

## THE IDEA OF HUMAN TRAGEDY ON GREEK CONTEMPORARY STAGE – THEATRE DIRECTORS OPENING A POLITICAL DIALOGUE

This paper aims at examining human catastrophe as represented in different case-studies of the contemporary theatre stage of Greece. The case studies include the play *Iraq – Nine Parts of Desire*, by Heather Raffo, presented in 2017 and in 2023 in Ergotaxion Theatre, in Athens Greece, the opera *Carmen* by Georges Bizet, produced in 2018 by the Greek National Opera and the play *A View from the Bridge* by Arthur Miller, produced in 2018 by the Greek National Theatre. In terms of methodology, the three different productions are examined under the same criteria, namely the play, the vision of the director, the means employed, possible challenges and perception of the play. According to the findings of the paper, despite differences among the performances in terms of the themes of the plays and the sizes of productions, audiences and spaces, artists shared a common critical view of today's society embedded in the interpretation and staging of their plays, setting human tragedy on an overlap between stage and real-life, through different means, mainly scenography, costumes and method acting coaching. In the case-studies examined, the stage served as a space of political debate, as deliberately and creatively set by the relevant theatre directors.

**Key-words** *catastrophe, tragedy, stage, contemporary, political*

### Introduction

Although the 21<sup>st</sup> century may arguably be considered as the most technologically advanced of all times, there are still acute crises and catastrophes of people or nature that keep torturing humanity. Wars, massive killings, extreme natural disasters, or the relatively recent Covid-19 pandemic are a few of the examples demonstrating that no matter the advances, humans themselves are ready to trigger unspeakable human tragedy, leading to an overall loss of faith and confidence of the general public towards politics and institutions to safeguard world peace, solidarity, democracy and human values.

Throughout time it is observed that the theatre stage, performing arts and arts in general, are functioning as a mirror of society, artistically expressing people's agony while struggling through crises. Arguably, this phenomenon develops a link between art and politics in various ways and extends. Some examples may include German expressionism as showcasing artists' critique on the social and political situation especially between WWI and WWII<sup>2</sup>, or the overall work of Brecht as theatre expressing political views and at the same time, stimulating and cultivating viewers' critical thinking<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> National and Kapodistrian University of Athens.

<sup>2</sup> Theodor Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and politics*, London and New York, Verso Books, 2020, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Siegfried Mews and Herbert Knust (eds.), *Essays on Brecht: Theater and politics*, Chapel

Interestingly, human catastrophes may be considered as already represented in literature starting from Homer<sup>4</sup> and in ancient theatre texts, such as Euripides' *Hecuba* and *The Trojan Women*, on the sufferings caused by war<sup>5</sup>, to name a few examples. Otherwise, research may have more to explore in terms of human catastrophe representation on theatre stage, examining both text and beyond text-related representations, while shifting from historical cases and rather shedding light to contemporary theatre production.

In this context the aim of this paper is to examine human catastrophe as represented in different case-studies of the contemporary theatre stage of Greece. To this goal, three different productions are to be examined under the lens of the same study – parameters. The three case-studies were chosen as showcasing on stage different kinds of human tragedy through different means, yet almost at the same time and at the same region – audience, while the fact of the representation of human catastrophe was actually one of their main elements. The case studies include: the play *Iraq – Nine Parts of Desire*, by Heather Raffo, presented in 2017 and in 2023 in Ergotaxion Theatre, in Athens Greece; the opera *Carmen* by Georges Bizet, produced in 2018 by the Greek National Opera; and the play *A View from the Bridge* by Arthur Miller, produced in 2018 by the Greek National Theatre.

The common criteria under which the three plays are about to be viewed explore the sub-questions of how human catastrophe is represented, what is it that makes it “human” and how these representations function aesthetically and symbolically. Under this scope, these criteria include, firstly, the play and the author in order to set a context of the production as well as to define whether the human catastrophe aspect is already present in text, and therefore present in the performance by default. Secondly, the vision of the director and context of the production are to be explored in order to identify whether the director had a deliberate idea to express possible aspects of human catastrophe on stage apart from the ones of the text, if present. For this purpose the posters of the productions were used as visually optimising the main elements of the directors' vision, as well as their own statements on interviews and other media appearances. Thirdly, the means of human catastrophe representation on stage are to be explored focusing on the core components of a performance such as scenography, costumes, acting, music, lighting, overall direction or other means employed to enhance the performance or the viewers' experience. Fourthly, possible challenges on the way to this representation of human catastrophe on stage are to be explored, as well as, fifthly, the relevant perception of the performance and of the human catastrophe representation where applicable.

Notably, the author of the present article viewed live performances of all the three productions discussed herein.

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Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1974, p. 199.

<sup>4</sup> Alan H. Sommerstein, “Atê in Aeschylus”, in Cairns Douglas (ed.), *Tragedy and Archaic Greek Thought*, 2013, pp. 1-15, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Helge Solbakk, “You can't go home again: On the conceptualization of disasters in ancient Greek tragedy”, in Dranseika, Vilius, Bert Gordijn and Dónal P. O'Mathúna (eds.), *Disasters: Core concepts and ethical theories*, 2018, p. 87.

