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**A visit to the our stage festival: Participation, inclusion and sharing at the Bürgerbühne Dresden**

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A VISIT TO THE OUR STAGE FESTIVAL: PARTICIPATION, INCLUSION  
AND SHARING AT THE BÜRGERBÜHNE DRESDEN

*Ioulia Pipinia*

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ABSTRACT: In 2009 Staatsschauspiel Dresden, the state theatre of Saxony, became the first playhouse in Germany to include, in the company's structure and repertoire, a Bürgerbühne, a stage dedicated to documentary and participatory theatre. Within ten years, Dresden's prolific and acclaimed model of a citizens' stage became a thriving and active example of inclusion and participation in theatre arts. In May 2019, Our Stage, the 4th European festival of, and on, citizens' theatre was held in Dresden, offering a full week of performances, seminars, talks, workshops and discussions on various aspects of participatory theatre. The article offers a partial account of the festival and its performances in order to trace recent developments in applied, documentary and participatory theatre; it also tentatively attempts to address the notions of participation, inclusion and sharing in relation to contemporary Greek theatre and its performances.

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In May 2019, Our Stage, the 4th European festival of, and on, citizens' theatre was held in Dresden, offering a full week of performances, seminars, talks, workshops and discussions on various aspects of participatory theatre. The return to participatory art forms in recent times in response to the diversity, complexity and unrest of contemporary societies has once again brought forward issues almost ingrained in theatre practice such as audience contribution, professional acting and community involvement; it has also required us to reflect on their "new" meaning, aesthetic challenges, and political and social outcomes in a changing Europe.

This article is a partial account of the festival and its performances as an example of recent developments and discussions on applied, documentary and participatory theatre; it also tentatively attempts to address notions of participation, inclusion and sharing in relation to contemporary Greek theatre and its performances.

*Dresden Bürgerbühne*<sup>1</sup>

In 2009 the Staatsschauspiel Dresden inaugurated a new project, the Dresdner Bürgerbühne (Citizens' Stage).<sup>2</sup> The state theatre of Saxony was the first playhouse in Germany to purposefully include, in the company's structure and repertoire, a section dedicated to the emerging trends of documentary and participatory theatre. As Miriam Tscholl, artistic director of Dresden Bürgerbühne for ten years and curator of the Our Stage festival, explains, this decision was also "a long-term promise to the city to keep the theatre's doors open to the city's residents".<sup>3</sup> The Bürgerbühne, as a modernised version of a people's theatre, is addressed to inhabitants and local communities as well as artists, theatre companies and institutions. Its launch was not a call to revive earlier artistic forms but to experiment with artistic collaboration and to explore new forms in theatre.

This in-house scene is situated primarily at Kleines Haus, the second and smaller space of the theatre, and operates as a regular production company, staging performances in which theatre practitioners and non-professional actors work together. In just a decade, the Dresden Bürgerbühne has hosted over 900 shows, welcomed the striking number of more than 3,000 non-professional performers, and had 160,000 spectators visiting its productions.<sup>4</sup> Every season the theatre organises and provides the means for five performances, which strictly observe all professional requirements as they are the outcome of

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<sup>1</sup> As of the 2019/2020 season, the name of the Dresden stage got an extra character (a colon) in its title: Bürger:Bühne (B:B). As the new artistic team (Tobias Rausch, Sabrina Bohl, Christiane Lehmann, Wanja Saatkamp) explains on the theatre's official site, the addition suggests "that someone is about to start speaking. In drama, in dialogue, it makes the individual speaker visible. A colon connects and separates, emphasises, arranges and opens up for more detail," Bürger:Bühne website, accessed 4 October 2019, <https://www.staatsschauspiel-dresden.de/buergerbuehne>. For the changes in the Bürgerbühne, see also the printed annual programme, *Staatsschauspiel Dresden 2019/2020*, pp. 105–115.

<sup>2</sup> The history and practices of the Bürgerbühne at the Staatsschauspiel Dresden are discussed extensively in Hajo Kurzenberger and Miriam Tscholl (eds.), *Die Bürgerbühne: Das Dresdner Modell*, Berlin: Alexander, 2014; for a general overview, see the first two introductory chapters: Tscholl, "Die Bürgerbühne Beschreibung eines Modells", pp. 11–22, and Kurzenberger, "Die Bürgerbühne Zur Geschichte und Entwicklung einer partizipatorischen Theaterform", pp. 23–38. For a brief English version, see Tscholl, "Participatory Theatre in Dresden and Europe: Our Stage", September 2018, European Theatre Convention (ETC), accessed 24 September 2019, <https://www.europeantheatre.eu/publication/our-stage-participatory-theatre-in-dresden-and-europe>.

<sup>3</sup> Tscholl, "Participatory Theatre".

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

cooperation, involvement and hard work. The theatre is responsible for the space and time on stage, technical assistance, PR support, necessary workshops or set constructions, and required masks and props. Upon deciding on the group of citizens who will join and the specific theme to be explored, as well as the director of the project, the theatre team also arranges the involvement of other collaborators: playwrights, choreographers, musicians, video artists. Rehearsals are intensive and can go on for months, with members of the projects meeting in the evenings or weekends. With the completion of the preparation, each piece is included in the season programme, as any other production at the Staatsschauspiel, and is presented on stage for as long as participants and an audience are available.

As far as the non-actors are concerned, they come from different backgrounds, religions, ethnicities, professions, gender or class – from every possible group or neighbourhood. The important element here is that the Bürgerbühne is addressed to all citizens and not exclusively to struggling local communities or disregarded and alienated parts of society or the city. It is not the educational or therapeutic results that permeate such an effort. The Bürgerbühne aims for inclusion and participation as a means to create, engage and ponder politically, socially and aesthetically. Therefore, a whole corpus of additional activities and events supplements and contributes to the objectives and work done on, and by, the Bürgerbühne. Theatre clubs,<sup>5</sup> for instance, follow a less strict structure, which provides education on theatre making while emphasising the importance of difference and sharing, promoting liberty, exploration and artistic creation in a vibrant and diverse society. The number of groups is considerably high, and their members come from all ages and social backgrounds.<sup>6</sup> Workshops and projects such as Unart for teenagers – now in its sixth year – are other undertakings organised and supervised by the Bürgerbühne that encourage citizens to bring their own ideas, see them developed professionally and try them on stage. Finally, the Monday Café (Montagscafé), held in the Kleines Haus courtyard and coffee shop, is open to

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<sup>5</sup> For theatre historians, the term “club”, especially after the Berlin Dada, is irrefutably linked to the most militant factions of historical avant-garde. When chosen by the German Dadaists in 1918, the word *club* meant to evoke eighteenth-century revolutionary formations (for example, French Jacobins) and, thus, to accentuate political engagement over, or, as part of, artistic creation; Günter Berghaus, *Theatre, Performance, and the Historical Avant-garde*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 147.

