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# Aeschylus' Persians to Denounce Modern Greek Politics

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N°6 | 2017

*Violence tragique et guerres antiques  
au miroir du théâtre et du cinéma  
(XVII<sup>e</sup>-XXI<sup>e</sup> siècles)*

sous la direction de  
Tiphaine Karsenti & Lucie Thévenet

<http://atlantide.univ-nantes.fr>  
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The logo for 'Atlantide' is centered at the bottom of the page. It consists of the word 'Atlantide' in a serif font, with the 'A' being significantly larger and more stylized than the other letters. The text is white and is set against a circular background that has a subtle, textured pattern. This circular background is itself centered within a white square, which is bordered by a thin, dark teal line.

Atlantide

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AESCHYLUS'S *PERSIANS*  
TO DENOUNCE MODERN GREEK POLITICS

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**Résumé :** En 2014, Nikaiti Kontouri et Tilemachos Moudatsakis, deux metteurs en scène ayant un parcours et une approche du théâtre relativement hétérogènes, ont choisi de monter *Les Perses* afin de se servir des questions conventionnelles de l'arrogance et de la mauvaise gestion du pouvoir de la tragédie antique pour dénoncer la situation politique et financière extrêmement complexe en Grèce contemporaine, tout en soulevant, à travers la forme théâtrale, des questions sociales qui peuvent dériver de cette situation.

**Mots-clés :** *Perses*, Nikaiti Kontouri, Tilemachos Moudatsakis, politique, Grèce moderne, *hybris*, critique sociale.

**Abstract:** In 2014, Nikaiti Kontouri and Tilemachos Moudatsakis, two directors with a relatively heterogeneous background and approach to theatre, chose to stage *The Persians* to delve into the play's otherwise conventional issues of arrogance and mishandling of power to indirectly comment on modern Greece's actual extremely controversial political and financial situation, while subtly glancing through their staging at social issues that may derive from it.

**Keywords:** *The Persians*, Nikaiti Kontouri, Tilemachos Moudatsakis, politics, modern Greece, *hubris*, social issues, performance.

The most notable performances of *The Persians* in modern Greece have taken place in times of war or political crisis: Spyros Evaggelatos' in 1978 (National Theatre of Northern Greece - NTNG, Epidauros Theatre), was staged after the establishment of the democracy following the 'Regime of the Colonels' (1967-1974); Karolos Koun's in 1988 (Herodus Atticus Theatre), followed the prevention of war between Greece and Turkey in 1987, and Lefteris Vogiatzis' in 1999 (National Theatre), was performed during the Kosovo War<sup>1</sup>. In 2014, two directors with a relatively heterogeneous background and approach to theatre Nikaiti Kontouri<sup>2</sup> and Tilemachos Moudatsakis<sup>3</sup> staged *The Persians* again, indirectly linking the play to the current financial and by extension political crisis in Greece. Through their stage design options they reopen the play's otherwise conventional subject of arrogance and mishandling of power while they incite pondering on social issues which may derive from the government's politics.

## TWO DIFFERENT SETTINGS

Nikaiti Kontouri closed the Athens and Epidauros Festival 2014 with *The Persians* in the ancient open theatre of Epidauros, under the aegis of the NTNG (National Theatre of Northern Greece). She opted for a classic staging in a thrifty production, to emphasize the play's anti-war message, with clear, clean lines and numerous references to modern Greece's suffering due to government politics, which resulted to photographic scenes seasoned with astute staging twists, such as dividing the chorus in two. The primary chorus consisted of fourteen men, the Elders, as in Aeschylus' play and the secondary consisted of three women, the Brides of Sorrow<sup>4</sup>, possibly attendants to the queen. However, the media most discussed the assignment of Atossa's role to a male actor and Xerxes appearing naked on stage<sup>5</sup>.

Giorgos Patsas<sup>6</sup> created the set using simple geometrical lines by placing a sloping diamond shaped platform in the centre of the orchestra, an allusion to Greece's important geographic position as the bridge between East and West. The four white ribbons attached to its top angle, connected it with the lighting trees left and right of the circular area between the seats and the stage (κοίλον) further reinforcing this idea. A wooden canopy placed on the top angle of the platform would reveal an elevating device

<sup>1</sup> See Giorgos Ganitis, *Οι οίμωγές, οι γόοι και οι χοές των Περσών*, [The cries, tears and libations of The Persians, 28/7/14], theatrical review, [online] Available at <http://www.k-tipos.gr> [last viewed 6/1/2017].

