised projects over 11 years.

Programme timeline

- 2013 “Mushrooms in the City: Exploring the City I Live in and the One I Would Like to Live in”
- 2014 “Floating Worlds – The Borders of European Identity: From the Aegean to the Atlantic, Myth and Reality”
- 2015 “Public Cemetery – Suppliant or Deceased: An Old Dilemma of the Modern World”
- 2016 “Headlines”
- 2017–2018 “The Citizen Artist: Focusing on the Political Voice in Times of Uncertainty”
- 2019–2020 “Youth Solidarity”
- 2022 “Democracy as a Public Good”
- 2023 “Hamlet, Today”



Figure 4: "Headlines" performance, Little Theatre, Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts 2016

By way of epilogue

The aim of this programme is to revitalise artistic theatre groups. For young actors, the aim is to cultivate the political dimension of theatre as a means of direct social intervention and a way of emancipating citizens. On the other hand, to remind theatre educators of the great power of stage experience, of the way in which a story becomes real and multiplies its effect on its audience when its facilitators have stage experience and can be internally consistent on stage. In both cases, however, the motivation to see the reality and the truth is strengthened. This happens when, as Pammenter (2013) puts it, one is concerned "with devising theatre in education (TIE) as an art form that examines, questions and represents the realities of our current human condition and makes new meanings in pursuit of progressive change and positive human development" (p. 83).

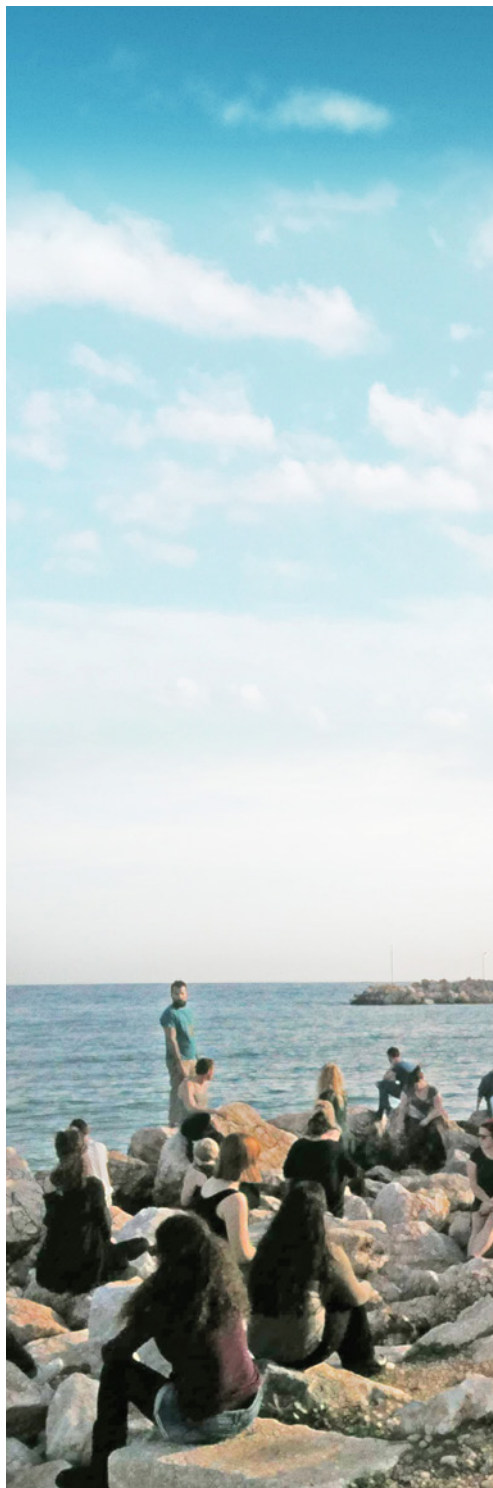
Different social conditions require new forms of interaction and innovative action. Creating theatre with substance is a dialectical process that adapts to specific contexts. Theatre in education, as an artistic means of exploring the human experience and as a tool for social change, always has human values at its core. Its aim is to deepen participants' understanding in order to challenge and change the conditions that limit human existence. The theatrical act with an educational and social dimension provokes, empowers the voices of the artists-teachers and brings

to light experiences that lead to a rethinking of perceptions and attitudes. This process is therefore itself a form of cultural action (Pammenter, 2013).

The workshops created a space that allowed the participants to see the intentions of others beyond themselves, to operate in a multi-prismatic way. The presence of strangers, the socialising dimension of the programme with the opening up of the closed university group to a larger one, created bonds of solidarity through the theatre itself, a simulated experience of the work that all participants, for their part, will be called upon to do in their professional futures.

The key to this shared experience, this openness, lies in the themes raised in the workshops, whether political, literary and inspired by contemporary reality or the timelessness of archetypal questions, which are already part of the students' lived experience. Recognising the differences between them, due to the culture, social and political realities and different backgrounds, but above all being aware of their similarities in terms of how they perceive what is happening and how they feel about what is happening around us, gives one a very high level of motivation about how to make sense of the world we live in.

With this basic philosophy, very close to Freire's pedagogy (1977) and the techniques of a theatre of self-observation such as Brecht's theatre (see



Brecht, 1974), they shaped content and created theatrical practices with aesthetics, elements that quickly united the members of the group and the sub-groups with which they were asked to work. The group as a whole, each time creating a language of theatre but also a language of political and social positioning, found a common voice through the workshops, which was expressed in the open to the public performances on the last day of the meetings; performances with common goals and a

common position on what needs to be shared with society through theatre today in a Europe that is undergoing radical restructuring.

By spending time together and getting to know each other, searching for common cultural material in the intensive time of a week and with many activities outside the strict framework of work, the groups create a small society, a kind of *communitas* as defined by Victor Turner (1969), an intermediate state of transition, in which the participants are isolated from the rest of society and temporarily placed outside the existing social structure. During this phase an ambiguous and playful recombination of all familiar cultural forms takes place and relations of equality and camaraderie develop between the initiates. In the case of the programme, this “defamiliarisation”, where the contents and gestures of the bodies have to be interpreted by another culture, creates a new language. A language of cultural perception in which a group acquires a common code for interpreting the world through similarities and established relationships (Bruner, 1964), through mutual understanding and non-verbal communication, where theatre always proves to be the best channel.

This cultural exchange is an active application of all the theories of experiential co-education, cooperative teaching, the assimilative capacity of education through the arts. But at the same time, it makes use of the techniques of the stage, of the ability to persuade through the stage, to offer meanings to the judgement of the public, to be a *hypokrites* (an actor) in a deep and archetypal sense, where the theatre for the sake of artistic acceptance is annihilated and the stage becomes an arsenal for social dialogue.

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