### ***Iraq – Nine Parts of Desire***

#### **Play & Author**

To create a context about the author and the text, the play *Iraq – Nine Parts of Desire* was written in 2003 by Heather Raffo, a female American writer, her father born in Iraq. It is a combination of nine monologues representing nine Iraqi women during the time between the first and second Gulf wars and occupation. Therefore, it is a play where human tragedy is plainly set as its main theme, since it is a play about women and war, or women during war, including captivation, massive killings, raping and overall disaster through bombing and the use of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, despite the seriousness of the issues discussed, the latter are approached through various perspectives including humour and a common feeling among the heroines of hope for peace, liberation and freedom<sup>6</sup>.

In the play, these nine women coming from completely different backgrounds share their personal stories bringing together the East and the West. In this light, the writer artistically achieves a cross-cultural gender portrayal by showcasing that all these women no matter where they are from share the same inner thoughts, fears, secrets, hopes and desires<sup>7</sup>.

Interestingly, the writer got inspired for this play by viewing a painting of a female artist in the contemporary museum of Baghdad, which triggered her desire to explore what it means to be a woman during war times. The play is well recognised as a major success with important awards and productions all around the world<sup>8</sup>.

#### **Vision & Context**

Although the two productions of the play had different directors, namely, Maria Olon Tsaroucha in 2017<sup>9</sup> and Efi Meravoglou in 2023<sup>10</sup>, they shared a common vision, to tell Iraqi women's side of the story, in times of scepticism against the East and of rising femicides, through stimulating emotion, cultivating empathy through experience and engaging the audience's feelings. This comes as no surprise since the two directors were already collaborating in the first production, they are both acting coaches and they share a friendship and a common view on method acting.

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<sup>6</sup> Gamze Ar, "The Analysis of Heather Raffo's 9 Parts of Desire," *Melius: Journal of Narrative and Language Studies*, 2023, 1(1), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Shaimaa Saeed, "Cross-cultural Performativity of Gender Communication in Heather Raffo's Play Nine Parts of Desire, *HERMS*, 2006, 11(3), p. 346.

<sup>8</sup> Heather Raffo, *Iraq - 9 Parts of Desire*. [online] <https://heatherraffo.com/projects/nine-parts-of-desire/> (accessed November 29th, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> In 2017, music was made by Maria Olon Tsaroucha, photos by Nikoletta Giannouli, sounds and lighting by Vassilis Dodos and the cast included Despoina Nikitidou, Dimitra Skebi, Efi Meravoglou, Ioanna Kyritsi, Katerina Bouzani, Maria Trygoni, Myrto Lodorfou, Sotiria Chrysikopoulou. Culture Now, *Iraq - 9 Parts of Desire* (in Greek). [online] <https://www.culturenow.gr/iraq-9-topoi-epithymias-ston-texnoxoro-ergotaxion/> (accessed November 28th, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> In 2023, scenography was made by the team, costumes by Sofia Katsoura, music by Efi Meravoglou, lighting by Giannis Karalias, the cast included Mygdalia Andreou, Aristeia Anyisi, Konstantina Varda, Efi Meravoglou, Christina Mouzi, Sofia Paspaliari, Anastasia Ravani, Andriana Stravidopoulou, Sotiria Chrysikopoulou and little Dimitra Bellou. Lifo, *Iraq - 9 Parts of Desire*. [online] <https://www.lifo.gr/guide/theater/events/irak-9-topoi-epithymias> (accessed November 28th, 2023).



**Image 1. Poster of the production *Iraq, 9 Parts of Desire*, 2017. Poster Design by Dimitris Semitecolo.**



**Image 2. Poster of the production *Iraq, 9 Parts of Desire*, 2023.**

As shown on the poster of 2017, there is the symbol of the feminine already at the fonts of the letters for the word Iraq at the title. Furthermore, there are symbols of the representation of all women, since there is a crowd at the background and at the same time, a meeting of the East with the West at the woman at the front, bearing some symbols of the East, scarf for the hair and worry-beads at hand and herself a brunette as typical of the East, yet only half hair covered and a red lip-gloss reflecting possibly as well the notion of desire as included in the title and throughout the text. Viewing the poster of the second production, it appears that both posters are designed in similar colours, namely black, sepia-gold, red and some white for the letters. Comparing the two posters, the woman at the first, stands in enface position and looks straight in the eyes, almost fearlessly, while the woman at the second poster only implies a look for a moment away from the floor, under her bourga-veil and while bending her body as expected from subalterns<sup>11</sup>.

It appears that the feminine element is more present in the first poster with the crowd of the women and the font-symbol, compared to the second poster where it appears to showcase three main elements, the East, from the font and the burqa, the Woman as submissive to Man, as she is bending and fully covered without even some breathing space allowed, and Desire. Desire in red colour rather dominates the scene, along with the eyesight outwards where there is possibly hope. After all, women's seductive nature is justified in the sacred book of Islam, the Talib, according which

<sup>11</sup> Hany Ali Mahmoud Abdelfattah, "When the subaltern speaks: solo narrative performance in Heather Raffo's *Nine Parts of Desire* and Issam El-Yousfi's *Tears with Alcohol*," *Interventions*, 2022, 24(1), pp. 88-101, p. 100.

when God created the ten parts of desire, he gave nine parts to women and one to men<sup>12</sup>. Interestingly, these choices about these posters on these two different eras of the production may reflect directors' views as influenced by the relevant context at the time, especially in light of a rather downturn on women's rights in Greece after the sharp rise in femicides during 2020 - 2023 and the re-evaluation of the legislation to decrease the criminal gravity of gender-based violence in 2018.