<sup>2</sup> Nikaiti Kontouri is a former actress and now director, collaborator of the National Theatre of Northern Greece (NTNG) since 2001 and teacher of Drama and Stage Directing in Drama schools.

<sup>3</sup> Tilemachos Moudatsakis is the founder of the Vivi company, director and professor of Theatrical Theory and Practice at the University of Crete.

<sup>4</sup> As mentioned on the play's programme [online]. Available at <http://www.ntng.gr> [last viewed 24/9/2014].

<sup>5</sup> See newspaper titles, NTNG archives [online]. Available at <http://www.ntng.gr>.

<sup>6</sup> Giorgos Patsas is a set and costume designer, official collaborator of the NTNG and the Athens and Epidauros Festival, with distinctions such as the silver medal in the Prague Quadrennial (1995 and 2003) and the first prize of the Union of Greek Critics for Drama and Music for the costumes of Theo Angelopoulos' *Eternity and a Day* (1998).

– on which Darius’ ghost rising from the dead would walk –, a direct reference to the ancient Greek practice of the *ekkyklema*. Parts of the floor in the forestage would also reveal traps such as a rectangular one from which Xerxes enters the stage splashing water as a child as he gets out reminding us the king’s young age. Lefteris Pavlopoulos’ lighting design was conceived in cold hues. The alternation between complete darkness and dim lighting onto and around the stage darkened even more the already gloomy atmosphere of the tragic play, as in the case of the chorus’ entrance: only the cold light of the neon tubes they held shed some light, thus foretelling the bad news and increasing the tension.

The costume designer Giannis Medjikof opted for a simple, classic black and white contrast and avoided placing the performance in a specific time frame by conceiving neutral creations which either referred to classical staging conventions or to war. More in particular, he dressed the male members of the chorus with black blazers over long black skirts to bring the performance to our time, while reminding us of ancient Greek tunics. The Brides of Sorrow used white transparent veils over their white blazers and linen dresses to cover their heads and emphasise on the absence of individuality in times of war. Atossa’s full-length long sleeved tunic was completed with an ornate, ivory white gown which hinted at Asian dresses and a red veil (the only coloured garment in the performance) to symbolise royalty. The Messenger was half naked, wearing black, discoloured, mudded army trousers, his body tainted with blood and mud as if he was returning from the Vietnam War, strongly reminding us of the soldiers from Coppola’s film *Apocalypse now* (1979). Darius rose from the dead in a gold sequined cloak topped with a headdress which were fixed on a stand leaving him with a long white tunic suggesting the Iranian traditional garments when he moved forward. On the one hand this little ruse suggests the obvious, that there are no kings in the underworld, but on the other hand it reminds us of Darius’ origins, a country surrounded by war. The costume designer’s (and the director’s) bold choice to present Xerxes naked on stage, his body dirty and blood stained, with only his empty quiver and a rug covering at times his genitals strongly impressed the audience and the critics as an image of the fallen, defeated king<sup>7</sup>. Both the Messenger and Xerxes were covered in mud from head to toe to emphasize their struggle to return home from the battlefield.

Numerous props completed astutely the set design and contributed to the gloomy ambiance of the play by adding references to war and tyranny. For example, upon entering onto the stage the chorus of Elders was holding white neon tubes wrapped in white veils. As they walked forward in the dark from the background towards the raised platform to finally stand around it, we are under the impression that the lost souls of the Persian army were slowly returning home. Later they would plant aggressively daggers at the borders of the platform to express anger and the urgency to punish those responsible for their loss. The Brides of Sorrow entered onto the stage bringing with them a powerful yet inauspicious symbol of power: three stuffed black eagles with spread wings, fixed on metallic sticks, alluding to the emblem of the Persian and Byzantine empires in the past and of America today. They placed the eagles on three sides of the platform (right and left front sides and upper left side), thereby giving us the impression that they were flying,

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<sup>7</sup> The critic Aggela Mantziou mentions: “G. Kolovos’ impressive Xerxes [...] demonstrated the weak side of a demystified nudity”, in *Αισχύλου Πέρσες από το ΚΘΒΕ*, [Aeschylus’ *Persians* by the NTNG, 1<sup>st</sup> review, 19/7/14], theatrical review [online]. Available at <http://culture.thessaloniki-portal.gr>. [last viewed 15/1/2017]. Our translation.

overseeing the performance, perhaps an allusion to the (video) surveillance every citizen is subjected to nowadays. The Brides of Sorrow were also writing with charcoal the names of the fallen soldiers on the platform while reciting, suggesting how the destructive fire turns everything to coal. The barefoot chorus would progressively wipe the names out with their footsteps perhaps to imply how quickly and easily people can forget and be prone to the same mistakes.

