

Pantelis Flatsousis, Panayiota Konstantinakou

Thebes – a Global Civil War

In Between the Local and the Global, the Contemporary and the Eternal

ABSTRACT The text discusses briefly the creation of the performance *Thebes – a Global Civil War*, a contemporary rewriting of *Seven Against Thebes* by Aeschylus performed in the Little Theatre of Ancient Epidaurus (Athens Epidaurus Festival 2023 / Contemporary Ancients cycle) and still on tour.

KEYWORDS *Seven Against Thebes* by Aeschylus, Civil war, Documentary theatre, *Verbatim theatre*, Theatre of experts.

1. From Thebes to Epidaurus: Setting the Frame

The performance *Thebes – a Global Civil War*, which had its opening night on July 21st, 2023, in the Little Theatre of Ancient Epidaurus, was produced within the frame of Athens Epidaurus Festival 2023 and specifically in the Contemporary Ancients cycle (launched in 2021)¹, which includes exclusively rewritings of the ancient Greek tragedies in an attempt to explore the multiple relationships between ancient myths and contemporary identities. For our performance we opted for a rewriting of *Seven Against Thebes* by Aeschylus. In Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, a man embarks on a military campaign against his brother and his native city. Ultimately, both men die, killing each other. The war may not be exactly civil; it is most certainly fratricidal though. As the intention of the dramaturgy team (Pantelis Flatsousis, Panayiota Konstantinakou, Ioanna Lioutsia) was to reflect on today's historical circumstances, we decided to build our own rewriting of *Seven Against Thebes* around the question: in our times, where the local and the global meet, could the bleak possibility of a World War III look like a global civil war?

2. Developing Themes and Concept

What kind of war can be identified as a civil one? Who can talk about it and

¹ URL https://aefestival.gr/festival_events/thiva-a-global-civil-war/?lang=en

how? How many conflictual narratives exist in such historical circumstances and in what ways do they evolve through time?

It is true that civil wars seem to be the most political ones as the foundation of human coexistence in societies lies on civil wars, as Aeschylus' tragedy argues. It seems that it is exactly within this painful and bloody juncture, that the bonds of brotherhood are clarified. And it is precisely the mutual murder of the two brothers, in the work of Aeschylus, that becomes the foundation stone of the political body of the city. As Hannah Arendt notes, on the occasion of the murder of Abel by Cain and Remus by Romulus, «the tale spoke clearly: whatever brotherhood human beings may be capable of has grown out of fratricide, whatever political organization men may have achieved has its origin in crime». Or as David Armitage states «politics itself has always been a form of civil war».

Our intention was to emphasize the political aspect of civil wars, having always in mind that civil wars are most commonly points of global conflicts either directly or by proxies. Or the other way round: global conflicts can be seen as civil wars, as confrontations among different ideologies on a global scale. Wanting to go further into this direction we used as our theoretical tools, writings mainly by Enzo Traverso and David Armitage.

Having these ideas in mind we chose four different countries which in the recent or more distant past have gone through conflicts that can be said that they bore the characteristics of civil war, as the origin countries of the four actors and actresses that would be casted in the performance. After interviewing numerous professional actors and actresses – a procedure which was extremely interesting – our cast finally comprised Racha Baroud from Lebanon, Vedrana Bozinovic from Bosnia/Herzegovina, Albertine Itela from Democratic Republic of Congo and Giorgos Kritharas² from Greece. As it is easily understood, in order to overcome the communication difficulties that could arise from such a multilingual cast, the language of the rehearsals was the English language, as the current *lingua franca*.

All four actors and actresses from different countries during the performance shared their own stories and also the stories of others gathered through field research and thus they were transformed into narrators/mediators between the local and the global, the contemporary and the eternal. Although we included conflictual narratives from specific occasions, it is true that yet we have mostly

² Replaced by Giorgos Paterakis for the performances in Festival delle Colline Torinesi, ULR <https://www.fondazioneitpe.it/festival/thebes-a-global-civil-war/>



Fig. 1. Under Seige. Copyright: Konstantinos Zilos.

Fig. 2. Racha Baroud, Giorgos Kritharas. Copyright: Konstantinos Zilos.





Fig. 3. Giorgos Kritharas. Copyright: Konstantinos Zilos.

Fig. 4. Racha Baroud, Vedrana Bozinovic, Giorgos Kritharas. Copyright: Konstantinos Zilos.

