

The Streets Belong to the People: Scenes and Heterotopias in the City

Giorgos P. Pefanis

The street releases an aura of hospitality unmatched by the great halls and the formal venues. This is so because the street belongs to the people—it is of itself the stage of hospitality. By “hospitable,” here, I mean, on the one hand, a site open and accessible to all, and even to roaming artists, and on the other, I mean something that befriends the strange, the unfamiliar, the unexpected; what you meet suddenly on the curve of a pedestrian walkway or at the edge of a square and at once you are distracted from daily existential cares and daily routines. While people were gathering without any clear objectives, besides demonstrating against the austerity measures of the economic crisis, the International Street Theatre Festival (Istfest) of Athens organized at that time, came to provide them with a significant “role”: their participation in a multi-faceted theatrical celebration, with strong political connotations. In more ways than one, *the street*, (in the broader sense of the public domain, of the open, collectively shared urban and planned city space, returned through the Festival to the people, the original owners, in the particular form of theatre: disguise, artistic expression, dramatic narration and performance.

During the economic crisis in Greece (as in other European countries), at a time when the residents of Athens wanted to go out to the streets, to occupy the public space with their physical presence, without, however, setting clear objectives about this, the International Street Theatre Festival (Istfest) of Athens (2009-2014) provided them with a significant objective: their participation in a multi-faceted theatrical celebration, with whatever political implications that could lead to. After all, the *street*, in the broader sense of the public domain, of the open, collectively shared urban and planned city space, belongs to the citizens and by means of a Festival of this kind returns to them in the particular form of theatre and whatever that entails: disguise, artistic expression, dramatic narration, and performance.

Of course, this was not always the case. Not long ago, whatever derived from the street was at times in danger of being considered or labelled “disreputable” (Stahl 7). Even today, the street is often equated with the unworthy and the suspicious. It is well known that in Europe, until the end of the 1970s, street

theatre artists were being arrested and charged with begging or disturbing the peace, that is the orderly functioning of public space. In recent years, however, the situation seems to be quite different. Street theater is gaining much ground. Theatre reviewers spend time covering the field pretty much the same way they would cover traditional theatre (Mason 8). This, however, is not the case in Greece.

Although the prestige of street theatre has been restored, culminating in the establishment of the Festival, there is much yet to be done to acquire the position it deserves on the cultural map of the country. The discussion that is developing around street theatre is not as prolific either in cultural journalism or in the more specialized sites and publications. One of the reasons for this marginalization could be attributed to its limited life span, its “unplanned” and informal activity, and the absence of tickets; yet, that is not enough to explain its marginalization. Let us not forget that there are performances of equally short duration that both journalists and specialists appreciate. Perhaps, we should turn to the critics themselves and to the street artists for an answer.

On the one hand, Greek critics do not sway away that easily from their customary habits of attending programmed performances in indoor venues. On the other hand, the actors, especially well-known actors (not to mention the celebrities) attract the lights of fame more easily than amateur or unknown actors who find an outlet (for expression—rarely for a livelihood) on the sketchy and ephemeral site of the street. The latter will, potentially, turn to street theatre more easily than the former (Mason 2). The street has often been more hospitable than the great halls and the formal venues. This is so, perhaps, because it belongs to the people (Demarcy 86); it is of itself the stage of hospitality. By “hospitable,” here, I mean, on the one hand, the site open and accessible even to roaming artists and, on the other hand, the site that is a friend to the strange, to the unfamiliar, to the outsider, to the unexpected, to what you meet suddenly on the curve of a pedestrian walkway or at the edge of a square and, all at once, you are distracted from daily existential cares and the daily routine. Such a place brings us close to the city-stage (Stavridis 2002) and, more specifically, to the stages of the street theatre, which in this way reveal their “heterotopic” substance. To the extent that every theatrical stage is “heterotopic” (Foucault 25; Pefanis 119-52), street theatre is twofold “heterotopic”: firstly, because it sets up a stage in the city, and secondly because it can—through the use of this stage—provide alternative designations for the space without clear aims (Hetherington 69). It can trigger off new relationships and create unexpected significations for the common space and the time that is interwoven with it. In this respect, “hospitality” here means the establishment of a heterotopia; the activation of an utopia or an “extension of life’s world through a process of referrals to other possible life worlds. These, however, are not merely imaginary, marginal, or complementary to the real world, but comprise and constitute the so-called real world in their reciprocal play and as their residue” (Vattimo 72).