<sup>6</sup> For a list of the Dresden Bürgerbühne clubs and their projects from 2016 to 2019, see “Clubarchiv”, 4 October 2019, <https://www.staatsschauspiel-dresden.de/buergerbuehne/clubs/clubarchiv>. For current clubs, see “B:Clubs and B:Clubs+ 2019/2010”, accessed 7 October 2019, <https://www.staatsschauspiel-dresden.de/buergerbuehne/clubs>.

all residents of the region. With its events, every week it transforms the house into an intercultural hub where “pop culture, subculture, food culture, film/dance/theatre culture” meet and thrive. Hence, unlike the community theatre that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s,<sup>7</sup> this new version of citizens’ theatre does not build on segregation but on merging; it does not privilege amateurism but rather the extensive collaboration of professionals and non-actors; and quite significantly, it is located not on the outskirts but downtown, at the very core of Saxony’s theatrical and cultural establishment. In other words, citizens and their artistic contributions, literally and symbolically, have moved from the periphery to the centre of the metropolis.

Dresden’s prolific and acclaimed model of a citizens’ stage has had a significant impact in Germany as well as Europe. A number of cities and theatres, from Düsseldorf to Mannheim and from Berlin to Karlsruhe, and countries, such as Austria, the Netherlands and Denmark, have followed the initiative to fund and experiment with this polyphonic and collective theatre practice. German theatre in particular endorsed the idea of participatory theatre from an early stage, which was linked to a great extent with the pioneering work of Rimini Protokoll. Since 2002, the Berlin-based group’s so-called “theatre of experts” has revisited and evolved documentary theatre, a form firmly entrenched in German theatre tradition.<sup>8</sup> Rimini Protokoll’s celebrated and highly influential productions did not coincide with the developments in participatory theatre and Bürgerbühnen programmes but were an integral part to their formation and materialisation all over Europe. As Jens Roselt has explained, it was the landscape of German theatre life that changed in the first decade of this century: an innovative genre and its methods stormed the stage and altered theatre dramaturgy, the need for a more active cooperation between professional theatre companies and citizens became pressing, while old institutional hierarchies and boundaries were challenged.<sup>9</sup> Among the most substantial and profound consequences was that the long-established divisions that regulated theatre life, such as the state/municipal theatre vs. independent theatre system, had to be reconsidered. With the economic crisis imminent and new ways of artistic collaboration at hand,

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<sup>7</sup> For a brief look at the “peripheral”, local and amateur character of community theatre, see Eugene van Erven, *Community Theatre: Global Perspectives*, London: Routledge, 2001, pp. 1–3.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Irmer, “A Search for New Realities: Documentary Theatre in Germany”, *TDR: The Drama Review* 50/3 (2006), pp. 16–28. For the German documentary drama of the 1960s, see also Lila Maraka, “Η επίδραση του Γερμανικού Θεάτρου-Ντοκουμέντο της Δεκαετίας του ’60 στη Σύγχρονη Ελληνική Δραματουργία” [The influence of German documentary theatre of the ’60s on contemporary Greek drama], *Σύγκριση* 5 (1993), pp. 33–40.

<sup>9</sup> Jens Roselt, “Rimini Protokoll and Bürgerbühne Theatre: Institutions, Challenges and Continuities”, *Performance Paradigm* 11 (2015), pp. 76–87.

state-subsidised playhouses and “free” theatre companies worked together, exchanging ideas, practices and expertise. In the 2010s, the financial aid from the Doppelpass fund of the Kulturstiftung des Bundes (German Federal Cultural Foundation), which “is specifically designed to support the cooperation of independent theatre groups and established theatre institutions”, was crucial to the consolidation of this process.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, it secured and encouraged a shift that has led German theatre to a prosperous and influential path and to a dominant position within European theatre and performance culture.

### *Our Stage Festival*

The Bürgerbühne conferences and festivals were envisaged as a way to apprehend the developments in citizens’ theatre and to create a community of institutions and practitioners working in the field. The meetings started in 2013 with a Bürgerbühne conference. In 2014 the first festival took place in Dresden. Thirteen groups of actors and non-actors performed, representing various cities and eight different European countries (Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Moldova, the Netherlands, Poland, Switzerland).<sup>11</sup> The event showcased the current trends in participatory theatre and charted the early accomplishments, primarily in central Europe. It also included workshops, lectures and social gatherings. This part of the festival expanded rapidly and markedly in the following years. In 2015 the Bürgerbühne of the Nationaltheater Mannheim organised the festival while in 2017 it was held at Theater Freiburg. The Mannheim National Theatre festival hosted twelve shows: eight from Germany (including one by Rimini Protokoll) and the others from the Netherlands, Switzerland, Denmark and Australia/Belgium.<sup>12</sup> Nine productions from Germany, France, Greece, Nigeria, Spain and Poland were part of the Art of the Cities festival in Freiburg, opening up the event to new countries and companies.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>11</sup> See the festival booklet “1. Bürger Bühnen Festival 2014: Ein deutsch-europäisches Theatertreffen”; see, also, the short official festival video, “Staatsschauspiel Dresden ‘1. Bürger Bühnen Festival 2014’ Kurz-Dokumentation”, YouTube, accessed 10 October 2019, <https://youtu.be/8BUUUreano4>.

<sup>12</sup> See the printed festival programme: “Auftritt Volk. 2. Bürger Bühnen festival: Ein deutsch-europäisches Theatertreffen”; see, also, Jens Roselt’s detailed discussion: “Das Publikum auf der Bühne”, *Nachtkritik.de*, 8. April 2015, accessed 10 October 2019, [https://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=10785](https://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=10785).

<sup>13</sup> See the “Art of the Cities: 3. Internationals Bürger Bühnen festival Theater Freiburg” programme as well as the press coverage in articles such as “Theater für alle: Das Bürger Bühnen festival in Freiburg”, *Südkurier*, 16 May 2017, accessed 10 October 2019,

The 4th festival returned to Dresden and had a similar but broader target, as it was lucidly declared from the very beginning: “Our Stage aims to consolidate the European contacts forged at the previous festivals [...], foster an intensive discussion of forms, content and experience and, in turn, establish a network that promotes the development of participative theatre as a whole.”<sup>14</sup> The spread of the Bürgerbühne concept and activities was to a certain degree pursued by reaching out to students and academia as well as larger theatrical associations. It was precisely this choice that brought the School of Drama of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and its postgraduate students to Dresden to become acquainted directly with citizens’ theatre productions, to participate in the lively forum of the Young Academy, and to reap the benefit of an overall engaging experience.<sup>15</sup> This visit, quite evidently, prompted the intervention at hand.