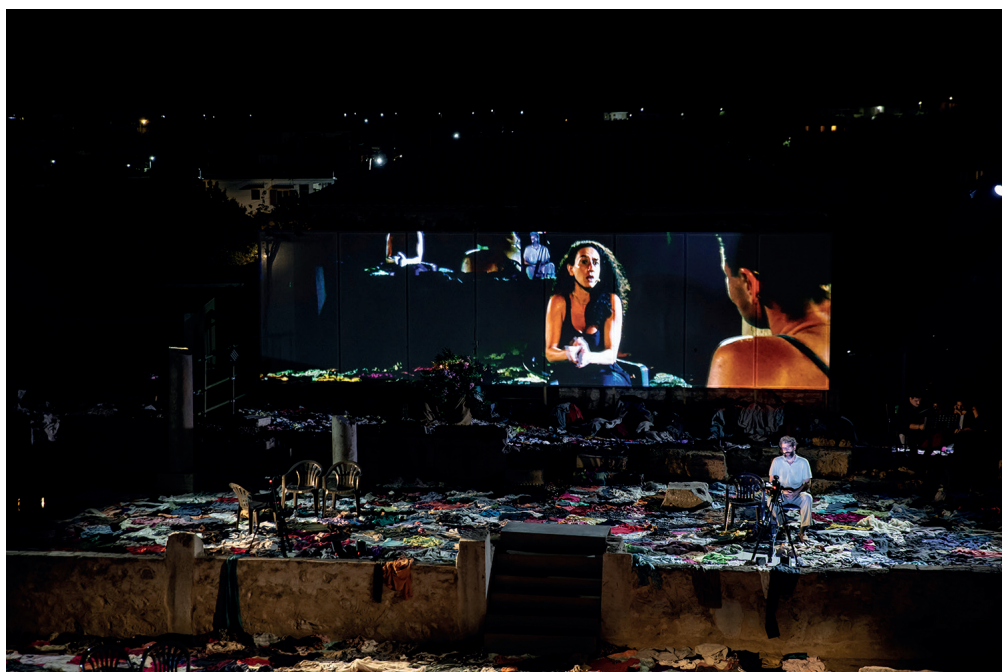




Fig. 5. Albertine Itela. Copyright: Konstantinos Zilos.

chosen people who were collectively on the defending side, in order to raise the question of “what war is a fair war?”.

“Which processes of memory are being activated when entire societies are being faced with enormous collective and unhealed personal traumas of civil war?” “Can we narrate them on stage, using the ancient myth as a springboard in order to create a new universal narrative?” During our rehearsals – but also during our field research period – we were constantly facing those questions. By putting particular emphasis on interviews of persons who have experienced in the past such conflicts in order to create our text, we aimed to explore the reality of civil war through its impact on what is, arguably, its most sensitive aspect: individual memory; that aspect in which individual and collective identities interact to such an extent that they can be viewed as “geopolitical identities”.

However, as we reflected on an almost dystopian past, present and future perhaps, a bond of common universal citizenship and fraternity, capable of seeking a way out of today’s global inequalities, was becoming apparent to us. Might it be that out of the grim affair of a global conflict the awareness that inequality and injustice in a distant part of the planet is also our own affair can emerge? Is this awareness the only one that, at the present historical situation, could be a promise of public and common freedom?

3. Bringing Narrations on Stage

The performance, as most of our previous works, falls into the broad category of the Theatre of the Real, which in this particular case blends fiction and non-fiction in an interview-based format combining *verbatim theatre* and *theatre of experts* elements.

The text of the performance was based mainly on interviews with the members of the cast but also on field research which we did months prior to the beginning of the rehearsals. In fact, a series of interviews were conducted with people of various ages and descends (eg. Afghanistan, Syria, different parts of Greece) in order to enrich our understanding of the civil war theme and gain a kaleidoscopic perspective. Out of this material and keeping the Aeschylus' text as our spine we created a four-part performance text. Each part reflects on a specific theme of *Seven Against Thebes*: A. Under Siege, B. Homes & Exiles, C. Neighbours becoming Enemies and D. Unburied Bodies. The blending of fiction and nonfiction (Aeschylus' text and real-life stories), superimposes, in an extremely rich palimpsest, ancient Thebes and – among others – modern day south Lebanon, 1990s Serajevo, 1940s Greece, 20th/21st century Zaire/Democratic Republic of Congo and by extension, all possible lands where (civil/global) war has been taking place or might take place in a not so distant future.

The professional actors and actresses on stage not only offer their own stories but also act as performers uttering the words of others in a mixture of *theatre of experts* and *verbatim theatre* elements. On the one hand, the performers, in a monological format, act as *experts of the everyday* offering their autobiographical testimonies to an audience who witnesses before their very eyes a living body, a living archive of past and present. On the other hand, the performers rotate in the roles of interviewer and interviewee in dialogic scenes, and allow, through their bodies, a range of other voices to be heard unearthing and validating a kaleidoscopic vision of the performance's main themes.

As monologues and dialogic scenes follow one another, dispersed by the lines of the ancient text, a rich tank of memories fills the stage, just like the numerous pieces of clothing scattered all around the floor, a reminder of all lost bodies that have already disappeared or are still being displaced in each corner of the globe due to the never ending war conflicts (set and costume design: Constantinos Zamanis).