Finally, Kostas Gerardos' kinesiological concept consisted of a combination of improvisation and detailed choreography that resulted in slow elaborate movements with ritualistic precision achieving a collective motion, while maintaining the individuality of each member and rendering the anger and the sorrow of the Elders towards the tragedy that struck their country. The eerie soundtrack composed by Sophia Kamagianni is mainly a combination of percussions and metallic sounds which contributed to the imposing, sometimes disturbing ambiance and created a feeling of uneasiness, while Theodoris Papadimitriou played live cello giving a sad connotation and rhythm to the Aeschylean verse.

The Vivi company (Crete) presented *The Persians* in the theatre Alkmini in Athens in winter 2014, after its success in July 2014 in the Albatros theatre in Avignon's Festival Off (with French subtitles), under the direction of its founder Tilemachos Moudatsakis. Since performance and text are the main preoccupation for Vivi, Moudatsakis opted for a minimalistic approach that is already obvious in the choice of rather small venues (45 places theatres in both Athens and Avignon). Although he maintained the characters of the play, he limited the chorus to one person, who would be joined during the choral parts by the performers whose characters were not part of the action.

He also opted for a minimal, practically empty stage: there is no setting but for the black wooden floor and heavy black drapery in the background. Kostis Christidis and Charis Sepentzis designed the few props which 'decorate' the stage. They mainly used allegories, such as huge blood stained ropes to symbolize the loss of the Persian fleet and lives; military boots gilded with golden coins to symbolise the extreme opulence of the Persian kingdom; big, dice-like cubes to allude to the minimal chances the Persians had of escaping their fate; two decorated wooden boards to suggest both the doors to Darius' tomb and his coffin; helmets fixed on modern rifles to refer to the war; wooden triangles which in the geometric era were a direct reference to a sitting or a praying person symbolising the prayers for the safe return of the Persians. Finally, the performers themselves would act as scenic objects when necessary, as in the case of Atossa's throne: one of the performers adopted a sitting position to suggest an armchair and wore red gloves on his fistled hands to allude to the arms of the royal seat. Atossa would literally sit on his lap, placing her hands on the gloved hands as if seated on a throne which emphasised the body's importance in the performance. The lighting design was subtle and unsophisticated, rather dark, with brief intervals of warm hues, mainly yellow and orange and numerous 'fade-to-blacks' which marked the transition from one episode to the other. Maria Symeon and Vassilis Panopoulos composed a musical partition with repetitive metal sounds and ritualistic Doric austerity, which did not lack melodic parts, and reminded us of Greek folklore songs. Moudatsakis also designed the minimalist costumes as symbols which helped the text become image and left the body exposed to

render more obvious the physical effort<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, the male performers/actors and Atossa were dressed in black jeans and T-shirts, with the exceptions of the Messenger who wore a sleeveless military jacket adorned with medals to allude to his soldier status and Xerxes who wore colourful embroidered jeans and a silk scarf decorated with numerous small pendants to symbolise his status as king of Persia. He would end up practically naked but for a small undergarment covering his genital parts.

#### TEXT, TRANSLATION AND ACTING

With regard to the text, Kontouri did not interfere with Panos Moullas'<sup>9</sup> translation of the ancient text as she asserted that the text would 'speak' directly to the heart of the audience which would make the connection with contemporary Greek reality<sup>10</sup>. For her the challenge lay in transferring and linking the "deeply political, religious text"<sup>11</sup> – in the sense that people at the time believed in divine justice – to the present. Therefore, her dramaturgical analysis focused on the thorough study of the ancient text in order to stage in the simplest way its conventional meanings and hidden messages<sup>12</sup>. On the other hand, Moudatsakis viewed *The Persians* as a means to remind the public of the three main Greek linguistic civilisations: ancient, byzantine (medieval) and modern/contemporary. Being an expert linguist and a scholar, he translated the text himself and composed an innovative 'partition' of speech, inspired by the Greek civilisation, literature, language and syntax – while keeping extracts of the original text in it, such as the paeon “ὦ παῖδες Ἑλλήνων, ἴτε [...] νῦν ὑπὲρ πάντων ἀγών”<sup>13</sup> – in an effort to balance the power of the text and the power of its performance by communicating the former through the later.