From 18–25 May, thirteen productions were presented (from Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Scotland, South Africa/Germany and Spain), with the involvement of hundreds of artists and citizens.<sup>16</sup> Our Stage was the most diverse event so far: theatre ensembles from ten different countries participated while many practitioners and over 100 students and teachers from eleven European academies and universities<sup>17</sup> contributed and attended the

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<https://www.suedkurier.de/ueberregional/kultur/Theater-fuer-alle-das-Buergerbuehnenfestival-in-Freiburg;art10399,9256530>, and Jürgen Reuß, “In Freiburg findet das dritte Internationale Bürgerbühnenfestival statt”, *Badische Zeitung*, 12 May 2017, accessed 10 October 2019, <http://bz-ticket.de/das-buergerbuehnenfestival-im-theater-freiburg-und-im-marienbad--136641378.html>. See also Jürgen Reuß’s very limited account in “Wohin führt die Partizipation?”, *Nachtkritik.de*, 25 May 2017, accessed 10 October 2019,

[https://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=14055](https://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=14055).

<sup>14</sup> From the introductory remarks on the festival at “Our Stage: 4. Europäisches Bürgerbühnenfestival”, accessed 10 October 2019,

[https://www.staatsschauspiel-dresden.de/spielplan/a-z/our\\_stage\\_buergerbuehnenfestival](https://www.staatsschauspiel-dresden.de/spielplan/a-z/our_stage_buergerbuehnenfestival).

<sup>15</sup> Six postgraduates of the directing/acting course and two lecturers visited Our Stage for five days (19–24 May): Anthi Dika, Argyrios Kotinopoulos, Christina Ntouka, Evanthia Stefa, Dimitrios Tsesselis, Ioannis Varvaresos, Glykeria Kalaitzi, Ioulia Pipinia.

<sup>16</sup> See the printed programme of the “Our Stage: 4. European Bürgerbühne Festival – Staatsschauspiel Dresden” and a short video of the festival activities at [https://www.staatsschauspiel-dresden.de/festivals/our\\_stage\\_buergerbuehnenfestival/](https://www.staatsschauspiel-dresden.de/festivals/our_stage_buergerbuehnenfestival/) (accessed 1 November 2019). The event followed a bilingual publication (German and English) with informative documents, a selection of lectures and interviews as well as visual material from the festival: Staatsschauspiel Dresden and Miriam Tscholl (eds.), *Our Stage: 4. European Bürgerbühne Festival. 18.–25 May 2019. Dokumentation/Documentation*, Dresden: Staatsschauspiel Dresden, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Participating universities: Academy of Performing Arts Baden-Württemberg; Dortmund University of Applied Sciences; University of Hildesheim; Berlin University of the Arts;

supporting programme of lectures, panel discussions, workshops, talks, meetings and social events. The 2019 festival, furthermore, was under the aegis of the European Theatre Convention (ETC), the network of public theatres in Europe.<sup>18</sup> The two institutions, the ETC and Bürgerbühne Dresden, cooperated in the selection of the productions, the networking and the preparation of an international one-day conference on the different approaches to participatory and socially engaged theatre. Citizens' stage as a model of participatory theatre is among the formats that the ETC included in its four-year Engage programme, sponsored by the Creative Europe budget of the European Union: "ETC aims at introducing the idea of the Bürgerbühne as a new form of creative community outreach via artistic collaboration and as a new artistic business model at a pan-European level."<sup>19</sup>

The Bürgerbühne project thus, after ten years of experience and efforts, has embarked on a bigger journey and great challenges. Expansion and institutionalisation can sometimes come with a price, whether in terms of rules and limitations or dormant hierarchies and hegemonic discourses.<sup>20</sup> Participatory theatre so far, in its many forms and variations, and as professed and already advanced across Europe,<sup>21</sup> thrives on difference, diversity and change and it is this aspect we saw in Dresden. It is rather telling that numerous terms, in several languages, related to citizens' theatre are listed in the inner pages of the front and back cover of the festival documentation:<sup>22</sup> they clearly indicate the

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Braunschweig University of Art; Aristotle University of Thessaloniki; Zurich University of the Arts; Thomas Bernhard Institut, Mozarteum University Salzburg; Lund University–Malmö; University of Theatre and Film Arts, Hungary; Russian State Institute of Performing Arts.

<sup>18</sup> The ETC was founded in 1988, has 40 members from 20 European countries and works towards promoting "European theatre as a vital platform for dialogue, democracy and interaction that responds to, reflects and engages with today's diverse audiences and changing societies"; "About ETC: An Artistic Platform for Creation, Innovation & Collaboration", accessed 10 October 2019, <https://www.europeantheatre.eu/page/about>.

<sup>19</sup> "Our Stage: 4. European Bürgerbühne Festival" programme, p. 93.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, the questions raised by Brigit Eriksson concerning the transformation of cultural institutions, in "Citizen Participation in Arts and Culture: Meanings, Interests, Transformations", *Our Stage. Dokumentation/Documentation*, pp. 120–123. For a broader critical approach to applied theatre and its political and institutional limitations, see Matthias Warstat, Julius Heinicke, Joy Kristin Kalu, Janina Möbius and Natascha Siouzouli, *Theater als Intervention: Politiken ästhetischer Praxis*, Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> An important piece of the festival were the talks and lectures on the forms participatory theatre had taken in different countries, cities and companies; these discussions are partly encapsulated in the texts published under the heading "Our Way" (a section of the festival, too) in *Our Stage: Dokumentation/Documentation*, pp. 149–186.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



origins and orientations of the trend, genre or format, but they also utterly testify its multiplicity and wealth. Terms such as “*teatro comunitario*”, “*Volkstheater*”, “*συλλογικό θέατρο*” (collective theatre), “engaged theatre” or “*théâtre public*” – to offer just five – communicate similar but not identical meanings, advocate many contexts and cultural frameworks and demonstrate how experimentation, constant renegotiation, differentiation and even mixing and bridging are at the core of this theatre, rather than uniformity, assimilation and appropriation.

### *Six Performances*

“(Self-)Empowerment as aesthetic practice” is Roselt’s landmark description of Bürgerbühnen artistic programmes.<sup>23</sup> In all six performances we had the opportunity to attend while at the festival, the dynamic relation between social and political objectives and artistic creation was copiously and resourcefully explored. The productions were not solely devoted to the mingling of professional and non-professionals, to the need real, personal stories to be told and the often-silent voices to be heard; it seemed equally important to invest in how they were told, how the “languages” and distinctive means of theatre formulated and articulated the context in each and every part. In that respect, the productions transcended earlier achievements and, as steady participants of the festival and experts in the field argue, changed formats, accentuated their artistic/theatrical character and enhanced their aesthetics.<sup>24</sup> Below, I shall briefly refer to these six performances, as projections or examples of the subjects discussed and the forms and modes participatory theatre has adopted or developed in response to the Bürgerbühne movement.<sup>25</sup>

The opening performance of the 2019 festival was *The Fan-Man or How to Dress an Elephant* (*Ο άνθρωπος ανεμιστήρας ή πώς να ντύσετε έναν ελέφαντα*), the piece created by En Dynamei Theatre Ensemble and Eleni Efthymiou,<sup>26</sup> as

<sup>23</sup> Roselt, “Das Publikum auf der Bühne”.

