

NO MAN'S LAND

The Greek Play Project suggests...

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The play "No Man's Land," a composition of two short works by the award-winning Romanian author Alexandra Badea, is presented every Wednesday and Thursday at the "From Machine Theater" in a translation by Venia Stamatia and directed by George Lyras. The work explores the concept of the border, the imaginary line that separates war from peace, slavery from freedom, "us" from "them," and death from life. The performance premiered for three shows (October 21, 22, & 23, 2016) at the Festival of Contemporary Theater "Le Théâtre à la Grecque," co-organized by the French Institute and the Michael Cacoyannis Foundation. The next stop is Palais de Béhague in France, with the support of the Romanian Institute (Romanian Embassy) and the Greek Cultural Center of France (Greek Embassy).

Shortly after the premiere of the play, we met Venia Stamatia, a formidable actress and one of the two unique Greeks who have studied at the Drama School of the National Theater of France (preceded by Fenia Papadodima). Intelligent, beautiful, and combative, she also undertakes the translation of the two works, reigniting the ongoing discussion about "passages," the "foreigner," and the Other.

How did this project start?

Living in Paris for these three years, as well as my involvement in the local theater scene, brought me into contact with contemporary French playwriting. It's an exceptionally active field where young playwrights in France are encouraged to write, supported by institutions, and rewarded for their efforts. The result is fresh theatrical texts, written with enthusiastic pens and youthful perspectives. Alexandra Badea is a case in point, representing the essence of what I describe. At just 35 years old, she has received significant recognition and is considered one of the most promising writers of the new generation.

I knew her as a presence but had never had the opportunity to collaborate or meet in person. One day, entirely by chance, through the page of her publisher Arche, I found the synopsis of her work "Aller / Retour," one of the two stories that make up our play "No Man's Land." The first part, "Aller," dealt with the escape of a couple from Romania in the 1980s. Two young people run to save themselves from a regime of absolute lack of freedom. I was particularly drawn to it, especially given the historical moment. What does it mean for someone to leave their place, their home, without any other choice?

However, what truly captivated me is what the second part, "Retour," addresses. It is an issue that is not only rarely explored in any form of art but also something that we rarely consider. How difficult

is it to return to what was once home? Where is our place? Does the concept of a "homeland" exist, or, in other words, is there a country that can truly contain us? I ordered the text, sent a message to Alexandra, met her, and everything took its course.

Why this particular play?

This play delves into "passages," the "neutral zones," that minimal time between one side and the other. What is fascinating is that different audience members read emotional passages, the difficulties of returning to an old relationship, for example, while others focus on spatial aspects. It's beautiful that the interpretation of the play is shaped by each individual's experiences, making it personal. Hence, this particular play. Because it is timeless, passages always exist in all epochs and dominate our lives. Because it is multidimensional, speaking to each person individually and providing fodder for endless discussions after the performance. And perhaps, also because we are currently in a time of absolute transition and in a country of absolute transition. People risk their lives to come here and go somewhere else, while others leave here in pursuit of their luck elsewhere, as opportunities for life have been minimized.

Foreigner, passage, elsewhere, differently. When will we arrive here? What should we do?

Foreigner. A vast conversation, a vast concept. "I have forgotten my language," says the character in "No Man's Land." One feels like a foreigner when they want to speak, express their opinion, and fear not understanding the response. Perhaps they won't find the right words to express themselves and fear sounding naive. When they invent a somewhat blasé self to hide their insecurity in a group. When everyone knows the songs at a party, and they do not. And so many other things that can happen to you here or elsewhere. What should we do? Probably nothing. Accept it as part of maturity, an experience that we will be able to evaluate later, in different circumstances. And, of course, remember that anyone can easily find themselves in the position of the "foreigner." One moment is enough. And we should be aware of it every time we engage with someone for whom this moment has come.

Tell us about your experience living in Paris and studying at the National Theater. What elements stand out, and how did they help you?

Paris was a very rich but challenging experience for me. Initially, I thought the difficulty was in passing the exams at the Conservatoire, the school of the National Theater. Undeniably, there was a challenge; the competition was intense, and the preparation required was extensive.

