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Who will **sacrifice themselves** for the **ailing country**?

Yannis Leontaris in conversation with **Christina Zoniou**

i

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Who will sacrifice themselves for the ailing country?

Yannis Leontaris in conversation with Christina Zoniou

The conversation between my colleague Yannis Leontaris, stage director and academic, and myself took place on the morning of July 14, 2020 in Nafplio, following a suggestion made by the Editing Committee of the *Education & Theatre* journal that we should ask theatre practitioners to share their concerns, as most of them were forced to cancel or fully redefine their artistic projects while experiencing an often traumatic reshaping of their practice, plans, and way of life. The main topic of our conversation is the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed on the thoughts and practice of theatre professionals.

With an extensive education in humanities and arts combined with rich artistic and pedagogical work, Yannis Leontaris reflects in a simple yet poignant way on this particular human condition, the essence and the future of the art of theatre, the ways in which artists are able to react, the choices made by the Greek government to remove arts education from the curriculum of secondary education schools and finally, the impact of the pandemic on his own artistic practice.

At the end of our conversation, Yannis Leontaris offers a pre-publication excerpt of the first part of his new theatrical play called *1821–2021: Unknown Soldiers or a patriotism test*.

Christina Zoniou

Christina Zoniou: *Yannis, we can see that performing arts practitioners seem to live through a special time of collective reflection. In the previous months (March to May 2020), during the lockdown imposed due to Covid-19, we watched and participated in online discussions about the future of theatre and read some interesting posts by many theatre artists and researchers –yours included– about the pandemic and the lockdown condition we experienced. What are your thoughts?*

Yannis Leontaris: In order to grasp the essential aspect of this whole story, I believe one must definitely go through History, that is conduct a research of the past; every one of us, the regular citizens, not only the experts. For an ordinary citizen to understand what is going on, they have to dust off historical memory a bit. In my opinion, this constitutes both a great medicine and a tool for understanding things. In the absence of that, fear and panic will prevail. In an attempt to go back and investigate any similar past occurrences, I identified numerous periods with similar and greater pandemics, such as cholera or the Asian flu, which had greatly impacted Greece as well: the cholera outbreak in the 19th century and the influenza pandemic, also known as Asian flu, in the 20th century. These outbreaks wiped out entire populations and cities, ran their course and things returned to normal. It is said that a great pandemic breaks out every 100 years or so.

Personally, this connection with historical facts helps me realise that we ought to distance ourselves from the events. We should not assume that these events are on their own capable of changing our whole perspective on social life. This kind of events, such as wars and pandemics, ought to be regarded as a parenthesis in the history of humankind, so that we will be able to pick up the thread of things afterwards. Otherwise, we run the risk of falling into the trap of an imposed interpretation that says “your lives have drastically changed, and everything

that’s happening constitutes a turning point”. I disagree. We should be able to treat these negatively charged historical periods as parentheses. Otherwise, we are in danger of witnessing phenomena of collective depression or submission to a vague concept of “fate”. People’s –historically proven– ability to intervene in their lives is lost. I feel it is urgent that we preserve our ability to intervene in our own lives and not hand it over to anyone else. We should always keep this question in the back of our minds: What will come next? After this circle has been completed, because all circles are completed – either because the vaccine will be discovered or immunity will be achieved, no doubt with great losses, but at some point, just like a war, this circle will eventually be completed. What are we going to do next? Why should our lives necessarily change for the worst, as we are told or threatened, and not for the best? We should be respecting the environment more, for example.

We think that this is never going to end, we think that our lives will be like this from now on. Well, they will not. And we should not believe that they will.

C. Z.: *You have adopted a perspective which is different from the one pointing to hysterical fear, which stems from a sense that there is no way of escaping the grim fate that awaits us and there is no other choice than a self-punishment of guilt and voluntary enslavement – an “emotional plague”, as stated by the Belgian political philosopher Raoul Vaneigem, when commenting on the current pandemic. I feel that our role as artists and performing arts educators is perhaps to find ways, even in this adverse circumstances of physical distancing, to preserve our social relationships, to collectively imagine that “afterwards”, to even contemplate reasons to keep our hopes alive, using our art as a tool – provided that we will be able to practise it. Honestly, in what way do you feel this human condition specifically affects the art of theatre?*