<sup>24</sup> Jens Roselt, “A Decade of the Bürgerbühne”, and Christoph Scheurle, “Why? Because We Can! The Bürgerbühne in Search of Aesthetic Answers to Social Questions”, *Our Stage: Dokumentation/Documentation*, pp. 124–136 and 137–141, respectively.

<sup>25</sup> The productions were performed twice during the festival and each had a follow-up discussion (audience talk) on one of the evenings.

<sup>26</sup> The play was performed on 18 and 19 May, at Kleines Haus 1. With Kleio Antonopoulou, Georgios-Zisis Bilionis, Sofia Bletsou, Efterpi Costa, Maria Dachlythra, Chrysoula Gkouma, Alexandros Hatsios, Margarita Kainada, Anna Kalincheva, Maria Koltsida, Theano Konta, Vaggelis Kosmidis, Elias Kuyumtzis, Nikos Kyparissis, Loxandra Lucas, Dimitris Lyras, Thanos Nanasis, Michalis Ntolopoulos, Theano Papavasileiou, Charis Serdari, Christos Sioumis, Athina Sotiroglou, Despoina Triantafyllidi, Danai Tsorlini, Noemi Vasileiadou. Direction and Music: Eleni Efthymiou; Stage Design, Costumes and

the first part of the trilogy *The Normal 'Other'* (*To άλλο το κανονικό*).<sup>27</sup> For the past five years, *The Fan-Man* has been repeatedly performed in Greece, and was unanimously applauded by spectators and theatre critics, for its forwardness, vision and energy.<sup>28</sup> Professional and non-professional performers, with and without so-called disabilities, met on stage to comment and muse on the idea of being different. Songs, poems, autobiographical narratives and excerpts from texts by Xavier Durringer, Nikiforos Vrettakos, Tellos Filis and J.M. Coetzee made for a collage of stories and snapshots, and a production full of music and movement. The show focuses on how language, practices, relations and science define and accommodate a “normal” and secure a standardised route in childhood that relies heavily on dependence, separation and marginalisation. Its various scenes and many parts speak about a life dominated by family, doctors, therapists, a life where abilities, emotions, expectations and instincts become a hindrance and cause for isolation.<sup>29</sup> “Ordinary”, “weird”, “special”, “maladjusted”, “unique” – a vocabulary of prejudices and stereotypes thus alternates with words of inclusion and reflection on the way otherness is constructed and propagated, leaving aside all positive meanings. Aesthetically, the performance diverges entirely from realism, aligning with rather surreal and stylised forms and abstract, or allegorical narrative and images.<sup>30</sup> *The Fan-Man* offers a profound challenge to the notion of normality, helps us to see beyond restrictive frameworks and suggests that participation, as Ulrich Khuon puts it, “never means doing something for somebody, but rather always with somebody”,<sup>31</sup> on, and off, stage.

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Masks: Elisavet Antapassi; Technical Management and Light Design: Richard Anthony; Video: Dimitris Zachos; Production Management: Fotini Tsakiri; Assistant director: Vaggelis Kosmidis; Artistic Direction of the En Dynamei Theatre Ensemble: Eleni Dimopoulou.

<sup>27</sup> The second and third parts are *To 'άλλο σπίτι* (*The "Other" Home*) (2016) and *Ερωτευμένα Άλογα* (*Horse in Love/Absurd Love*) (2018).

<sup>28</sup> A detailed and well-documented presentation of the performance, its history on stage, and press reviews, are available at “*The Fan-Man or How to Dress an Elephant: The Plot*”, accessed 22 October 2019, <http://www.eleniefthymiou.com/fan-man>.

<sup>29</sup> See Nikolaus Merck, “Hohe Form der Selbstimmunisierung”, *Nachtkritik.de*, 19 May 2019, accessed 22 October 2019, [https://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=16790](https://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=16790).

<sup>30</sup> See Christopher Harris, review, “Our Stage: European Bürgerbühne Festival: Day one, Saturday”, 30 May 2019, *TheTheatreTimes.com*, accessed 22 October 2019, <https://thetheatretimes.com/our-stage-european-burgerbuhne-festival-day-one-saturday>.

<sup>31</sup> Ulrich Khuon, “Participation: Demanding, Unavoidable, Transformative”, *Our Stage. Dokumentation/Documentation*, p. 116.

*The Ballad of the Apathetic Son and His Narcissistic Mother*, the fourth production presented,<sup>32</sup> concentrates on Lucy and Raedie, a mother and her teenage son, the two actors, and is by the performance group 21Common, an association of Scottish artists.<sup>33</sup> Parenthood and adolescence, the process of growing up, relationships caught up in mutual rejection and interdependency, “the inherent narcissism that is at the centre of motherhood and how this becomes a burden to the child embarking on adulthood”<sup>34</sup> are some of the topics exposed in the performance. The initial impression is of a personal, direct confession to the audience: the plot seems to follow a rather linear progression, the two characters stand facing the spectators, the set is minimal. However, there is another canvas on which the story unfolds. The fascination with Australian singer Sia that the mother and son share offers a common (back)ground and is the catalyst to unearth and venture into their agonies and resentments, to sing and dance and dress up, to swap clothes and identities, to perform their idol, their dual selves and each other.<sup>35</sup> “It all becomes more multi-layered and [...] more theatrical,” according to Roselt,<sup>36</sup> but genuinely problematic, according to Christopher Harris, who considers the reversing of positions (“professional actors claiming the standard roles: mother and son”) as a breach of the “character-audience” contract that authenticity entails.<sup>37</sup> *The Ballad* is “a people-focused exploration”, in which the social and political investment is of the utmost importance. As Simon Sharkey puts it when discussing participatory forms of theatre in Scotland: “The goal is to get to the heart of a person, community, issue or opportunity and transform lives.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Performed on 19 and 20 May at Kleines Haus 3. With: Lucy Gaizely and Raedie Gaizely-Gardiner. Direction: Lucy Gaizely and Gary Gardiner; Dramaturgy: Deborah Richardson Webb; Light: Michaella Fee; Video: The Untold; Production Management: Deanne Jones; Executive Producer: Louise Irwin; Associate Artists: Ian Johnston and Craig McCorquodale.

<sup>33</sup> On their site the group introduces itself thus: “We are an arts and social action organisation dedicated to using radical arts practice for the benefit of personal and social change”, accessed 24 October 2019, <https://21common.org>.

<sup>34</sup> From the piece description at <https://21common.org/the-ballad> (accessed 24 October 2019).

<sup>35</sup> See Lyn Gardner, “Sia Brings a Mother and Son together at Glasgow’s Startling New Festival”, *The Guardian*, 2 March 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Roselt, “A Decade of the Bürgerbühne”, p. 130.