#### Means

As explained by Efi Meravoglou<sup>13</sup>, the means employed aim at stimulating personal engagement of the audience, as the main goal of the vision of both productions. Overall, there is a common approach, where directing invests largely in coaching the actresses through specific acting code and dedicated preparation, along with scenography, costumes, lighting, music and experience of the actresses themselves and of the viewer, including before the starting of the performance.

In 2017, as shown in the photos given to the press, this is mostly pursued through showcasing the portraits of the women – heroines looking straight in the eyes of the viewers, making them part of the story. At the same time, viewers appear as sharing part of the responsibility, since these eyesights appear as waiting for viewers' response on their stories, such as on the photo with the blood on the hand of the woman (Images 3, 4, 5, 6).



**Image 3. Press-Kit Photo for the production *Iraq, 9 Parts of Desire*, 2017.**

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<sup>12</sup> Gamze Ar, "The Analysis...", *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Efi Meravoglou, Interview by Eirini Polydorou about the production and direction of the play by Heather Raffo, *Iraq, 9 parts of Desire*, 10.07.2023.



**Image 4. Press-Kit Photo for the production *Iraq, 9 Parts of Desire*, 2017.**



**Image 5. Press-Kit Photo for the production *Iraq, 9 Parts of Desire*, 2017.**





**Image 6. Press-Kit Photo for the production *Iraq, 9 Parts of Desire*, 2017.**

Perhaps the most fundamental of the means for both the productions was a three months preparation, coaching and research for all the actresses through method acting, considered as favourable to cultivating viewers' empathy and personal engagement<sup>14</sup>. In this context, actresses also had the opportunity to enrich their acting research through meeting with civil society organisations and people coming from Iraq.



**Image 7. Press-Kit Photo for the production *Iraq, 9 Parts of Desire*, 2023.**

Expressionistic acting<sup>15</sup> was employed in both directions where the wide range of voices, intense gestures and overall body engagement used (Image 7) could serve firstly, familiarising audiences with a view of a multiple self, as western viewers of manners closer to Delsarte's actor would be brought closer to the ways eastern cultures express their words, and secondly, highlighting the gravity and intensity of the sufferings presented<sup>16</sup>. Although the play is all about women's suffering during wars and occupation, there was absolutely no violence on stage.

To the contrary, even in moments of intense emotions, there was an overall feeling of calmness on stage, allowing the notable participation of a child of nine years old on stage, the daughter of one of the actresses in the production of 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Verducci, "A moral method? Thoughts on cultivating empathy through method acting," *Journal of Moral Education*, 2000, 29(1), pp. 87-99, p. 97.

<sup>15</sup> Maria Olon Tsaroucha, *Iraq – 9 Parts of Desire* (video, in Greek), 2017, [online] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmTRjMBg4WM> (accessed November 20th, 2023).

<sup>16</sup> Walker, Julia A., "'In the Grip of an Obsession': Delsarte and the Quest for Self-Possession, in 'The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari'", *Theatre Journal by the John Hopkins University Press*, 2006, 58(4), p. 618.



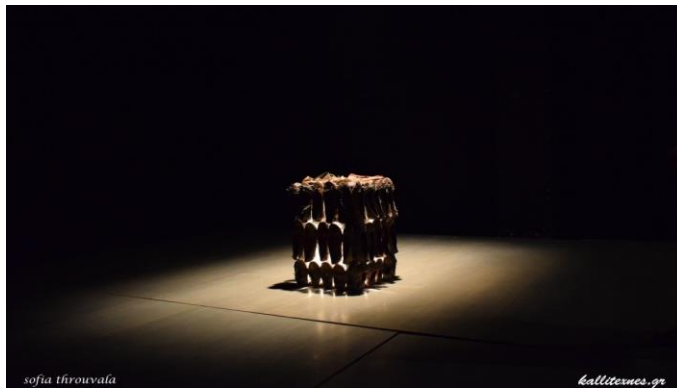
**Image 8. Press-Kit Photo for the production *Iraq, 9 Parts of Desire*, 2023.**



**Image 9. Press-Kit Photo for the production *Iraq, 9 Parts of Desire*, 2023.**

Scenography in both productions was austere and symbolic. In 2017 the central scenery of the production was a square box, made of shoes, since shoes were used as the only way to identify corps in Iraq (Image 10), bringing on stage the human tragedy of not even being able to recognize the bodies of dead beloved-ones in times of war.





**Image 10. Photo by Sofia Throuvala, published in the press,  
*Iraq, 9 Parts of Desire, 2023.***

In the production of 2023, the back and floor of the stage are covered with the material of a military camouflage, showcasing the overwhelming presence of war, while making a reference to the texture of a sand and desert (Images 8, 9, 11), staging the catastrophe of a dry land, because of the war and especially because of a war over water, which is a main element and motive of the text. Also, there is the bottom part of a tree and roots coming from the ceiling, since women are rooted, as bound with their land and simultaneously uprooted due to the war (Images 11, 12). This idea is also reflected in the mostly dark lighting (Image 12), staging that women emerge from earth where they are rooted and therefore bound to suffer its catastrophes.