Therefore the street actor is the guest and the host at the same time. S/he

truly gives his/her soul to the street people, that is in the public place, where nothing can be hidden and everything is shared for a few moments. S/he is the guest in a space that does not belong to him/her and, while this space is temporarily appropriated for the duration of the performance, s/he, subsequently, is host to all passers-by. If the actor of the “closed” theatre feels that s/he is exposed to the public watching beyond the reach of the stage spotlights, the “artist” of the street does not even have that spotlight, neither does s/he have the security offered by the very ontology of stage art. More often than not s/he does not even have the support of the sound and lighting framework to be protected from a disturbing light or a random and annoying sound. Contrary to the traditional performer, s/he does not expect the spectators to pay to come and see his/her performance, but goes on his/her own to meet the spectators, to surprise them at a place where s/he possibly did not want to be surprised, say during the stressful commute to his/her work or while s/he is enjoying a carefree walk etc. The street actor is neither protected from the existential judgment that Henri Gouhier puts at the heart of the theatrical relationship,¹ nor by this minimum framework of *as if* that Richard Schechner, following Victor Turner, has acknowledged, along with the power of disguise, which lies in the core of the theatrical process (229). Without a framework, unprotected, artistically as well as institutionally, the street actor appears suddenly before the eyes of the passer-by as the latter turns around the corner or steps on a pedestrian walkway. In addition, while engaging with the spectacle, the duration of the exchange and sometimes its content are determined more by the interest of the spectator than by the course of the spectacle itself (Harris 59). The street actor is truly exposed to all and to everything. That is why a great amount of courage is demanded of him/her. The only things s/he asks for are a momentary smile and a slight bit of acceptance. Not much, if one considers how much s/he gives.

Let us turn to the particular pragmatic perspective of the Athens Istfest. Street theatre in Greece had never had a regular presence. There had been offhandedly formed groups which were quickly dissolved, improvised groups, occasional performances, but nothing more stable. Their activities had been rather erratic, without particular artistic aims or unified planning. The content of the performances, for the most part, included those elements associated with the demonstration of physical skills (juggling, acrobatics, etc.) instead of theatrical activity with the narrow meaning of disguise and the execution of a role. The main pursuit had been the presentation of a brief and quite standardized spectacle that would pleasantly entertain passers-by on the street or visitors to an event.

With the Istfest of Athens (2009-2014) things took a different turn. The Festival, which took place mainly in the historic center of the city, brought together nearly all of the theatre groups that were active in Athens and in other areas of

1. The existential judgment presupposes the spectator as *causa sine qua non* of the theatrical game. See Gouhier (1991) 29.

the country and gave them the opportunity to express themselves through all types of street performances. In the first year of the Festival, fifty Greek groups worked in cooperation with ten theatrical groups from other countries and in the five days of the Festival two hundred and forty performances were given by a total of four hundred artists in significant locations of Athens that encompassed the city's historic center. The opening performance was held at the Kalimarmaro Stadium and the rest were held in the area of the Zapion, on the pedestrian walkways of Ermou and Apostolou Pavlou streets, in Kapnikareas, Klathmonos, and Kotzia Squares, as well as in the areas of Monastiraki and Thissio. The center of Athens was transformed into a multi-colored celebration.

The Festival had a competitive character. In 2009, the awards were accompanied by a monetary prize, whereas, in the following years, the awards were comprised only of honorary distinctions. The economic crisis that hit the country affected the awards, as well as the invitations of foreign troupes. Regarding the type of the awards, they were all of equal value and could be distinguished only as to their criteria. They were conferred by two committees, one for each category of participation. In the main one, four awards were given: one for the overall concept and presentation of the street performance, one for the originality of the show, a third award consisted of the formal invitation exclusively to a Greek group to perform at another festival abroad, and one more award was given to an individual artist. In the second category, the open category, three awards were given: one for an individual artist, another one for a theatrical group and one more invitation for another festival abroad.

Comprehensive accounts do not always reflect the whole truth, but rather display the general picture and the dynamic the theatre can assume in public places. It is indicative that, only in the first four years of its operation (2009-2012), more than one thousand five hundred artists from France, Italy, Poland, Holland, Spain, Turkey, Germany, Bulgaria, the United Kingdom, Mexico, Brazil, Kurdistan, Iraq, Uruguay, Iran, and, of course, Greece participated in the Festival. This multi-cultural character, as well as the polyphony and variety of expression, created a rich anthropogeography and led to the development of four hundred eighty events which were attended by more than one million spectators. The performances covered the entire range of arts in a public place, obviously, exceeding the limits set by the traditional street theatre of disguise: objects theatre installations, shadow or fire theatre, juggling, acrobatics, clown and stilt walkers spectacles, parades, storytelling, site specific performances, fire dance, puppet shows, pantomime, dance-theatre shows, fireworks, happenings, music bands, dance groups, circuses, and all those in varied combinations and original mixes of types and expressive ideas.