<sup>37</sup> Christopher Harris, review, “Our Stage: European Bürgerbühne Festival: Day Two, Sunday”, 31 May 2019, *TheTheatreTimes.com*, accessed 24 October 2019 <https://thetheatretimes.com/our-stage-european-burgerbuhne-festival-day-two-sunday>.

<sup>38</sup> Simon Sharkey, “Scotland”, *Our Stage: 4. Dokumentation/Documentation*, p. 170.

An urgent and corrosive social and political problem is the theme of *Addressless: A Vagabond Role Game* by Lifeboat Unit and Stereo Akt,<sup>39</sup> two Hungarian theatre companies that focus on public space and social issues and work in an inclusive and collective way.<sup>40</sup> Every day, two to three people lose their homes in Hungary, the production informs us, because of low income: the minimum wage barely covers the average rent. Homelessness thus becomes unavoidable for deprived people, even when they have a job. This situation is enacted on stage as a board game of strategy and decisions. A homeless activist, a social worker and two actors instruct the audience during the performance about the choices they are expected to make. Spectators are divided in groups, each responsible for a character that has lost, or is about to lose, their rented home; the welfare and life of the character is in the hands of the audience members since questions such as “Are you going to sleep in the shelter tonight or buy a warm meal?” or “Should you pay for your medication and sleep in the street?” determine a characters’ finances and expenses as well as their life expectancy and health. The counterbalance to the sketchy persona of the individuals that each group of viewers speaks and decides for comprises statistics, personal accounts, legislation, economic figures. What the audience is thus being informed about is a life trapped in numbers, bureaucratic paranoia, social exclusion and individual contempt. In *Addressless* the spectators hold a key role in the performance, but the scenarios and the course of action are premeditated and programmed.<sup>41</sup> In this respect, decision making appears to negate participation and

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<sup>39</sup> Performed on 21 and 22 May at Kleines Haus 3. With: Gyula Balog, Mária Kőszegi, Zola Szabó, Réka Szenográdi; Text: Gábor Fábíán and the cast; Direction: Martin Boross; Dramaturgy: Ambrus Ivanyos; Music: István Rimóczi; Stage Design and Costumes: Zita Schnábel; Graphic Design: Luca Szabados; Game Developers: Agnes Tar, László Bass, Bálint Csató, Márton Gosztonyi, Róbert Jakus; Production Manager: Dóra Trifonov; In coproduction with: Shelter Foundation, Budapest Methodological Centre of Social Policy and Its Institutions (BMSZKI); With support from: Budapest Bank for Budapest Foundation, Public Foundation for the Homeless, and Gábor Galács.

<sup>40</sup> See the theatre groups’ webpages at <http://www.mentocsonak.com/p/english-lifeboat-unit.html> and <http://stereoakt.hu/about-us> (accessed 29 October 2019).

<sup>41</sup> See Christopher Harris, review, “Our Stage: European Bürgerbühne Festival: Day Four, Tuesday”, 2 June 2019, *TheTheatreTimes.com*, accessed 29 October 2019, <https://thetheatretimes.com/our-stage-european-burgerbuhne-festival-day-four-tuesday> and Nikolaus Merck, “Zuschauer in der Krise”, *Nachtkritik.de*, 26 May 2019, accessed 20 October 2019, [https://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=16823](https://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=16823); published as “Audiences in Crisis”, *Our Stage: 4. Dokumentation/Documentation*, p. 143; see also Roselt, “A Decade of the Bürgerbühne”, p. 136; and Scheurle, “Why? Because We Can”, pp. 138–139.

involvement; it gives the impression of ceding power and authority to spectators but, in the end, whatever your decisions, the characters' situation will deteriorate. Homelessness in Hungary and in *Addressless* offers little choice and no escape.

The stage of the Festspielhaus Hellerau, the iconic historical location of Émile Jaques-Dalcroze's school of eurhythmics and now home of the European Centre for the Arts, hosted the piece *Every Body Electric*.<sup>42</sup> This astonishing contemporary dance performance received, not at all surprisingly, the festival's audience award. Austrian choreographer Doris Uhlich, after her projects *More than Naked* (2013) and *Ravemachine* (2017) and as a result of her Energetic Icons workshops, embarked, together with professional and non-professional performers with physical disabilities, on an explosive and radical exploration of physical potential, dynamic ability and carnal pleasure. Wheelchairs, prostheses and crutches are understood as extensions of the body and become part of a string of corporal and mechanical movements that fully regulate the rhythm of the performance. Loud rave and techno music, as well as strong lights, envelop the action. The artists move solo or as an ensemble, often at twirling speed, creating highly individual dance styles. They perform in tight clothing or naked, in an empty space, dominating fully the stage with their repetitive movements. In this production "the energetic dancing of the people whose bodies do not conform to the norm questions normative restrictions".<sup>43</sup> Each choreographed sequence time and again defies body limitations and restrictions and contests the determinants of dancing and mobility.<sup>44</sup>

If the Hellerau theatre, a site associated at times with particular (and disturbing) perceptions of the body,<sup>45</sup> provided a thought-provoking discursive

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<sup>42</sup> Performed on 20 and 21 May at Hellerau, Großer Saal. With Yanel Barbeito Delgado, Adil Embaby, Karin Ofenbeck, Thomas Richter, Vera Rosner-Nógel, Katharina Zabransky. Choreography: Doris Uhlich; Dramaturgy: Elisabeth Schack; Sound: Boris Kopeinig; Light and Stage Design: Gerald Pappenberger; Costumes: Zarah Brandl; Production: Marijeta Karlovic Graf and Margot Wehinger; Production Assistance: Theresa Rauter; International Distribution: Something Great; In coproduction with: Tanzquartier Wien, Schauspiel Leipzig and insert (Theaterverein); With support from Kulturabteilung der Stadt Wien.

<sup>43</sup> "Our Stage: 4. European Bürgerbühne Festival" programme, p. 23.

<sup>44</sup> For more on the performance, see Roselt, "A Decade of the Bürgerbühne", pp. 126, 134; Christopher Harris, review, "Our Stage: European Bürgerbühne Festival: Day Three, Monday", 1 June 2019, *TheTheatreTimes.com*, accessed 29 October 2019, <https://thetheatretimes.com/our-stage-european-burgerbuhne-festival-day-three-monday>; Merck, "Audiences in Crisis", p. 145.