Y. L.: The art of theatre is definitely affected to such an extent that its very essence is threatened. What exactly do we perceive as the essence of theatre? There are various approaches to this question, but I suggest that we focus on the notions of meeting and movement. Theatre primarily constitutes a space of meeting. This space can be perceived at two levels. The first level corresponds to the stage, which is not necessarily a theatre stage area, as it may even be a public space; still it is the space we define as stage, where the participants of the performance, the actors, physically meet. And at a second level, it is the meeting of these people with the audience. Both participants in the event, actors and spectators, in order to arrive at these meeting spaces have moved from somewhere else; that is, they have moved from their home, they have left their hearth. The actors inhabit the space we call stage in a dangerous manner – I call it dangerous because everything that occurs there is free of social filters, prejudices, stereotypes, etc. A truth of things is revealed on stage, as a result of this exact meeting. On the other hand, the spectators have left their homes and have moved to another place and have formed a temporary community, but during this community-forming process and in close contact with stage action, they experience an “internal movement”, a shift. As a spectator, leaving my home to go to the theatre does not constitute the only movement I will make. While at the theatre, I will also experience an internal shift stemming from what is happening right in front of me. And this is utterly different from any shift that could occur when I am at home watching a film or a recorded performance. It is of a different kind, a different level and a different quality. Therefore, when the operation of theatre is restricted, this condition is in fact cancelled.

C. Z.: *In your opinion, what will be the outcome of the virtual versions of theatre we have witnessed or many of us have created these past months and will perhaps continue to do so in the future?*

Y. L.: I am in no position to talk about the condition that might emerge. It could be interesting, but I also have to stress that a restrictive condition cancels everything that has long been perceived as the essence of the art of theatre, that is meeting and movement/shift. The new forms of theatrical representation and stage action in relation to performance art and the introduction

of multimedia or the Internet in theatre practice are likely to provide some answers. In my personal opinion, a pandemic cannot cancel the essence of a long-standing art form. Therefore, I’m going back to the question I raised above: What will happen afterwards? When all this is over, will it still be convenient to watch theatre from our own computers? Just a few days ago, the Greek Ministry of Culture announced funding for digital performances. I do not think it is necessarily a bad thing, because it responds to a very specific need deriving from current circumstances. However, because the measures implemented by the Government in the face of crisis are rarely withdrawn once the emergency that imposed them is over, I fear that this possibility of alternatively subsidising performances in a physical space and performances simply recorded and stored in a digital archive without ever meeting “live” with spectators will continue after the pandemic. Why am I afraid of that? Surely not because I think it is a negative development to have a new dimension of stage action in theatre, which will be based on its digital recording. We have relevant examples of stage directors, e.g. Katie Mitchell in Britain has handled the co-existence of filmed and live action on stage in a very creative way. In addition, there are excellent examples of virtual performances, which genuinely constitute interesting hybrid proposals. What scares me is the digital recording of what I previously called meeting and movement which occurs in a particular space with the sole purpose of being reproduced online in a “museum” manner. Nevertheless, promoting new forms of theatre which organically include digital image and online “dissemination” in their own “body” would be very positive, in my opinion. Still, it would be problematic if we are simply to record the theatre of meeting in the form of a postmodern memorial.

C. Z.: *Apart from the essence of theatre itself, theatre practitioners are equally threatened. I am afraid that many theatre professionals will be forced to look for work elsewhere, abandoning long and arduous research work. We have recently seen that artists have become increasingly mobilised undertaking collective action, which could be considered somewhat unexpected in such a competitive field. Is this a promising sign? Is there hope for young artists and graduates of Theatre Studies departments to continue doing this job? What happens with the labour rights of theatre professionals in times of crisis like the one we are currently facing?*



Y. L.: I believe that we are witnessing a third period of dominance in the history of Western theatre. Roughly speaking, the dominance of the actor lasted until the end of the 19th century and was replaced by the dominance of the stage director in the 20th century. I have the feeling that the producer has been gradually emerging as a dominant figure in theatre practice in the 21st century. Something that was established a long time ago in other art forms, such as cinema, has been happening, at least in Greece, to an extraordinary degree in the past few years, as we can see. This has gravely impacted the working conditions of theatre professionals and all other artistic contributors. These conditions have been degraded to such an extent that theatre professionals are on the verge of not practising their profession at all. I mean they are forced to practise another main profession to make a living and those who can afford to work in the theatre do so in their spare time. Thus, the art of theatre has once again become a major class issue. Some people may be financially able to do theatre, but the rest are faced with significant difficulties.