All of these artists and artisans remind us of something important: the street belongs to the citizens. It always did—even when it was not handed over to them. It may pass, snake-like, in front of austere or majestic buildings, it may, in other words, cross private property, but it belongs to the citizens; to all and to each one separately. Even the large streets, the ones mainly devoted to cars, belong

to the citizens; that is why they are called boulevards, literally “people carriers” [*λεωφόροι* in the Greek language]. Their existence is inseparable from the pavements that flank them. These borderline spaces “at the edge of . . .” or “at the margins of . . .” comprise the other space of the street; the pavements provide protection from the street traffic but they also gather strength and vitality from that very traffic. Just like the streets, the pavements belong to the citizens who can appropriate them but they cannot own them. The private street and the private pedestrian walkway are oxymoronic phenomena. With its predominantly public character, the pavement space becomes the stage of habitation, ownership, and wandering; of commerce and accidental encounters; of contingency and dynamic identity.

In this light, the pedestrian walkway bears all of the features of the pavement, as well as those of the street, except for the circulation of the cars. It is a street that has become a large pedestrian walkway, maintaining the characteristics of both street and pavement. Most importantly, it maintains the feature of the performativity of public conduct (interaction), hence the acting out of diverse identities. That explains why street theatre often chooses the pedestrian walkway as its stage. It is not just the absence of cars. There is more than that.

Street theatre also chooses squares just as often as it chooses pedestrian walkways. Squares constitute the symbolic centers of the city. They are places for gathering and recollection of the collective memory; hubs of social, political, cultural, and commercial activity. As every center, the squares separate and, at the same time, link. The street may cross the square, but it may also be cut off by it. The square is designated for the collective processes of democracy. It may separate the residential plan of a city, but it also reinforces its cohesion. A square is inseparable from the great historical moments and major expressions of co-responsibility. Along with the street, the square jointly expresses one of the fundamental characteristics of every city’s “conceptual image” (Lynch 3): the square orients and the street leads and ends up at a destination. In both cases, we have an invitation to wander through the city.

Many Festival performances responded to that invitation. They evolved as a procession in the streets of Athens (promenade theatre) (Carlson 23-27), with the audience following them or suddenly running unexpectedly into them in small squares, crossroads, or openings. At that moment the unaware public could also benefit from the street spectacle because in each and every stop the procession performed so as to facilitate the action and to, possibly, renew the audience that was following. Just such a performance was the *Athina-Streets-Visions* (2009), a musical and theatrical happening by the “Avista” troupe, which wandered in the area of the traditional Plaka, at the foot of the Acropolis. A junk dealer and two musicians led the audience through the narrow streets of Plaka, unearthing old stories together with old objects and costumes that they salvaged from the dealer’s wheelbarrow. The wheelbarrow functioned as a mobile, miniature set from which the traces of the past were extracted by the junk dealer, the professional reseller of memories. That was a self-referential performance, since

one of the street professions that continues to flourish even today is theatre itself: the performers of the street were the junk dealers of time who rejuvenated the past in order to cope better with the future.

Saurus (2009), the show by the troupe “Close Act,” could also be included in the mobile street performances. The Dutch/Belgian group tried to take a trip back in time: from the prehistoric era of the wild monstrous reptiles to the present, when the beasts have become playful, vegetarian reptiles. From behind the grim masks of reptiles the performers were seeking the dark roots of fear felt by modern, civilized people in opposition to the secret powers of nature and the question of existence.

Movement is not, of course, the only way to seek out the tensions hidden on a street. Very often, standing in one spot, concentrating on one section of the street, can reveal subtle details of that spot or a dynamic of space that can lead to mnemonic compositions and connotative images which would be difficult to attain while moving about. Such was the case with *Valse*, a tender comment on our common European culture, by the Teatro Tascabile di Bergamo (which became a professional theatre group in 1973), under the directorial guidance of Renzo Vescovi.

The “Carnage Productions Group” from Toulouse, France, presented one of the two most successful comic scenes in Kapnikarea. The performance of *S.W.A.T.* (2009) was an absurd comic happening that satirized the special forces of the police as well as the corresponding action films. Four committed commandos are trained for “impossible” missions and, without managing very well, they start out on an undertaking which they have not even understood. The aim of the performance was to show how people’s disproportionate faith in their ability to solve problems in an impressive way leads to more problems. Another show, *The Balls* (2009), by the Bulgarian group “Fireter,” combined fire theatre with some features of ritual theatre. The group “Kavardak,” from Germany, directed by Stanislav Bogdanov and Jelena Bolsuna, gave a *Clown Show* (2011) inspired by children’s paintings which was humoristic as well as melancholic. The troupe “Inciertos,” from Barcelona, in their performance *Dialogos en Blanco y Negro* (2010), combined clownery, pantomime, and theatre of the absurd.