<sup>45</sup> Hellerau theatre, the structure that housed Appia's and Dalcroze's proposals and experiments on rhythmic space and movement, and contributed extensively to the emergence of modern dance, was demolished and rebuilt as a police academy in 1938, it was later used by Waffen-SS and became after 1945 a military hospital and barracks for the Soviet army. See Ross Anderson, "Adolphe Appia and the Eurhythmic Promise of Hellerau", in *Bauhaus No*

setting – historically and culturally – for *Every Body Electric*, the timeframe cast a rather fitting but equally stimulating light for *Pending Vote*.<sup>46</sup> The production, created by well-known Catalan director Roger Bernat in 2012 and which has toured many countries, was presented on the eve of the European Parliament elections, when the streets of Dresden, together with the rest of Europe, were covered with political banners and posters. *Pending Vote* turns spectators into protagonists since it transforms the stage into an assembly. Each member of the audience has a digital voting device at the beginning and is requested to participate in a ballot on a number of issues related to the performance (for example, who is entitled to vote) but also to fundamental democratic values and the way parliamentarianism functions. The questions to the audience address current debates within the European Union, concerns about political and social rights, the changes in society brought about by the economic crisis, pressing international problems and disputes in global affairs. The performance, however, goes beyond decision making and participation in a series of plebiscites: “Bernat’s production focuses on discourse as a political instrument in an entertaining and provocative way, creating a partly serious, partly absurd game situation in which we as an audience reach the limits of our tolerance.”<sup>47</sup> Audiences choose their institutional representatives while all the time facing a blackboard on which individual votes and collective results are projected while software develops a script based on the audience’s interactive voting.<sup>48</sup> Choices are analysed and interpreted in order to lead to the grouping of the spectators and a system of collective rather than individual voting. The bleak outcome, when at the end a single person represents the room, “showed the limits of representative

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8: *Movement*, ed. Claudia Perren, Leipzig: Bauhaus Dessau Foundation/Spector Books, 2016, pp. 94–99 and “Hellerau–History”, European Centre for the Arts, accessed 1 November 2019, <https://www.hellerau.org/en/history>.

<sup>46</sup> Performed on 22 and 23 May at Kleines Haus 1. Direction: Roger Bernat; Text: Roberto Fratini; Data Visuals: Mar Canet; Devices and Software: Jaume Nualart; Light Design: Ana Rovira; Sound Design: Juan Cristobal Saavedra; Music: The Sinking of the Titanic by Gavin Bryars, PatchWorks, etc.; Assistance and Technical Direction: Txalo Toloza; Stage Graphic Design: Marie-Klara González; Special Effects: Cube.bz; Production Management and Coordination: Helena Febrés Fraylich; In cooperation with: Centro Dramático Nacional (Madrid), Fundació Teatre Lliure/Festival NEO & Elèctrica Produccions (Barcelona), Manège de Reims-Scène Nationale/Reims Scènes d’Europe, Manège de Mons/CECN, TechnocITé in the Transdigital project supported by the European programme Interreg IV.

<sup>47</sup> “Our Stage: 4. European Bürgerbühne Festival” programme, p. 37.

<sup>48</sup> See the “Programmer’s Notes”, accessed 1 November 2019, <http://rogerbernat.info/en/shows/pending-vote-new-project-2012>. The webpage offers various information on the creation of performance as well as its reception in the countries it was staged.

democracy”.<sup>49</sup> Taking 1960s Forum theatre further, Bernat – who visited Athens in 2015 with his 2008 performance *Public Domain* as part of the Onassis Stegi Fast Forward Festival 2 – dissociates community and participation from idealised milieux, emancipation processes and oppression mechanisms and asks for a theatre of “immersion” in which “democracy is a way of representing reality”.<sup>50</sup>

The last performance we had the chance to attend was *Hillbrowfication*, a joint dance project by Constanza Macras/Dorky Park company and the Hillbrow Theatre in Johannesburg.<sup>51</sup> Twenty-one children and young people from the Hillbrow district, a rough and poor neighbourhood, “create their own universe situated between utopia and dystopia, in which they negotiate and subvert the racism and violence they experience in their everyday lives”.<sup>52</sup> Various dance forms, songs and music styles are mixed on stage in a lively and overwhelming performance. In its many scenes and stories, the performers reveal fears, aspirations, humour and talents, as they resume to “space tales” and search for their “future cities”.<sup>53</sup> From a means of coercion during a fictitious alien attack, dance becomes a weapon against exclusion, xenophobia, otherness. The fragmented and, at times, grotesque universe they create, inspired by Afrofuturistic art, is a comment on the global order but also a path

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<sup>49</sup> Merck, “Audiences in Crisis”, p. 143. See also Christopher Harris, review, “Our Stage: European Bürgerbühne Festival: Day Five, Wednesday”, 2 June 2019, *TheTheatreTimes.com*, accessed 1 November 2019,

<https://thetheatretimes.com/our-stage-european-burgerbuhne-festival-day-five-wednesday>.

<sup>50</sup> See the “User’s manual” for Bernat’s performances, accessed 1 November 2019, <http://rogerbernat.info/en/roger-bernat-4>. See also Roger Bernat and Robert Fratini Serafide, “Seeing Oneself Living”, in *Joined Forces. Audience Participation in Theatre*, ed. Anna R. Burzynska, Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Performed on 23 and 24 May at Kleines Haus 1. By and with Miki Shoji, Emil Bordás, John Sithole, Zibusiso Dube, Bigboy Ndlovu, Nompilo Hadebe, Rendani Dlamini, Karabo Kgate, Tshelang Lebelo, Brandon Magengelele, Jackson Mogotlane, Bongani Mangena, Tisetso Masilo, Vusimuzi Magoro, Amahle Mene, Sandile Mtembo, Thato Ndlovu, Simiso Msimango, Blessing Opoku, Pearl Segwagwa, Ukho Somadlaka, Sakhile Mlalazi, Lwandle Ngubane; Direction: Constanza Macras; Choreography: Constanza Macras and Lisi Estarás; Dramaturgy: Tamara Saphir; Light Design and Technical Direction: Sergio de Carvalho Pessanha; Costumes: Roman Handt; Stage Design: Constanza Macras and Outreach Foundation’s Boitumelo Project; Sound Design: Stephan Wöhrmann; Direction Assistance: Helena Casas and Linda Michael Mkhwanazi; In cooperation with: Outreach Foundation, Hillbrow Theatre Project and Maxim Gorki Theater Berlin; With support from Goethe-Institut and TURN Fonds of the Kulturstiftung des Bundes.

<sup>52</sup> “Our Stage: 4. European Bürgerbühne Festival” programme, p. 41.

<sup>53</sup> The subtitle “A Part of Space Tales, Future Cities” now accompanies the performance title in its forthcoming productions in Germany.

towards belonging, where bridges across cultures and communities are built. *Hillbrowfication*, the only performance from another continent, was heralded as “an important part of the festival because Europe cannot be regarded without its colonial history”.<sup>54</sup> It was also this choice and performance that attracted some serious criticism precisely for perpetuating a misleading and highly questionable concept of postcolonialism.<sup>55</sup>

Notwithstanding objections and disagreements – all in a way part of an interactive event that tends to reclaim engagement in the arts – the performances included in the festival programme charted the highly diverse state of participatory theatre. Besides, five more productions were presented during its course: *Stadium*, by Mohamed El Khatib and Collectif Zirlib (France), a documentary performance on the French football club RC Lens; *A Doll's House*, based on Ibsen's play, and staged in a real living room with three actors and a real couple, by the Danish theatre group Fix & Foxy; *Long Live Regina!* by Self-Theatre (Hungary), on the struggles and adversity faced by Roma women and mothers in their encounters with the social system; *Invited*, by Seppe Baeyens/Ultima Vez (Belgium), a dance performance in which the spectators become actors and co-choreographers; and *Der Hamiltoncomplex*, by Lies Pauwels and Schauspielhaus Bochum (Germany), on the transition from childhood to adulthood. Finally, there were two side performances from Germany that were staged only once: *The Country I do not Know* (Georg Genoux), on the refusal of an area's residents to participate in a production, and *I Am a Muslim Women – Any Questions?* (Bürgerbühne), focusing on how gender, religion and individual freedom constructs the lives of Muslim women in Germany.