Although Kontouri gave the actors instructions as to what she expected from them, she also gave them the liberty to decide themselves how to stage their role. Therefore, the individuality of each part is evident while they form a coherent group. However, Kontouri's main focus was the chorus whose parts are recited and not sung so as to make them clearer for the audience and to confirm the director's statement that the Aeschylean word was of great importance. She asked its members to deliver the text without showing emotion or colouring their voices, to move as one and be faithful to Kamagianni's soundtrack so as to express the anger, and the devastation of the people. She instructed them to progressively show how their pain turns first into fear and then into horror, as they slowly realise the destruction of the Persian Empire and the fall of their king. As a result, the verses recited by the Brides of Sorrow become more powerful and their impact on the audience is doubled. On the one hand the Persian women/mothers/wives are implicated to the plot and on the other hand women in a general sense are linked to war as its indirect victims. Contrary to Kontouri, Moudatsakis chose by means of an open audition five young actors to form the cast of *The Persians*, for both the main characters

<sup>8</sup> Interview given for the Greek antenna *Street Radio* on nov 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Panos Moullas (1935-2010) was a scholar and a philologist, Professor of Modern Greek at the Universities of Nanterre and La Sorbonne. His translation of the *Persians* was published in 2010, ed. Stigmi.

<sup>10</sup> Press conference [online]. Available at <https://www.youtube.com> [last viewed 23/1/2017].

<sup>11</sup> Interview in *Aggelioforos*, 13<sup>th</sup> may 2014. Source: archives of the NTNG.

<sup>12</sup> Press conference [online]. Available at <https://www.youtube.com> [last viewed 12/1/2017].

<sup>13</sup> Aeschylus, *Πέρσαι* [*Persians*], Athens, Zitros, 2007, v. 401-404.



and the chorus, as he wanted to teach them his method from the beginning. He believes that older, accomplished actors would not be as receptive to his teaching, since their acting is mature and their art has already been mastered. Accordingly, the actors work as a whole throughout the entire performance, all the while maintaining their own singularity. As Yannis Askaroglou (Darius) clarified in an interview (for the Greek antenna Street Radio on Nov 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014), the performers were not dancers to begin with; they discovered the physical requirements of the method during the first studio rehearsals. Each rehearsal lasted five hours: two hours were dedicated to physical exercise *per se* to warm up the body and three hours to the actual repetition: the text, the movements and a combination of the two. This gradually turned into improvisation based on impulses and reactions to the text which, consequently, led to the final movements. Askaroglou explains:

Our work was based on reflexes and the emotions produced by each moment. The moves were not shown to us, but ‘corrected’ on us. Since each body has a different way to express itself, each movement had to be made our own, adapted to our perception of it and to our physical abilities. This demanded a great deal of physical effort. Our aim wasn’t to narrate the story with our movements, it wasn’t a mime. We aimed at creating symbols that refer to an idea or a feeling or a point in the action. We had to transmit the density of the text with our body and through our experience and that is why it was so difficult and so demanding – physically<sup>14</sup>.

Agisilaos Alexiou (the Messenger) adds: “Corporality is what characterises this interpretation and the tragic elements of the text are put in evidence through formations, clean strong lines and symbolisms<sup>15</sup>”.