**Image 11. Press-Kit Photo for the production  
*Iraq, 9 Parts of Desire, 2023.***

Regarding costumes and props, instead of any furniture, there are big pillows on the floor, in accordance with the eastern interior of houses and way of living (Image 11). In addition, to the opposite of human catastrophe there is also on stage a female divine entity of the water bearing wisdom and hope for peace. For her, a total white

costume is selected, designed according to the traditional Eastern burqa dress for women covering all body and head, leaving only the eyes to appear, which in real life would be black.



**Image 12. Press-Kit Photo for the production  
*Iraq, 9 Parts of Desire, 2023.***

Apart from that, all heroines' costumes are according to the traditional dresses for women, including their hair scarf-covered, mostly in colours of earth, so that they are unseen compared to background, as they are unseen in real life and especially in times of war, yet sometimes allowing for some red elements staging also desire, passion and hope for life (Images 12, 13)



**Image 13. Press-Kit Photo for the  
production *Iraq, 9 Parts of Desire, 2023.***

Additionally, there is a staging of a meeting between East and West as all heroines with their stage entrance bring to the stage some prob relative to their story and to their east heritage, yet combining western elements, such as a carpet with eastern design with a west-brand notebook (Image 13).

The lighting is rather dark (Image 7, 8, 9), mostly expressionistic with high contrasts (Images 12), wide use of focal lighting points (Image 7, 10, 11, 13) and in warm tones (Image 11) when in more bright moments, such as in the presence of the divine female goddess bringing hope for peace.

### Challenges

The lighting is one of the aspects of staging human catastrophe and the overall performance, where challenges were set, since the small size of the theatre, of the stage space, of the height of the stage and of the distance between viewers and stage, along with the limited budget possibilities would not allow the full implementation of director's ideas. After all, as most off-Broadway theatres of Athens, *Ergotaxion Theatre*, where both productions of the play were presented, allows for limited stage possibilities and a maximum capacity of 50 seats for the audience. Nevertheless, Evi Meravoglou, the person that initiated both the productions of the play, suggests that if given the possibility to have literally no obstacles in terms of stage size and finance, she would still choose a black box theatre as more convenient for the creation of a feeling of captivity for the audience's experience.

Furthermore, there were political issues connected with the staging of this play, as its presentation of the human catastrophe connected to a rather recent war, touching on sensitive high political issues that for example would not allow for the presence in the audience of high officials of the countries involved, let alone for assigning the play under their auspices. Eventually, the sensitivity of the political aspect of this performance would not allow for any communication support, especially in 2017 on the first presentation of the play in Greece, a country of sensitive importance for the Gulf wars.

Furthermore, especially in 2017 there were financial shortages as well as a high financial risk connected with the fact that the *Ergotaxion* theatre, which was only in its first year, would have to take the risk to stage a politically and commercially difficult play that would not guarantee tickets not even for its financial survival. Nevertheless, despite the odds against the choice of the particular play, Efi Meravolgou, which was also in the production team, decided to proceed, because she felt a need to stage this human catastrophe in a way that would combat ignorance and hatred and that would cultivate empathy to the best of the overall society, therefore arguably making a choice of an artist acting politically, with high possibilities for that to come at her livelihood expense and the survival of her newly established theatre.

### Perception

In terms of perception, interestingly in 2017 the play was perceived by audiences, and often fellow theatre artists, as "*not needed*" or "*not relevant*", according to their own words as noted by Efi Meravoglou. This general scepticism was rather inverted in the second presentation of the play in 2023 when the acting performances were praised, young audiences and school educators were interested in the play, which was overall considered as "*well said*", mostly needed and relevant. In an attempt to explain this much different perception between the two productions,

it could be interesting to see what the actuality and the common experience of Greece was in 2017 and 2023.

More specifically, 2017 was a time of rising levels of the far right, as Greece was under strict financial government measures of austerity and increasing levels of unemployment and poverty and sharpening polarisation, amidst rising xenophobia especially against muslims and people of Eastern provenance and, further pushed because of the ongoing proceedings of the trial for the murder of singer Pavlos Fyssas by the political party of Golden Dawn, that had taken place in 2013<sup>17</sup>. Arguably, this was not a favourable situation for staging a play about muslim Iraqi women. After all, there was the experience of the past where fanatic orthodox crowds would organise protests out of Chytirion theatre, where a small theatre company, similar to Ergotaxion theatre, had staged in 2012 the play *Corpus Christi*, where there was even violence and beatings against viewers of the play, the actors and journalists by protestors and the director of the play got sued and brought to court by Golden Dawn members<sup>18</sup>. On the other hand, in 2023 Greece and the whole world was struck by the riots in Iran for the murder of Mahsa Amini for taking off her hijab and for the oppression of women's rights by the religion police, which eventually led to more visibility for femicides and gender-related violence and claims of women's movements<sup>19</sup>. Greece was at the same time shocked by the femicide of Caroline Crouch by her husband in January 2023, monopolising the news for months, along with other femicides and gender-related crimes that would be brought to the attention of the media, in parallel with the rise of the Greek *Me Too* movement, which had started in 2021<sup>20</sup>. This context, further supported by the power of advocacy of people in the platforms of social media and the gradual prevalence of political correctness against a deeply rooted mentality of a toxic patriarchy in Greece, would create in 2023 a much more favourable momentum for this play, compared to 2017, at least because this time people could identify with the female perspective of the play, which was a trend in the daily news and social media.