Citizens' stages, then, in their plurality and vitality, even in their shortcomings, as Our Stage exhibited, attempt to respond to the crisis of representation and legitimation, to open up participation to everyone, to create and try new possibilities for inclusion in theatre and society, and to experiment with art forms, genres and means. What appears to be a defining element here is that the plays and productions we saw, together with their emphasis on the political, social or individual, appeal for a version of participatory theatre where artistic means do not primarily cater for educational purposes or prioritise forcefully between the social and the aesthetic. Every performance, chosen on its own merits to fit in a celebratory and encompassing occasion of a festival, functioned as an exercise – to copy and reframe Thompson and Schechner's

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<sup>54</sup> “Our Stage: 4. European Bürgerbühne Festival” programme, p. 41

<sup>55</sup> For the Brussels-based dramaturge Tunde Adefioye's intervention at the opening of the ETC Conference, see Merck, “Audiences in Crisis”, pp. 144–145.



words in discussing social theatre – in “interaction [that] does not pretend an easy balance but exists as a continually renegotiated flux between the different fields” and disciplines surrounding participatory practices and forms.<sup>56</sup>

### *Greek Theatre*

Contemporary Greek theatre has shown a keen interest in documentary theatre, from its former versions to its current forms.<sup>57</sup> Zoe Ververopoulou, who has meticulously studied its new trends and impact on the modern Greek stage, has traced its recent techniques and practices, in a number of dramatic texts and performances, written and presented in this decade, often in response to the growing social unrest that started haunting Greek society early in the new millennium.<sup>58</sup> This development is, for Greek theatre too, directly linked to Rimini Protokoll’s productions but also to the advent of a new generation of theatre artists, working primarily in Athens and Thessaloniki.

Rimini Protokoll’s *Prometheus in Athens (Ο Προμηθέας στην Αθήνα)*, which put 103 inhabitants of the Greek capital on stage, was a groundbreaking exemplar of participatory theatre when it performed in July 2010 at the Odeon

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<sup>56</sup> James Thompson and Richard Schechner, “Why ‘Social Theatre?’”, *TDR* 48/3 (2004), p. 13. For a discussion of the tensions between participation and aesthetics, see Wolfgang Sting, “Ästhetische Praxis des Theaters als Intervention, Partizipation oder einfach nur ästhetische Erfahrung?”, 2017, *Kulturelle Bildung Online*, accessed 7 November 2019, <https://www.kubi-online.de/index.php/artikel/aesthetische-praxis-des-theaters-intervention-partizipation-oder-einfach-nur-aesthetische>.

<sup>57</sup> For earlier versions of documentary theatre in Greece, see Gregorios Ioannides, “Το Θέατρο-Ντοκουμέντο και οι σχέσεις του με το πρωτοποριακό ρεύμα της μεταπολεμικής ελληνικής σκηνή” [The relations of the documentary theatre with the Greek avant-garde postwar stage], in *Θέατρο και Δημοκρατία: Πρακτικά Ε΄ Πανελληνίου Θεατρολογικού Συνεδρίου* [Theatre and democracy: proceedings of the fifth Panhellenic Conference on Theatre Studies], vol. 1, ed. Alexia Altouva and Kaiti Diamantakou, Athens: National and Kapodistrian University of Athens – Department of Theatre Studies, 2018, pp. 563–576.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Zoe Ververopoulou, “Θέατρο, πραγματικότητα, επικαιρότητα: η σύγχρονη σκηνή ως ΜΜΕ” [Theatre, reality, timeliness: mediatic aspects of the contemporary scene], in *Σκηνική πράξη στο μεταπολεμικό θέατρο: συνέχειες και ρήξεις. Διεθνές επιστημονικό συνέδριο αφιερωμένο στον Νικηφόρο Παπανδρέου* [Performance in post-war theatre: continuities and discontinuities. International conference in honour of Nikiforos Papandreu], ed. Andreas Dimitriadis, Ioulia Pipinia and Anna Stavropoulou, Thessaloniki: AUTh Press, 2014, pp. 423–434; Ververopoulou, “Διαδικασίες και δοκιμές πολιτότητας στο νέο θέατρο-ντοκουμέντο” [Exploring issues of citizenship in new documentary theatre], in Altouva and Diamantakou, *Θέατρο και Δημοκρατία* [Theatre and democracy], vol. 1, pp. 167–176.

of Herodes Atticus. Helgard Haug and Daniel Wetzel revisited the classical myth and Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, imprinted an image of the city's population in the group of non-actors involved, and built the performance's dramaturgy on the conventions of Greek tragedy to address issues underpinned by the ancient narratives but relevant to contemporary concerns, such as rebellion and sacrifice, resistance to power, freedom, social justice and ethics.<sup>59</sup> *Prometheus in Athens*, as Margherita Laera argues, "engineered mechanisms for audience participation within a self-defining community ritual, playing with the notions of social identity, democracy and representation".<sup>60</sup>

This emblematic performance triggered a series of productions in the current decade by young performers, directors and dramaturges: Anestis Azas, Prodromos Tsinikoris, Korina Vasiliadou and Charis Pechlivanidis (Influx), Eleni Efthymiou and Georgia Mavragani are among the theatre artists who have tested and explored the modes of reality theatre, as proposed by Rimini Protokoll.<sup>61</sup> Needless to say, the deepening of the economic crisis, the political and social turmoil, the violent clashes in the streets and the overwhelming guilt and mistrust that infiltrated public life soon after played a pivotal role in the quest for a new paradigm in arts and beyond: "Overnight a whole nation entered the 'real world' via a shocking crisis which created a rupture between the individual and the collective perception of the nation and its ideologies."<sup>62</sup>

Azas and Tsinikoris are undeniably the principal advocates of the genre.<sup>63</sup> They worked with Rimini Protokoll on *Prometheus*, produced a substantial

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<sup>59</sup> See Marissia Fragkou, "We are Athens': Precarious Citizenship in Rimini Protokoll's *Prometheus in Athens*", in *Performances of Capitalism, Crises and Resistance*, ed. Marilena Zaroulia and Philip Hager, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 171–192.