So, the pandemic and the closure of theatres lanced the boil, bringing all this to the fore, since theatre professionals have had trouble making ends meet. This forced us to meet again in an urgent manner, to start calling things as we see them and to put forward demands. Currently, efforts are made to set up unions and establish a new kind of collectiveness. My experience from participating in such collective efforts shows that there is a qualitative change, in the sense that that any potential divergence of opinion does not take priority within the framework of these mobilisations. Everyone is now focused on the meaningful goal, because it is an emergency. For me, this is a very positive development and I believe that something tangible will come out of this very soon in terms of the labour rights of theatre professionals and planning a broader cultural policy. You can't have one without the other. A trade union or a collective of theatre professionals cannot distinguish between the quality of working relations and the way in which the overall cultural policy is implemented in a country which ranks last among EU countries in terms of government funds allocated in the culture sector – when in fact we can observe a significant gap from the country ranking next to last. The latter, Cyprus, provides double funding relative to GDP to the culture sector compared to Greece, with Portugal and Italy offering triple funds. I am referring to three countries whose economies have also suffered from the preceding financial crisis. Therefore, the financial crisis cannot always serve as an alibi for the uneducated, indifferent and inadequate political officials so that they can keep cultural subsidies at such outrageously low levels, when their rhetoric – in an utterly hypocritical manner – monotonously reiterates that culture is the heavy industry of Greece.

C. Z.: *In other words, you think that narrowly defined union claims may well prove unfruitful unless they factor in and take a stand on the bigger picture, the wider role of arts within the Greek society as shaped by those making fast-track decisions about what will last and what will die. And looking at this bigger picture, we cannot help but feel sad about the government's recent decision to remove the few remaining arts subjects from the curriculum of secondary education. For decades now, the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network (TENet-Gr), essentially replacing the State, has helped theatre educators and teachers of all specialties in all educational stages and forms to*

use performing arts in a creative manner. This new development creates the impression that decision makers do not take into account this active interest expressed by the Greek education community in performing arts in schools – endless free training seminars, conferences, research, international and local networking. What is your opinion about this negative development for arts education?

Y. L.: I will begin backwards. All these years, there has been a request for the establishment of an Arts Academy or university departments with comprehensive study programmes focused on arts education. The main obstacle to granting said request was that arts subjects which could facilitate such a development are not included in the curriculum of upper secondary education. In other words, we were told that it is not possible to set up a Theatre Academy, which would be attended by students after successfully passing the national level university entrance exams, because there is no established examination of a theatre-related specialty subject (similar to the drawing exam, for example, taken by students who want to attend a School of Architecture), given that no such specialty subject is taught in school. This is exactly why the inclusion of arts subjects such as theatre, cinema, music, etc, in the curriculum of upper secondary education schools has been a long-standing request. It is totally absurd that students should be allowed to attend arts-oriented higher education institutions (HEIs) after sitting university entrance exams without being examined in a relevant subject. This is why the request involved the addition of arts subjects in the curriculum – which is an international practice, anyway. So, as we were waiting for this request to be granted, the government decided to remove any subjects already included in the curriculum! It is just preposterous and scandalous, clearly expressing a specific political stance by the Ministry of Education, whose officials appear to want to close any existing university departments that serve the arts. Removing the subjects from the upper secondary education curriculum, which could act as a bridge to enable students to attend arts-oriented HEIs, means that you generally want to degrade this particular field within the overall higher education system. It is just ludicrous.

C. Z.: *It is true. However, I can see that teachers, theatre educators and artists have dug their heels in. They don't seem discouraged despite any difficulties. We cannot rule out that new dynamics will eventually emerge in all fields of educational and artistic practice. How is your own artistic work fuelled by the pandemic?*

Y. L.: I am currently preparing a performance called *1821–2021: Unknown Soldiers or a patriotism test*. The pandemic in combination with all the hype surrounding the anniversary of the War of Greek Independence motivated me to attempt a second account. I'm saying it is the second attempt, because the first account was collectively undertaken by the Kanigunda theatre group in 2010–2011 in a performance called *City-State*. That performance focused on the history of the city of Athens in connection with the financial crisis and the Siemens scandal, in particular. It was based on the techniques of theatrical revue, utilising the tools of the revue and transforming them into tools for political thinking on stage. This performance travelled to New York, Paris, Germany and elsewhere. Ten years later, I am preparing the *Unknown Soldiers*, returning to the

materials of the revue but on the grounds of new data: an ailing society reflecting on the War of Greek Independence.

The short excerpt below is part of the dramaturgical material of the performance, which will be presented in Athens in 2021. The aesthetics is based on a combination of the codes of theatrical revue (dance, music, song) with archival material, composing a peculiar “national circus” on stage. The dramaturgy is diverse and heterogeneous. It comprises an original theatrical play, devised text produced during rehearsals and archival materials (speeches of politicians, autobiographical texts, journals, letters, press articles, literary texts). During the pandemic, a self-serving conferencier raises the serious issue of *self-sacrifice*. In other words, he forces everyone to face up to their responsibilities: “Do you love your country? Your country is sick. Two hundred years after the sacrifice of the heroes of the Greek Independence War in 1821, what would you be willing to sacrifice in order to cure her from this deadly virus?” However, this is far from a painless process. Things appear to be more dangerous. At the end of the performance, someone will definitely have to sacrifice themselves for Greece. It is essential that a modern Iphigenia should be found. Six characters, “random samples of Greek citizens”, take this patriotism test. And the spectators join them.