The space writing, attempted by street theatre, creates a space that is neither purely real nor fictional; it is rather *the meeting of the intelligible with the material*, the utopian with the functional space, thus creating a new heterotopia, which could be the answer to the question about the relationship between intellectual and social space, “between the space of representation and the representation of the space” (Lefebvre 210). The potential of the heterotopic space in street theatre shows us that public space is never neutral and pure; it is already labelled, associated with historical and political contents which are reactivated in a different way in every performance in order to motivate the audience to create new ideas and new political views. This significant political dimension of street theatre was manifested in many ways in the Istfest. The source of inspiration for the artists was the reality that European citizens are experiencing in urban centers, the var-

ious forms of power that are imposed on their daily lives, people's isolation, and the need to reconsider and enhance human relationships.

A significant conjuncture during these years of the Festival was, by all means, the economic and social crisis that Greece was—and still is—experiencing. It was, therefore, only natural to see the political dimensions dominating the Festival's focus. It is no coincidence that, just a few days before the third Festival began (from June 30 to July 4, 2011), Arianne Mnouchkine was in Athens with the Théâtre du Soleil to present the performance *Les Naufragés du Fol Espoir*, under the auspices of the Hellenic Festival. The company was asked to participate in the demonstrations of the movement “*Aganaktismenoi* – The Indignants” in Syntagma Square, protesting against the politics and the austerity measures of the economic memorandum. Mnouchkine happily participated in the protest (July 15) with a puppet show whose central theme was the meaning of justice. One of the basic slogans of the theatrical intervention was Romain Rolland's phrase: *Quand l'ordre est injustice, le désordre est déjà un commencement de justice* (“When order is injustice, disorder is the beginning of justice”). If that happening had taken place a few days later it would have appeared as a performance of the Istfest. Set apart from the Festival, the happening revealed the political reflexes of the Théâtre du Soleil and of Mnouchkine. When seen retrospectively, it resembles an important and unexpected preamble to it, as it illustrates the political dimension of every kind of street art, every art that makes use of public space and transforms it into a place for citizens to meet, for artists to express themselves, and for public to reflect on things.

In one way or the other, many performances carried strong political connotations. One such instance was the performance *My Nationality the Colour of the Wind* by the “Sardam troupe” (2014). Another was *Carmen Funebre* (2009) by the “Teatr Biuro Podrozy” from Poznan, directed by Pawel Strzalko: an open-air production inspired by the war in Bosnia and other ethnic conflicts. While preparing the production, members of the group met with refugees from former Yugoslavia in order to collect images and experiences. Stilts, fire artists, searchlights, and spectacular sets were used so that they could attract the experienced spectator along with the passer-by and provoke fear and compassion. The performance *The Human Path*, by the “Contraho Teatro” from Germany (2010), was also dedicated to the immigrants and, more generally, to the people who are forced to abandon their family, their home, and their country. The performance *Striptease* by the “Avista” troupe (2011), referred to the political and the social parameters of personal relationships in people's daily lives. Finally, a political story in Greece, *Lessons of European Hysteria* (2012), was presented, in a critical and sarcastic light, by the “Boufoni” of Vili Sotiropoulou.

There were also many performances which drew on theatrical plays or adaptations, a choice that increased the theatricality of the performances and created interesting intersecting zones between street theatre and conventional theatre. Lorca's *The Butterfly's Evil Spell* by the “Helix” Troupe, was one such example; also, *Hamlet* by the “Ison Ena” company, *The Nickel Opera* by the Theatre

School “Delos” (2012), Kostoula Mitropoulou’s *Cabaret, The World* by the troupe “Avlea,” Kostas Mourselas’s *Oh, What a World Dad!* by the company “Helix,” Andreas Staikos’ *Karakorum* by the “Spelling Mistakes” troupe, Euripides’ *Cyclops*, Nicolo Machiavelli’s *Mandragola*, Maurice Maeterlinck’s *Berniquel*, Aristophanes’ *The Birds*, and Beckett’s *Acts Without Words*. The Workshop of Akis Davis presented the *Scenes That Do Not Exist* (2011), scenes which could have been written for three well-known plays (*Romeo and Juliet*, *Don Juan*, and *The Cherry Orchard*) and, the following year, *Pictures from Tennessee Williams’ A Street Car Named Desire*.