Indeed, the most important element for Moudatsakis is the actor’s body. In his approach he uses its infinite ability of expression through physical effort and, by extension, through suffering. Moudatsakis introduces a new method of performing ancient drama, which received a UNESCO award in 2014. The starting points for his method (as he states in his interview for *MC News*<sup>16</sup>) are the philosophy of Heraclitus and the ideas of Dionisius the Areopagite, as well as Antonin Artaud’s *Théâtre de la cruauté*. His technique focuses on the combination of physical effort and concentration, in order to gather and pull energy from the environment, then store it inside oneself, until diffusing it again on stage during the performance. Critics mentioned the method has a ‘post-tragic style<sup>17</sup>’, and Petros Anastasiadis, professor of Philosophy at the University of Crete, suggested that the performance contradicts in a way the Aristotelian definition of tragedy as ‘μίμησις πράξεως’ (an imitation of an action)<sup>18</sup> since the director’s aim is to convey the tragic element by means of physical effort and not acting *per se*. The body’s

<sup>14</sup> Extract of the interview given for the Greek antenna *Street Radio* on nov 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014. Our translation.

<sup>15</sup> A.P., *Οι Πέρσες στην Αβινιόν* [*The Persians in Avignon*, 21/7/2014], [online] Available at <http://www.enet.gr> [last viewed 17/9/2015]. Our translation.

<sup>16</sup> Maria Chatzinikolaou, *Τηλέμαχος Μουδατσάκης: Η καλλιτεχνική δημιουργία χρειάζεται μεγάλες ελευθερίες* [Tillemachos Moudatsakis: artistic creation needs freedom, 3/11/14], interview, [online]. Available at <http://www.mcnews.gr> [last viewed 19/9/2015].

<sup>17</sup> Katerina Mylona, *Το βραβείο στους Πέρσες από την UNESCO*, [The UNESCO prize to *The Persians*, 10/1/15], interview, [online]. Available at <http://www.patris.gr> [last viewed 15/9/2015].

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, VI.30.

energy is diffused in space producing numerous symbols and images, which create harmonic sequences; these sequences are again combined with the physical effort of the actor, and so on. The actor's/performer's body imprints the codification of the roles hence defining the different characters of the play. This goal is achieved, through structural moves performed with mathematical-geometrical precision inspired mainly by the paintings of the Greek geometrical era, the red figure vases and the Parthenon reliefs. That physical effort, the principle of pain and suffering of the body, is the means to transmit theatrical poetry.

So, Anastasiadis' point that such an approach to text and performance invalidates the Aristotelian definition of tragedy as "the imitation of an action"<sup>19</sup> is confirmed by the fact that actors basically compose and decompose meanings, symbols and situations to perform an interpretation of the historical facts within the fictional environment of *The Persians'* plot, thus proving that the density, rhythm and power of the text can be transmitted by the corporality of the tragedy, the body movements and the complex acrobatic formations. The concentration that the performance demands and the energy drain are considerable and that is what transforms the tragic text into physical pain. The poetic rhythm is then diffused in space, while speech transmits the contents of a linguistic signified in association to the multiple signifiers. And, since the play is the product of a theatrical transcription, we could possibly call it a 'scenic text'.

#### A STATEMENT FOR TODAY'S CRISIS

Despite the considerable differences in their technical and dramaturgical approach, the same concerns motivated both Kontouri and Moudatsakis to stage this play: Greece's current political and financial situation, due to the government's mishandling and abuse of power to serve individual interests. Accordingly, they chose to stage *The Persians* as a statement in times of extreme political complexity when many citizens in contemporary Greece still consider every day as a lost battle against politics and government interests. As the Persians, the Greeks not long ago placed their confidence in their rulers only to be confronted with the disastrous outcome of the government's arbitrary decisions, broken promises of welfare and true democracy, poor judgement and numerous compromises. When talking about his approach to Xerxes' part and the way he conceived it, Kolovos (NTNG) admits being inspired by the current political situation:

I was looking for clues as to my approach to the king with the 'superego'. And then I opened the window and saw that our society is full of destroyed kings who with their ungainly actions ruined their country, without taking responsibility for their criminal negligence that led us where we are now [...]. That great play is modern, it screams to us to wake up and to realise that our rulers are arrogant and addicted to power and that we need not allow them to be so<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, VI.30.

<sup>20</sup> Vasilis Bouziotis, *Γιώργος Κολοβός: "Όπου και να γυρίσεις πια, βλέπεις ένα Ξέρξη...λέρα"*, [Giorgos Kolovos: "Wherever you look, you see Xerxes...and filth", 13/8/2014], interview [online]. Available at <http://www.ntng.gr> [last viewed 19/9/2015]. Our translation.