Also, according to the audiences' verbally expressed opinions after the performance, the description of the napalm bomb disaster narrated in the play, would bring them horror, as identifying with the major train crash at Tembi region of Greece that took place in 28 of February 2023, thus during the time of the play's presentations, where 38 passengers were killed as burnt alive and which overall contributed to further polarising of the greek society at the time<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Jo Angouri and Ruth Wodak, "'They became big in the shadow of the crisis' The Greek Success Story and the Rise of the Far Right.", *Discourse & Society*, 2014, 25(4), pp. 541-42. Also, Dietmar Loch and Ovidiu Cristian Norocel, "The populist radical right in Europe: A xenophobic voice in the global economic crisis," in *Europe's prolonged crisis: The making or the unmaking of a political union*. London, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015, p. 251.

<sup>18</sup> Tassos Angelopoulos, "Corpus Christi Case (2012). An Attempt to Institutionalize Far Right Censorship Against Theatre in Greece," in *Concept*, 2021, 22(1), pp. 65-66. Also, Konstantinos Eleftheriadis, "Queer responses to austerity: Insights from the Greece of crisis," *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 2015, 14(4), p. 1044.

<sup>19</sup> Hamid Sajadi, "Iranian Women's Movement: Political Opportunities and New Forces," in *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 2023, 25(2), p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Fabienne Baider and Anna Bobori, "Online Reactions to the# MeToo Movement," *La toile et les femmes*, no 39, 2023, p. 60.

<sup>21</sup> Vassiliki Tsagkroni, "First thoughts on the 21 May 2023 election in Greece," *Greek Politics*

### *A View from the Bridge*

#### Play & Author

*A View from the Bridge*, written in 1955 by Arthur Miller<sup>22</sup>, concerns the reality of the working class people in Brooklyn of the 1950's. The main hero Eddie, a dock worker, falls madly in love with his niece Catherine, who is getting married to Rodolpho. The latter, together with his brother Marco, are the cousins of Beatrice, Eddie's wife, poor illegal immigrants from Italy hosted in the couple's house. Blind of jealousy, Eddie reports the cousins to the immigration authorities, they manage to bail out, yet during a fight with Marco, Eddie gets stabbed by his wife and dies<sup>23</sup>.

It is a play of social and political messages under a human-oriented perspective, highlighting the hardships and the sufferings poverty brings, and denouncing the social system of the time. The themes represented and relevant to human catastrophe include illegal immigration as crucial for survival, working class poverty and self-destructing lust and jealousy employed in such ways that Eddie is considered as a tragic hero and the play is often compared to ancient Greek tragedy<sup>24</sup>.

#### Vision & Context

The play was presented in 2018 by the Greek National Theatre<sup>25</sup>. As explained by the director Nikaiti Kontouri, her vision was to set the play to today, in view of the tragic fate of the immigrants and children flooding the Aegean in broken floats, and highlight the links of the play with ancient Greek tragedy<sup>26</sup>.

In this context, the abstract combination of a hook and a hanging rose in red background shown in the poster of the production, may symbolise the heroes of the play as hooked by their fate (hook) which was triggered by lust and or passion (red and rose), while the hook as typical in docs, could also showcase the hardships of working class, as well as the inescapable and suffering fate (hook) of illegal immigrants as one of the tragedies of the play and of today, especially in Greece (Image 14).

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*Specialist Group – GPSG Pamphlet*, (7). [online] <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3630037> (accessed November 22th, 2023).

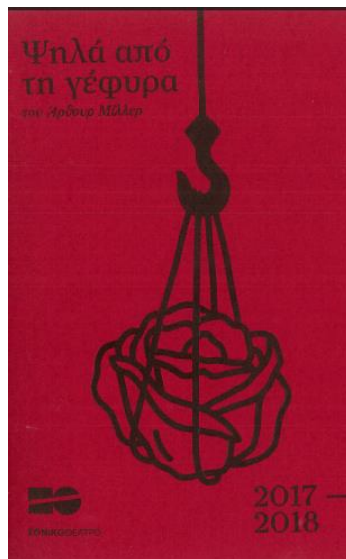
<sup>22</sup> Arthur Miller, *A View from the Bridge*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Gerald Weales, "Arthur Miller: man and his image," *Tulane Drama Review*, 1962, 7(1), p. 165.

<sup>24</sup> Hanyue Li, "The Idea of Tragedy in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and *A View from the Bridge*," *English Language and Literature Studies*, 2018, 8(2), p. 115.