Moreover, in *Thebes – a Global Civil War* we once again employ the use of live and recorded video as a means to enhance the documentary aesthetics and support the interview-based format and additionally as a way to place a com-

ment on the mediatized world of the present day, which apart from anything else has turned war into a spectacle. As the actors and actresses perform their parts, their faces and bodies are projected live on a back screen, doubling their stage presence and handing to the audience the responsibility to choose where exactly to place their gaze. As the live and the mediatized co-exist, intimacy and distance, individuality and universality go hand in hand while issues of memory and identity are addressed. Pre-recorded material also appears in order to authenticate the various strata of the narratives (eg. photographic portraits or footage from the ruins of ancient Thebes).

To further authenticate the autobiographical nature of their narratives we decided all performers of our multicultural cast to use their own mother tongues on stage (Serbo-Croatian, Arabic, Greek and French/Lingala). This was a rather demanding task during rehearsals, since it required a great degree of concentration and aural intelligence. English, the *lingua franca* par excellence, was used in all but one dialogic scenes as well as in the choral bits opening and closing the piece. Full understanding of the words spoken in the performance is only possible by reading the surtitles projected on the screen. Multilingualism thus is seen as the perfect vehicle to foster intercultural dialogue and understanding in this age of global conflicts.

Thebes – a Global Civil War

Epilogue

RACHA: I saw lifeless bodies hung in squares.

GIORGOS: I saw women and men being whipped in the street.

VEDRANA: I saw funerals held at night, so that the planes with bombs would not kill people.

ALBERTINE: I saw cars full of armed men carrying dead bodies around the city.

RACHA: I saw war criminals being declared heroes.

VEDRANA: I saw women painting the walls of their houses as the war was approaching.

GIORGOS: I saw people committing suicide because the enemies had surrounded them.

RACHA: I saw crowded theaters while the city was being bombed.

ALBERTINE: I saw women being raped while they were going to the river to fetch water for their children.

GIORGOS: I saw men and women lining up to see a movie while all around them there was war. Men and women of all ages wanting more than anything else to get on with their lives.

VEDRANA: I saw a beauty contest being held in the ruins.

GIORGOS: I saw soldiers of opposing sides sleeping in the same tent to save themselves from the cold.

VEDRANA: I saw a young girl standing in the supermarket line wondering how many of those standing around her have killed other people?

RACHA: I saw generations of people living as prisoners in their own place.

GIORGOS: I saw marriages dissolving, couples separating because they belonged to opposing sides.

ALBERTINE: I saw people being lost forever without ever saying goodbye to their loved ones.

RACHA: I saw children having fun playing games of war, where the soil was still wet from the blood of the dead.

VEDRANA: I saw all the wars fought on the land of Thebes and I asked myself: which of them were fair wars?

4. Thebes and Epidaurus: an attempt to reinterpret the world we live in

The performance was part of the first Greek theatre showcase (Gr.A.Pe) organised by Athens Epidaurus Festival 2023, an initiative whose main objective is to interconnect the performing arts produced in Greece with international artists and institutions. *Thebes – a Global Civil War* was subsequently shown in Prizren International Theatre Festival (27.07.23) and Festival delle Colline Torinesi (19, 20.10.2024)³ and it is still touring. This fact allows the performance itself to stay in constant dialogue with the ever greater changes and tensions that keep arising globally in recent years. If when we were preparing this particular performance, we wondered “how World War III would look like”, today almost two years later we see reality surpassing many of our most ominous thoughts. It is certain that we do not know the future and we cannot predict it. It seems, however, that the texts of ancient Greek tragedies can once again become a vehicle of reinterpreting and reinvesting the world we live in with new narrations, allowing at the same time the emergence of new universal narratives on stage, in times where these tend to disappear. Greek tragedies can be a source of creating new dramaturgies of global emergency.

³ URL <https://www.efa-aei.eu/en/members/567/>; URL <https://www.fondazionetpe.it/festival/thebes-a-global-civil-war/>

Text assembled by Pantelis Flatsousis & the ensemble
 Directed by Pantelis Flatsousis
 Dramaturgy: Panayiota Konstantinakou
 Set and costume design: Constantinos Zamanis
 Original musical composition: Henri Kergomard
 Video design and editing: Constantine Nisidis
 Lighting design: Christina Thanasoula
 Dramaturgy collaboration: Ioanna Lioutsia
 Sound engineer: Kostas Michopoulos
 Assistants to the director: Athena Bakoyianni, Anna Karamanidou
 Assistant to the lighting designer: Semina Papalexandropoulou
 Production managers: BEE DRAMAQUEENS / Rena Andreadaki, Zoe Mouschi
 Executive production: Spectrum
 Cast: Vedrana Bozinovic, Racha Baroud, Albertine Itela, George Kritharas
 (replaced by Giorgos Paterakis for the performances in Festival delle Colline
 Torinesi)
 With the participation of two musicians on stage / Alexandros Sioupoulis,
 Evangelia Nikolouzou
 In collaboration with scientific consultant Manos Avgerides
 A production of Athens Epidauros Festival 2023//The performance was a part
 of Gr.A.Pe, the first Greek theatre showcase
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Sitography

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