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In a state of crisis

by Christy Papadopoulou 2/5/2011

ATHENS' ancient history and modernday reality meet in Kanigunda theatre company's City-State, currently running at the Onassis Cultural Centre. The tragicomedy calls on viewers to dig into the city's long-forgotten past in order to find associations with the often-psychotic present.

Playing politicians, citizens, doctors and patients, Kanigunda performers combine song, dance and historical testimonies.

The company started working on the performance a year ago. "We all felt the need to talk about this city which I believe is in a state of permanent crisis," director Yannis Leontaris tells the Athens News. "Athens is a city in constant transformation. We wanted to convey what preoccupies us on the stage by theatrical means," he adds.

The performance title is suggestive of the ancient Greek institution of city-state and its defining features: freedom, independence and self-sufficiency. "Looking into these features, we realised that none of them apply to today's Athens," Leontaris observes.

"In our attempt to compare with the present we concluded that the term 'city-state' has nowadays acquired a different meaning. Today's Athens is identified with the state in the sense that it brings together over half of the country's population and in essence functions as a self-sufficient state itself."

Like a revue, but not quite

Half of the play's text is original material based on company members' contributions, while the other half is archival material - be it literary texts, press clippings or scientific historical surveys.

Not a conventional performance, City-State borrows its tools from the realm of revue. Theatre personas are associated with those of current political reality. Dance as well as timeless Greek songs are brought in as material along the way.

But there is also an important difference from the revue. "As a genre, a revue usually condemns society's ills by assuming it is in the right," Leontaris explains. "But rather than being didactic, our performance focuses on posing questions."

Though the past is a constant point of reference, this is a work about the here and now, he adds.

"We have tried to highlight the connection between what goes on in Athens today with periods of crisis from the city's past," Leontaris points out. Stops in this journey down history lane include the 5th century BC plague that hit Athens, the German occupation and civil war following it, the Greek junta and the flow of refugees in 1920s as a result of the Asia Minor disaster.

"There is a powerful relevance to the present and we are trying to channel viewers into making these associations themselves," Leontaris says. "For instance, the way the city behaves towards migrants today is very relevant to the way it treated Asia Minor refugees in the past."

At times gentle and elsewhere harsh in its handling of the main theme, City-State balances between two extremes. It is structured in such a way as to lead the audience abruptly from scenes that are likely to cause laughter to others almost emotionally unbearable and vice versa.

"In the end," Leontaris discloses, "there are mixed feelings just as in real life where the most heart-rending event may include a touch of humour and the most hilarious situation can hide a small tragedy."

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A city of patients

In yet another interesting approach, political speech is complemented by testimonies from the patients of the Dromokaition psychiatric hospital. "Studying the phrasing of politicians through the ages we found out that their way of expression - which we are used to accepting as logical - borders on the absurd," the director notes.

The relationship between politicians and citizens within the city is likened in many scenes to that of the psychiatrist and his patients in an asylum. "By using this metaphor, the city is seen as a huge mental institution, where politicians determine its fate and patients represent the citizens," he adds.

As part of its research, the company has relied heavily on a published study on Dromokaition by Maria Farfaliou. "In a strangely interesting way," Leontaris adds, "by following the history of the institution from the end of the 19th century to the interwar period, the German occupation, the civil war and so on, one can also follow the history of Athens."

Have we lost our memory as a nation?

It depends on what we mean by memory. Historical memory is shaped by those in power who control the mass media and record official history. This sort of memory is often false. What people can do is to go back to the archives and the historical sources to discover and unveil things that are often kept hidden from them.

This is how we worked in this production. We found the correspondence of well-known politicians who played an important role in the years after the restoration of democracy in Greece, like Konstantinos Karamanlis and Konstantinos Tsatsos, who before the junta were discussing plans to impose a dictatorship - something which we've been ignoring up till now.

We also saw that during the German occupation many Athenians became rich at the expense of their fellow citizens who were starving. These historical clues are bits of memory which were unknown to us before we started working on the performance. By searching, one can overturn the stereotypes of historical memory as they are imposed on us and can discover that things are not exactly as they are presented in schoolbooks or the press. As a nation, I think that we are used to swallowing historical memory as imposed on us. But it is our responsibility to dig deep into it.

In lieu of a CV

The Kanigunda company - Maria Kehagioglou, Yiorgos Frintzilas, Maria Maganari, Rebecca Tsiligaridou, Efthimis Theou and Anthe Efstratiadou - is named after a character from Ingmar Bergman's 1957 classic film, the Seventh Seal. "We try to refrain from the illusion of taking things for granted," Leontaris says. "Everything is under trial, and for things to remain as they are it takes a lot of effort. We chose a name that symbolises the ephemeral because we don't know for how long our collaboration will last. So far - and it's been six years now - it's been going very well."

Yannis Leontaris was born and raised in Athens. "This is a city which, like other European metropolises, imposes upon the human body its own rhythms in the way the latter moves, breathes and receives information." Yet, in contrast to other major cities, Athens is lacking in providing its citizens with daily amenities and overall services. "Though it is very difficult for me not to live in this city, I often feel its suffocating effect. It is a hostile city and it takes a great effort to discover the beauties it hides," he admits.