<sup>25</sup> Translation, adaptation and direction was by Nikaiti Kontouri, translation by Giorgos Kimoulis, scenography by Giorgos Patsas, lighting by Lefteris Pavlopoulos, music by Sofia Kamagianni, choreography by Agni Papadeli-Rossetou, video by Yorgos Zois, assistant set and costume designer was Tota Pritsa, assistant director was Thalia Griva, dramaturg was Vivi Spathoula, and cast included Giorgos Kimoulis, Maria Kehagioglou, Nikos Hatzopoulos, Ilianna Mavrommati, Stathis Panagiotidis, Alexandros Mavropoulos, Kostas Falelakis, Paris Thomopoulos, Tasos Pirgieris, Kostas Korakis, Thalia Griva, Nikolas Hanakoulas, Ilya Algaer, Giorgos Matziaris, Anastasis-Simeon Laoulakos, chorus by The Company and musician on stage was Christos Kalkanis. National Theatre of Greece, *A View from the Bridge by Arthur Miller*, 2018. [online] <https://www.n-t.gr/en/events/oldevents/Aviawfromthebridge> (accessed November 30th, 2023).

<sup>26</sup> Nikaiti Kontouri, Interview by Eirini Polydorou regarding the direction of the play by Arthur Miller, *A View from the Bridge*, 15.07.2023.



**Image 14. Poster for the production  
*A View from the Bridge*, 2018.**

#### Means

Regarding the means, it appears that a scenography of abstraction and symbolism was key in staging human catastrophe in this production. As shown in image 15, there were hanging hooks across the stage for the hooked fates of the heroes.



**Image 15. Press-Kit Photo for the production  
*A View from the Bridge*, 2018.**

Another main part of scenography was a symbolic raft onstage accounting for desperate illegal immigrants floating in sea (Image 16).





**Image 16. Press-Kit Photo for the production *A View from the Bridge*, 2018.**

Notably, the hooks, the raft and all actors as well, were always present onstage, arguably as human tragedy is always linked with and present throughout one's life. Costumes may as well be considered as one of the means to stage human catastrophe on stage in this production and as making a clear reference to real life human tragedy taking place at the time of the presentation of the production.



**Image 17. Press-Kit Photo for the production *A View from the Bridge*, 2018.**

Notably, on the first appearance of the actors playing the Italian immigrants, the heroes appeared in orange life-vests (Image 17) similar to the real life-vests worn by real life illegal immigrants and asylum seekers (Image 18) seen almost daily in the news at the time of the production, as flooding the Aegean Sea of Greece and the Mediterranean,

tragically drowned at times in their hope to reach Europe<sup>27</sup>.



**Image 18. Photo by Andrew McConnell in Greece, 2015, published by UNHCR.**

### Challenges

As expressed by the director there were not any major challenges linked with the production of this play. After all, it was a play chosen and produced by the National Theatre of Greece, therefore no crucial financial, practical, political or other obstacles appeared.

### Perception

Regarding perception, overall there was general appraisal for the play and the direction in general. On the other hand, specifically the orange life-vests were not always welcomed. Notably, at that time, there were massive waves of monopolizing immigrants and refugees seeking asylum to Greece and a passage to Europe. The tragic incidents of their drownings due to the sinking of their boats in the Aegean Sea, as well as the inhumane conditions of their camps in the reception islands had been monopolizing the news in Greece and in Europe, involving the engagement of major organisations as well, such as the UNHCR and Amnesty International.

This growing visibility led to growing awareness of their sufferings, but at the same time to polarising society between those viewing migrants as a threat and those who would view them as suffering people who need our solidarity. Therefore, scepticism towards the production's staging of real life-vests and making a clear reference to the Aegean Sea tragedy, while it was not plainly needed by the text of the play, could be expressing the more conservative parts of society who would stand critically against the reception of the people massively arriving<sup>28</sup>. On the other hand,

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<sup>27</sup> Iosif Kovras and Simon Robins, "Missing migrants: deaths at sea and unidentified bodies in Lesbos," in Green, Sarah and Donnan, Hastings (eds.), *Migrating borders and moving times*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017, p. 171.

<sup>28</sup> Theodoros Fouskas and George Koulierakis, "Demystifying Migration Myths: Social Discourse on the Impact of Immigrants and Refugees in Greece," *Urbanities Journal of Urban*

indeed, it was not at all needed by the play to make such a clear reference to actuality, yet the artist-director apparently made a political choice on stage, contributing also to the overall momentum on raising awareness about the humanitarian disaster in the Aegean and the Mediterranean Sea, in times when authorities would still not provide for adequate policies.

### ***Carmen***

#### **Play & Author**

The play, written in 1875 by Georges Bizet and based on a novel of 1847 by Prosper Mérimée is considered as the most original of all french operas<sup>29</sup>. It is an opera comique about *Carmen* a gypsy that defied social norms of her time to live a life of freedom and passion<sup>30</sup>. The play takes place in the 1820s at the frontier of a remote town near Seville, Spain. A soldier, Don José, falls in passionate love with Carmen and abandons his childhood sweetheart, Micaela, a woman of virtue standing as the opposite character of Carmen. Jose loses his military career for her sake and follows Carmen into smuggling. Despite his desperate efforts, Carmen loses interest in him and he eventually kills her out of jealousy during a bullfight. The themes and motives of the play include freedom as opposed to captivation, violence as linked with savage passion, which would be opposed to morals and norms of the times about women<sup>31</sup>.