So both directors insist in their interviews on the point that the play is a warning against hubris and arrogance. Our contemporary Lord David Owen defines the Hubris Syndrome as “including a narcissistic propensity to see the world as an arena to exercise power and seek glory<sup>21</sup>”, which he considers as a characteristic of contemporary heads of State<sup>22</sup>. Kolovos comments on hubris:

The [*Persians*] message to the audience is that the millennia may pass but Hubris still exists. Passions, ambition, vanity, are issues that people had to address and resolve throughout their lifetime either then or now. *The Persians* show how power can become an instrument of destruction in the wrong hands; that not many things have changed [...] since Aeschylus' time and that our decisions still and always will have consequences<sup>23</sup>.

Therefore, in both directors' view, the play is not a modern nationalist manifesto that lifts the spirits (the paean of the Greeks always gets strong applause from the audience) but an admonition and a warning against lack of respect and common sense. They believe that with what many will view as the same foolishness as Xerxes, the Greek government overestimated its power but had to ply (three times – by the time this article is being written) to the EU's decisions and ultimatums, putting the people in an extremely difficult situation. For them, *The Persians* are about taking responsibility. Nevertheless, Akis Sakellariou (Atossa-NTNG) points out that:

[...] citizens are to blame too, myself included. [...] What we need to do is learn from our mistakes and swallow our pride. We are a nation that cannot take responsibility. We cannot complain about the people we voted for. We have to assume our choices. [...]<sup>24</sup>.

Kolovos (Xerxes-NTNG) generalises:

Modern man is a lot like Xerxes. Not only the Greeks. We generally tend to avoid our responsibilities as individual members of our society and hide behind the whole. Similarly, when the time comes to face our part of responsibility in the disaster we put the blame on the group but exclude ourselves from it [...]<sup>25</sup>.

Surely during the last few years Greece is going through one of the biggest social and political crises in its history which often leads citizens/artists/journalists in addressing any other issue, no matter how important it may be, as a mere distraction. Therefore, although essential international issues such as the war in Syria or the immigration problem (equally important for the Greek reality) reach the news' brief titles, general

<sup>21</sup> See Lord David Owen, *Hubris syndrome: Diminished empathy and unbridled intuition* [online]. Available at <http://www.lorddavidowen.co.uk> [last viewed 5/10/2015].

<sup>22</sup> Lord David Owen, *Ασθενείς ηγέτες στην εξουσία*, Athens, Kastaniotis, 2008 (English title: *In Sickness and In Power: Illness in Heads of Government During the Last 100 Years*, London, Methuen Publishing Ltd, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Interview in *City magazine*, 31<sup>st</sup> July 2014. Source: archives of the NTNG. Our translation.

<sup>24</sup> Elsa Spuridopoulou, *Άκης Σακελλαρίου: “Η αλαζονεία της εξουσίας έγινε αλαζονεία της οικονομίας”*, [Akis Sakellariou: “The arrogance of Power has become arrogance of Economy”, 20/7/2014], interview, [online]. Available at <http://www.ntng.gr> [last viewed on 01/10/2015]. Our translation.

<sup>25</sup> Giorgos Papanikolaou, *Ο Γιώργος Κολοβός στο My Salonika*, [Giorgos Kolovos speaks to My Salonika, 30/7/2014], interview, [online]. Available at <http://mysalonika.gr> [last viewed 19/9/2015]. Our translation.

attention is focused on politics and the financial situation. Social issues being also neglected, Kontouri and Moudatsakis subtly point us towards them through their staging options. One of them is the use of nudity to emphasise loss and suffering and Vivi's technique focuses precisely on the body - as conveyor of theatrical poetry. Xerxes tears his clothes and ends up practically naked on stage so that the audience can witness his physical pain as he sweats and pants heavily from the effort required to perform his complex acrobatic moves while reciting the Aeschylean verses. This physical pain alludes to the suffering of contemporary Greek citizens whose sorrow and restlessness for the loss of their comfortable way of life could be gradually transformed into emotional and perhaps also physical pain. Similarly, in the NTNG performance, when the news of the destruction come, the Persian Elders literally rip their clothes in despair and stay half naked on stage, whilst later Xerxes appears completely naked to suggest the loss of the Persian army. But Kontouri's bold move is also an advice: it implies that one must be free of all 'conventions' in order to start over. Xerxes is revealing himself physically but, more importantly, emotionally. The fallen king stands naked - but for the quiver that covers his genitals - before the chorus as someone who regrets his mistakes and assumes his responsibility. Thus, in both cases, Xerxes' nakedness combined with his mourning confirms his repenting and his 'decision' to reinvent himself as a ruler, wiser from his experience.