<sup>60</sup> Margherita Laera, "Reaching Athens: Performing Participation and Community in Rimini Protokoll's *Prometheus in Athens*", *Performance Research* 16/4 (2011), p. 50.

<sup>61</sup> Zoe Ververopoulou, "Από την πράξη στη θεωρία: Μια συζήτηση για το νέο θέατρο-ντοκουμέντο" [From practice to theory: a discussion on new documentary theatre], *Σκηνή* 8 (2016), pp. 1–17; Natascha Siouzouli, "Mettre la réalité en scène: Performances documentaires en Grèce", *Théâtre/Public* 222 (2016), pp. 92–96. See also Evaggelia Stamati, "Το Θέατρο-Ντοκουμέντο ως θεατρικό είδος: Το Θέατρο-Ντοκουμέντο ως εκπαιδευτικό εργαλείο" [Documentary theatre as a theatrical genre: documentary theatre as an education tool], MA thesis, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 2019, pp. 30–40.

<sup>62</sup> Savas Patsalidis and Anna Stavrakopoulou, "Introduction: From the Years of Utopia to the Years of Dystopia", *Gamma* 22/2 (2014), p. 8.

<sup>63</sup> See Ververopoulou, "Από την πράξη στη θεωρία: Μια συζήτηση για το νέο θέατρο-ντοκουμέντο" [From practice to theory: a discussion on new documentary theatre]; Anestis Azas, Prodromos Tsinikoris and Philip Hager, "Shifting the gaze': Anestis Azas and Prodromos Tsinikoris in Conversation with Philip Hager", *Journal of Greek Media and*

number of documentary theatre projects in Greece and Europe and endeavoured, as the directors of the Experimental Stage (-1) of the National Theatre in Athens from 2015 to 2019, to promote versions of engaged theatre in the country's main playhouse. Azas and Tsinikoris' *Clean City* (*Καθαρή πόλη*) is probably their most renowned work and the first performance from Greece to be included in a Bürgerbühne festival (Nationaltheater Mannheim, 2017). Part of the Europoly project,<sup>64</sup> it focused on the lives of immigrant cleaners in Greece in order to subvert stereotypes through the stories and testimonies of five women from different countries and to discuss "the historical, philosophical and political dimension of the concept of cleanliness, a term that was at the core of racist propaganda and led to the ideology of a pure race".<sup>65</sup>

Azas and Tsinikoris' performances concentrate on political and social issues such as the privatisation of public services (*A Journey by Train/Ταξίδι με τρένο*, 2011), the discontinuities in national narratives and the forging of unified traditions (*Epidaurus: A Documentary/Επίδαυρος: Ένα ντοκυμαντέρ*, 2012), immigration (*Telemachus/Τηλέμαχος: I Stay or Should I Go?*, 2013), refugees and the perilous crossing to Europe (*Case Farmakonisi or The Right of Water/Υπόθεση Φαρμακονήσι ή το δίκαιο του νερού*, 2015). A controversial gold mining plan and the tensions it brought to local communities are discussed in Vasiliadou and Pechlivanidis' *Min(d)ing Ibsen: An Enemy of the People meets the People* (*Ορυχείο Ίβσεν: Ένας εχθρός του λαού συναντάει τον λαό*, 2014), a project with actors and non-actors that was performed at Thessaloniki Town Hall and awarded with an International Ibsen Scholarship. In 2018, the Influx Artist Collective aimed at social awareness and inclusion around sight and blindness with their interactive performance *Blind Date*. The event asked from the sightless artists and the audience to encroach on conventional theatre norms and to disregard ableist constraints. In this respect it borders with Efthymiou's work with En Dynamei, which we encountered earlier, as they both suggest and provoke new ways of looking at body, disability, senses, space, spectatorship, and identity. Mavragani often resorts to devised theatre techniques, but she

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*Culture* 3/2 (2017), pp. 259–272. Azas participated also in the panel discussion of the ETC International Conference in Dresden (24 May 2019, Residenzschloss).

<sup>64</sup> Europoly is a European theatre and cinema project run and funded by the Goethe-Institut in collaboration with the Munich Kammerspiele, the Onassis Cultural Centre, the Sirenos International Theatre Festival in Vilnius, the Teatro Maria Matos in Lisbon and the Tiger Fringe Festival in Dublin.

<sup>65</sup> From the description of the performance at:  
<https://www.onassis.org/whats-on/clean-city> and  
<https://www.n-t.gr/en/events/oldevents/thecleancity> [accessed 15 November 2019].

also adopts many practices attributed to documentary and participative forms: archival research, a narrative based on personal stories and original material, the cooperation of professionals and non-professionals. In the performances she directed, such as *Not Innocent Any More* (Όχι αθώως πια, 2015), *Old Age: A Choral Ode* (Το γήρας: Ένα χορικό, 2015) and *First-hand: A Performance on Tobacco Workers* (Από πρώτο χέρι: Μια παράσταση για τα καπνά, 2016), the political is interweaved with the personal and local history denotes collective memory. The production *In Spite of Everything: Nine Cancer Survivors Share Their Experiences* (Παρ' όλα αυτά: Εννέα μαρτυρίες γυναικών για τον καρκίνο, 2018), furthermore, approaches individual trauma and subjective experiences as a way to enable vicarious participation in the suffering of another.

This short list of performances and artists exploring documentary and social theatre practices is far from complete or extensive. It merely delineates the shift in the contemporary Greek stage towards participation and inclusion, and the yearning for a new mode of representation which will exceed long-established oppositions between viewing and acting that, as Jacques Rancière underpinned, “embodied allegories of inequality” and “belong to the structure of domination and subjection”.<sup>66</sup> This shift is also fully aligned with an overall change in the Greek theatrical landscape amid the crisis, covering all aspects of theatrical activity: dramatic writing, theatre and performance practices, the formation and economics of theatre companies, the policies and role of cultural institutions.<sup>67</sup> This is an era during which Greek theatre seemed to thrive in numbers, and to pursue alternative and experimental ways to cope with transition and a shattered reality. In the attempt to envisage and understand rupture, precariousness and constant dissuasion, it appeared to diversify, cross borders and reach out to the demoted and the outsider, invest in collaborative creation, dismantle artistic boundaries, ask again for whom are theatre and art meant, and reflect on the aesthetics of sharing.

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<sup>66</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott, London: Verso, 2009, pp. 12–13.

<sup>67</sup> See, among others, the special issues on Greek theatre of, and during, the crisis: “The Geographies of Contemporary Greek Theatre: About Utopias, Dystopias and Heterotopias”, ed. Savas Patsalidis and Anna Stavrakopoulou, *Gramma* 22/2 (2014); “Scènes en transition – Balkans et Grèce”, ed. Katia Arfara, *Théâtre/Public*, 222 (2016); “Dramaturgies of Change: Greek Theatre Now”, ed. Philip Hager and Marissia Fragkou, *Journal of Greek Media and Culture* 3/2 (2017).