C. Z.: *I want to thank you, Yannis, for this conversation, as well as for the excerpt from your new theatrical play that you have been kind enough to share with us. A favourite writer of mine, Ursula Le Guin, says that poets are realists of a larger reality, in the sense that they can see not only what already exists but also the potential. I have a feeling that we are going to need poetry in these difficult times.*

Y. L.: I thank you too, Christina, for this conversation.

Translated from Greek: Aimilia-Alexandra Kritikou

Yannis Leontaris studied Modern Greek Literature in Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and received his PhD on Comparative Literature from Paris X-Nanterre University. He currently holds the position of Associate Professor in the Department of Theatre Studies at the University of the Peloponnese, Greece where he teaches Directing and Acting. From January 2016 since Mars 2017 he was President of the Board of Direction of the Greek Film Center. He worked as a film director from 1987 to 2003. His films have been awarded with the National Award for Best Short Film (1994, 1996) and the National Award for the Best Documentary Film (2002). Since 2004 he has been directing for the theatre. He is a founding member of the Kanigunda Theatre Company (2005–2014). He has collaborated with the National Theatre, the National Theatre of Northern Greece, Onassis Cultural Center, Athens Festival, Theatro tou Notou, “Karolos Koun” Theatre and Peiramatiki Skini tis “Technis”. He has also presented his theatre works in collaboration with international theatre institutions and festivals such as Festival Avignon OFF (2008, 2018), Festival Chantiers d’Europe (Paris 2013), Heidelberger Stuckemarkt Festival (2103) and Between the Seas Festival (New York 2013). In 2019, his work for the performance *The Elephant* was selected as the Greek participation at the 18th edition of the Union des Theatres de l’Europe Festival (Cluj-Romania).

Christina Zoniou MPhil, PhD teaches Acting and Social Theatre, at undergraduate and graduate levels, as a Tenured Member of the Specialised Teaching Staff of the Department of Theatre Studies, Faculty of Fine Arts, University of the Peloponnese since 2005 and as a Visiting Professor in the Universities of Pisa and Rome. She has created participatory performances based on theatre of the real in addition to facilitating social theatre performances. She has been member of the Board of Directors of the Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network (TENet-Gr), participating in numerous actions.

1821–2021: Unknown Soldiers or a patriotism test – a pre-publication excerpt

Scene One

CONFERENCIER:

*Ladies and gentlemen,
good evening.
You are here tonight
Because you know
what is going to happen,
what has to happen.
The pandemic now inhabits every
corner of our country.
Fear is the feeling that unites us all.
You are anxious
and terrified
just as I am.
Lost
Desperate.
Things are not going well.
This is not the first time that the
Nation
has found herself on the edge of
a cliff.
There is no light.
But this time
it is clear
that nothing.
There is nothing
we have learned
from the past.
We have forgotten the meaning of
sacrifice.
However
A recent
rare
archaeological discovery
forces us
forces you
once again
to take responsibility.
In Crete the bones of a young girl
have been unearthed.
Archaeologists are convinced that
this creature
was once
sacrificed on the altar of this same
country to appease gods
following the great earthquake that
destroyed the Minoan civilisation.
In the meantime
From that day to this
gods have died.
What about you?
What are you going to do,
dear ladies?
Honourable gentlemen?*

*The earthquake of then
is today's pandemic.
Ever since
tens, hundreds, thousands, hundred
thousands, thousand thousands
compatriots,
have sacrificed their lives
for this country.
They have fought
Have been executed
Martyred
Set themselves on fire
Thrown themselves into the void
Hanged themselves
Without second thoughts.
Without exchange.
Without reason.
This year, amidst a pandemic,
we celebrate the 200-year
anniversary of the ultimate sacrifice.
The sacrifice of the heroes of the
Greek War of Independence.
Why do we celebrate?
How dare we?
Today the country
is nearing her end.
Stands just before the end.
In her death throes.
In the intensive care unit.
Without gods.
Without faith.
Without myth.
Without elation.
Without narrative.
Without ceremonies.
History, ladies and gentlemen, does
not consist of logical implications.
It is blood.
Transcendence.
History is a matter of metaphysics.
Of psychoanalysis.
Of the absurd.
Of faith.
It requires propitiations and
ceremonies.
Tonight
We have gathered here
To provide the country
with what she needs.
For what she pleads screaming.
Mourning.
A self-sacrifice.*