#### **Vision & Context**

*Carmen* was produced in 2016, presented again in 2018 by the Greek National Opera<sup>32</sup> and staged at Odeon of Herodes Atticus, the most important venue of the country, after the ancient theatre of Epidaurus. The vision of world class director, Stephen Langridge as expressed to the press material of the production referred to a “a modern, sharp, take on the opera, relevant to our times, set in contemporary Europe, a continent of closed borders and poverty”<sup>33</sup>. His view, as showcased in the poster of

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*Ethnography, Special Issue Greek Crisis Inequalities*, 2022, 12(5), pp. 19-20.

<sup>29</sup> Edgar Istel and Janet Wylie Istel, “Carmen: Novel and Libretto--A Dramaturgic Analysis,” *The Musical Quarterly*, 1921, 7(4), pp. 493-510, 493.

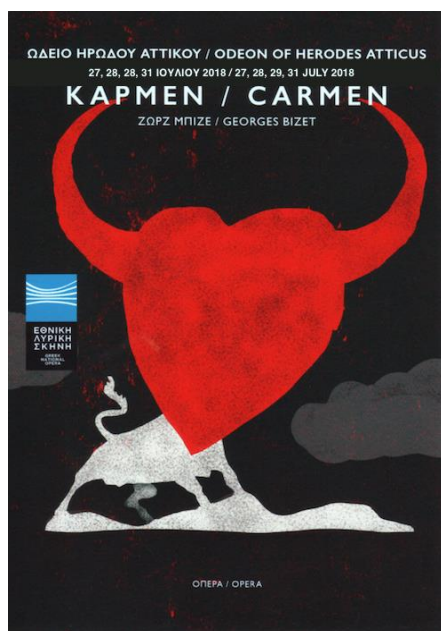
<sup>30</sup> June Dams, “The Femme Fatale Versus the Sentimental Heroine in Georges Bizet’s Operas: Characterisation and Performance,” in Sandhoff, Bridget and Hedenborg-White Manon (eds.), *Transgressive Womanhood: Investigating Vamps, Witches, Whores, Serial Killers and Monsters*, Oxfordshire, Inter-disciplinary Press, 2014, pp. 153-164, p. 153.

<sup>31</sup> Ciprian Tudor, “Bizet’s Carmen. Between the cultural agenda of the 19th century and contemporary postcolonial, post-orientalist or feminist readings,” *Analele Universității Spiru Haret. Seria Jurnalism*, 2017, 18(2), p. 17.

<sup>32</sup> Conductor was Lucas Karytinis, director Stephen Langridge, set designs-costumes by George Souglides, video by Silbersalz Film, Hagen Wagner & Thomas Bergmann, lighting by Giuseppe di Iorio, movement by Dan O’Neill - Fotis Nikolaou, chorus master was Agathangelos Georgakatos, children’s chorus mistress Konstantina Pitsiakou, cast of singers; Anita Rachvelishvili, Kate Aldrich, Pavel Černoch, Dimitris Paksoglou, Dionyssis Sourbis, Dimitris Tiliakos, Maria Mitsopoulou, Myrsini Margariti, Tassos Apostolou, Petros Magoulas, Yannis Selitsaniotis, Nikos Kotenidism, Chrissa Maliamani, Danae Kontora, Artemis Bogri, Harris Andrianos, Nikos Kotenidis, Nikos Stefanou, Christos Kechris, With the GNO Orchestra, Chorus, Soloists, Ballet and Children’s Chorus. Greek National Opera, *Odeon of Herodes Atticus - Carmen*, 2018. [online] <https://www.nationalopera.gr/en/archive/productions-archive/season-2017-2018/item/2190-carmen> (accessed November 30th, 2023).

<sup>33</sup> Athens Epidaurus Festival, *Carmen by Georges Bizet*, 2018. [online]

the production, reflects on when passion (dominating red heart) becomes savage (bull, heart with horns). Notably, the scene makes a reference to a bullfight, therefore to Spain where the play is staged, as well as to the last act of the play, when Carmen gets killed right out of the bullring. Interestingly, bullfighters take the bulls by their horns to control them, as it happens to this heart standing instead of the bulls' head/brains, since it is controlled by its horns, its savage passion. On the other hand, the body of the bull is white, pure before passion for Carmen, while the dominating red heart with horn brings dark clouds, referring to something dark about to happen, that would lead to human catastrophe, at the black background.



**Image 19. Poster of *Carmen*, Greek National Opera 2016 and 2018.**



**Image 20. Press-Kit Photo for the production *Carmen*, 2016, 2018.**

#### Means

Regarding means, the scenography and costumes of the production, by George Souglides stage human catastrophe by making a clear reference to real-life human catastrophe, viewed in the daily news. In more detail, the overall set was a staged refugee hotspot, similar to the refugee hotspot of the Greek island Lesbos, seen in the daily news of Greece and Europe, as a real-life humanitarian disaster of the 21st century. The play started with a high fence with guards and with containers on stage (Image 20) as the fence, the guards and the containers of the refugee's camps. Screenings of people in queues projected on containers (Image 21) would make a reference on people queuing to receive food, or to the absurdly long queues refugees would have to wait for days just to apply for papers. The overall set was all about captivation, poverty and people limited, imprisoned.