However, only at the NTNG performance is Atossa present at the final scene and lets Xerxes go through his trial in silence, confirming his change by covering him with her veil in a tender, motherly action that raises further questions. Atossa's last action is a surprising innovation made by Kontouri and one of the rare times in both performances that her 'female' features occur. If we associate this adaptation with the addition of the Brides of Sorrow and the assignment of Atossa's part to a male actor, the question of gender is quickly raised<sup>26</sup>. On one hand the secondary chorus is a reference to the first-wave feminism's struggle for women to have a public voice<sup>27</sup>. On the other hand, Kontouri's approach to Atossa combined with Moudatsakis' choice to not insist on her motherly features and to present a vigorous, harsh and imposing queen allude to the recurrent anti-feminist view that a woman must have male 'characteristics' to rule. What is certain is that both directors see male and female features in Atossa - a bisexuality. Kontouri explains that "Atossa is a woman and a mother-queen but at the same time a ruler in the absence of her son-king"<sup>28</sup>, so her bisexuality is more psychological than physical since it is due to social conventions. Although entrusting the role to a man could imply Atossa's physical bisexuality (!), it chiefly suggests a certain indifference towards the choice of sexual identity: one does not need to define his/her gender to be a good ruler. Furthermore, Judith Butler<sup>29</sup> promotes the idea of 'gender' being equivalent to 'role' and theatre is a place where 'gender' can literally become a 'role'. In other words, to

<sup>26</sup> Being it impossible to elaborate on gender theories due to the article's limited space see, Elsa Dorlin, *Sexe, genre et sexualités*, Paris, PUF, 2008; Isabelle Clair, *Sociologie du genre*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2012; and Françoise Héritier, *Masculin/Féminin, Tome 1. La pensée de la différence*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> The first-wave feminism focused mainly on women's right to vote. See June Hannam, *Feminism*, London, Routledge, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Ileana Dimadi, *Μοιάζουμε κι εμείς με τους ηττημένους Πέρσες*, [We look like the defeated Persians ourselves, 14/8/2014], theatrical review, [online] Available at <http://www.athinorama.gr> [last viewed 24/09/2014]. Our translation.

<sup>29</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, New York, Routledge, 1990.

paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir<sup>30</sup>, Atossa is born a woman, but she becomes a man to rule.

In the final analysis, the differences between the two performances' visual and practical approach are evident. Kontouri opted for a classical approach by staging the play in the ancient theatre of Epidaurus, while Moudatsakis eliminated all elements of grandeur by choosing a small venue. Set, costumes and props served to impress the Epidaurian audience, whereas they were mere symbols and innuendos in the case of Vivi. Kontouri used the modern Greek text which easily came across to the audience, whilst Moudatsakis' translation contained elaborate literary elements, thus appealing to a more informed audience. The stage directions were limited to instructions, thus allowing the experienced actors of the NTNG to develop their characters according to their own perception of the part, while the young actors of Vivi were taught a new performing method. Moreover, Kontouri used two choruses by introducing the Brides of Sorrow, focusing on the choral parts, whereas Moudatsakis limited the chorus to one person. Last but not least, the power, emotion and tragic element of the NTNG performance were the result of the speech and recitation of the Aeschylean verses, whereas in Vivi's case they resulted from corporal effort and physical pain.

But, despite their formal and dramaturgical dissimilarities, it seems that both performances served the same purpose; both directors used this anti-war play to make a comment on the actual controversial political situation in Greece and the problems that the citizens are facing. Furthermore, they insist in all their interviews, on the importance of the Aeschylean message about hubris and arrogance and used the text to facilitate its communication to the audience, which easily identified the allusion to the current events. But although the directors did not stray from the conventional message of the play, we perceive an either conscious or unconscious attempt to also bring up through their staging options contemporary social issues such as gender, loss and suffering. These issues can indirectly and, by extension, by themselves, become bearers of political connotations, raise further socio-political questions and encourage pondering on them more thoroughly.

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<sup>30</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe, Tome 1. Les faits et les mythes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1986.



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