However, the real difficulty came afterward and, at the same time, the good that it did me was enormous, invaluable. Of course, I couldn't comprehend it at the moment it was happening. I often say it's very challenging to step on stage and not be sure if the audience understands what you're saying, literally. If you pronounce correctly, articulate properly, maintain the correct melodic line of the language. French has sounds that have no relation to Greek. As a result, there are words that sound almost the same to us but not to them, and, of course, their concepts have no connection. For example, the words "wine" and "wind" sound very similar to us, but imagine Miss Julia asking Jean for "wind" instead of "wine." So, on stage, I had to think and focus on many more things than

someone who performs in their native language. There was real resistance. And that could only do me good. And now, when I have to perform in Greek, the paths I use are entirely different. My studies at the National Theater there taught me to unlock the text, to utilize all the tools it can offer. It is truly significant help and knowledge for an actor.

Art in 21st-century Greece. What would you say?

Greece is a country in deep economic crisis, and this undoubtedly affects the theater, perhaps more than anything else. We are considered to be engaged in a luxury job, and that might be true. But it is also true that great works are born in such times. If we do not remain attached to the old, and if we recognize and reject the old that comes disguised as new, then this difficulty can turn out to be beneficial. However, I think we still have a little time ahead for that.

You have already adapted literary works for the theater, as well as translations. This seems to be in the tradition of the actor-intellectual. Tell us about this.

In addition to my acting studies, I studied at the Department of Communication and Media of the University of Athens. Writing has always been something that interested me, and I've been doing it since I was a child. I'm happy that, in this way, I can combine my two great loves. I believe that everything starts with knowing why we do what we do. The motivation is what matters. So, when I come across a text that captivates me but is in another language or form outside of theater, I feel an incredible need to communicate it in the way I know, through staging. The culture of the Art Theater, my previous studies, and, of course, my time in France, where an actor is not merely an executor, all play a role. In France, actors study, propose, disagree, write, translate, analyze, and in collaboration with the director, aim to serve the text. I like this approach. I believe strong bonds of collaboration are formed, making us more intellectual beings with more intellectual quests.

What kind of theater do you enjoy doing? Your play "No Man's Land" has speech as its main component, which some theater professionals consider outdated. However, in France and Germany, if I'm not mistaken, there is a return to a new version of speech in theater. How do you see all of this?

I'll answer as a spectator. I like performances that, as long as they last, absorb me, make me believe I'm somewhere else, in Greece in the '50s, Cyprus in the '70s, Romania in the '80s, or even in a family's living room during dinner. There, for moments, it gets confusing about what is truly happening and what is part of the performance. I love magic, the fairy tale. I enjoy this kind of theater as an actor as well. As for speech, I believe in it, but I also think it's challenging to handle, dangerous. That's why sometimes it might be convenient to avoid it. However, I'm not absolute; I appreciate other aspects of theater and other art forms that do not involve speech, such as dance or circus. There, though, there are risks.

What is it like to create a performance with elements from contemporary history, whose memories are still fresh?

It's extremely interesting and delicate in its handling. It gives me chills to feel that there are people in the audience who may see a part of their lives on stage—youth, fears, dreams. In this way, I feel

like we communicate deeply, secretly, and completely. However, it is also very challenging. One must know how far to go, maintain the necessary distance not to inadvertently violate strict and personal boundaries.

When history is expressed as a personal experience, does it become more communicative?

Certainly. But in any case, history is nothing more than a collection of personal experiences. Something a student reads in a history book is just the perception of a reality from a specific perspective. When one wants to bring a historical event to the stage, they choose a pair of eyes and convey their perception. That's how it goes.

Why do we nostalgically long for times we haven't lived through?

Perhaps because we think that the era we live in is sterile, lacking in romance, magic, and ideal dreams. I am a characteristic example of someone who would like to live in the past, in a different era. I see photos or read books about Athens in the '50s, and I envy it. When I watched Woody Allen's "Midnight in Paris," I realized that this happens in any era. Because reality is always more pedestrian than imagination. The only way to face it is to try to live our lives like a fairy tale. Or, at least, as close to it as possible.