The “Helix” Troupe, the oldest of its kind in Greece has given many and interesting performances abroad as well,² presented the show *Dies Irae*, which was not included in the competition. It was a post-theatrical performance which opened the Festival of 2010. It underlined the commitment of the Festival organizers to keep alive the centuries-old tradition of street theatre as well as the folk roots of the acting profession. The company’s director and group manager, Nikos Hatzipapas, used two well-known plays, which he had directed independently in the past, as his textual basis. The first one was Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the play *Pyramus and Thisbe* which, in the Shakespearean work, is prepared by the artisans as a performance in honour of the King. The second play was Michel de Ghelderode’s *L’école des bouffons*. Both plays combined created a highly spectacular performance. A group of middle-aged clowns set a trap, a “theatrical performance,” for their teacher, an expert among the clowns, in order to steal the secret of the “Grand Art” from him. The actors attempted to entrap actors; thus, the theatrical action was transformed into a play-within-a-play, so that the nucleus of art itself could be revealed as a secret of life. Performers on stilts and fireworks, scenes with fires, and banners were some of the keys that were meant to open up the mystical world of the theatre.

Many artists were inspired by mythology (*Orpheus and Eurydice* by the group “Omnia Studio”), by folk and literary tales (“Tales With Lies and Truths,” a montage of Grimms’ fairy tales by Maria Savvas’ “Paiktes” company), by the world of the circus (Alvaro Ramirez Marquez’s *Itinerante Circo Funk*), by music (*The Contrabass Player*; a woman’s monologue performed by the “Omnia Studio”), but also by literature (Italo Calvino’s *Le città invisibili* presented by the troupe “Pleusis,” the female monologue *Apse Svise* from Ioanna Karistiani’s prose by the “Little Theatre,” and Nikos Kazantzakis’ *The Saviors of God* [Ασκητική] enacted by “Omnia Studio”).

With a tear or with a smile, with melancholic reminiscing or pleasant utopias, with a critical disposition opposing the politics of poverty and isolation or with a playful mood addressed to small and grown-up children, the performances of the four festivals reminded the Athenian public of the strong roots of theatre—roots that are often neglected, but also of how close people can and must come to each other, especially when there are powers that want them di-

2. Nikos Hatzipapas’ “Helix Street Theatre” was founded in 1987.

vided. Many troupes were comprised of—and continue to be comprised of—artists of different ethnic and cultural origins, who, however, do not have difficulty communicating and expressing themselves through the international language of theatre. In the public's conscience a conviction is now being established: that the Festival is an integral part of city life and that it will continue to exist in even more developed forms. Efforts have already begun to integrate actions in European networks (such as the Open Street), something that will hopefully prove that the streets of Europe are open.

*Associate Professor
Department of Theatre Studies
University of Athens
Greece*

Works Cited

- Carlson, Marvin. "Streets, Squares, and Strollers: The City as Performative Space." *Parabasis* 12.1 (2014): 17-27. Print.
- Demarcy, Richard. *Éléments d'une sociologie du spectacle*. Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1973. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces." *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986): 22-27. Print.
- Gouhier Henri. *Theatre and Existence*. [Το θέατρο και η ύπαρξη.] Athens: Kardamitsa, 1991. Print
- Harris, Sue. "'Dancing in the Streets': The Aurillac Festival of Street Theatre." *Contemporary Theatre Review* 14.2 (2004): 57-71. Print.
- Hetherington, Kevin. *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopias and Social Ordering*. London: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *Rights in the City: Space and Politics*. [Δικαίωμα στην πόλη. Χώρος και πολιτική.] Athens: Koukida, 2007. Print.
- Lynch, Kenneth. *The Image of the City*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1960. Print.
- Mason, Bim. *Street Theatre and Other Outdoor Performance*. London: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- Pefanis, Giorgos P. *Adventures of Representations: Scenes of the Theory II*. [Περιπέτειες της αναπαράστασης: Σκηνές της θεωρίας II.] Athens: Papazisis, 2013. Print.
- Schechner, Richard. *Performance Theory*. London: Routledge, 1988. Print.
- Stahl, Johannes. *Street Art*. Königswinter: Ullmann, 2009. Print.
- Stavridis, Stavros. *From the City-Screen to the City-Stage*. [Από την πόλη-οθόνη στην πόλη-σκηνή.] Athens: Ellinika Hellenica Grammata, 2002. Print.
- Vattimo, Gianni. *The Transparent Society*. Oxford: Polity Press, 1992. Print.