**Image 21. Press-Kit Photo for the production *Carmen*, 2016, 2018.**

Furthermore, in the third act, where Carmen meets with the smugglers, human catastrophe is staged with the setting of human trafficking and prostitution, again in the inside part of the containers (Image 22).



**Image 22. Press-Kit Photo for the production *Carmen*, 2016, 2018.**

As with all aspects of life in the refugees' camps, everything in this production would happen in or somewhere near the containers (Image 23).



**Image 23. Press-Kit Photo for the production *Carmen*, 2016, 2018.**

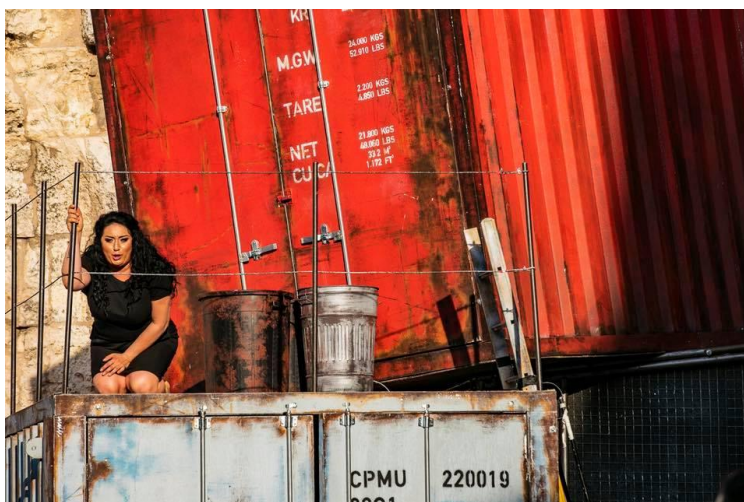
Apart from the setting, costumes were also a clear reference to the human catastrophe of desperation of refugees. The first time the chorus came on stage, all chorus singers, apart from the soldiers, came on stage wearing real orange life-vests and stood at a line, backs to the fence, creating a rather impactful image of people who just made it to not get drowned in the sea, yet they are standing as if they were about to be executed. Their acting and choreography, served as well to showcasing their fear and desperation in different scenes of the production, while soldiers would express the other side dominating over fear and power (Image 24).



**Image 24. Press-Kit Photo for the production *Carmen*, 2016, 2018.**



In this production, there were also references to human catastrophe as destruction of nature. In the beginning of the performance, there was on stage an out of context violent killing of a bull and throughout the performance there were trash bins on stage and projections of images and videos of nature being destroyed (Image 25).



**Image 25. Press-Kit Photo for the production *Carmen*, 2016, 2018.**

Additionally, in crucial moments there were flashbacks staged for the heroes, arguably as a chance that humanity still has to save nature and its own being, or as reverse timing for a fate to come, since despite the flashbacks, the heroes went straight to their destruction.

### Challenges

It may be supported that there were no apparent challenges linked with the production of *Carmen*. After all, all needed resources in terms of personnel, material, networking, design, finance and media communication were at disposal, since the play was produced by the country's largest music theatre institution, the National Opera of Greece, at one of its most important venues and with a world-class director and performers.

### Perception

Regarding perception, there were different opinions about the play's direction in critics from Greece, asking questions such as why highlighting a well-known problem which is everywhere in the news and why including it in a play about love, passion and freedom, rather than as an attempt to impress<sup>34</sup>. On the other hand, there were also supporters, suggesting that it was a well-put mirroring of reality, staging the biggest humanitarian crisis on European grounds, especially as viewed right next to Parthenon, the world's symbol of democracy and giving the audience food for thought<sup>35</sup>.

<sup>34</sup> Kostas Karasavvidis, *We saw Carmen in Herodion (in Greek)*, 2023 [online] <https://shorturl.at/mKN07> (accessed November 29th, 2023).

<sup>35</sup> Laurant Barthel, *Carmen sous le Parthénon*, 2023 [online] [https://www.concertonet.com/scripts/review.php?ID\\_review=13262](https://www.concertonet.com/scripts/review.php?ID_review=13262) (accessed November 29th, 2023).

### Discussion: Theatre Direction as Political Action

Comparing the three case-studies on the different criteria under examination (Table 1), the discussion focuses on how human catastrophe is approached in terms of the play, the performance, director's vision, the means, the challenges and the perception of the overall production.

To start with, text wise, all the three plays have passion and desire as a common theme, which in *Carmen* and the *View* leads to the hero's killing, and thus human catastrophe, while in *Iraq*, desire is considered as women's characteristic justifying their oppression by men, extending to violence, abuse and raping and overall, human catastrophe. Apart from human catastrophe linked to passion and desire, in *Iraq*, which is about wars, occupation, violence and women's oppression, human catastrophe is directly at the heart of each monologue of the text. Secondly, on the *View* the plot is driven by social injustice and poverty-driven illegal immigration. At the same time, in *Carmen*, the dominating theme of passion could indirectly be approached as freedom versus social norms' captivation, violence, smuggling, killing and also, as dominance of man over woman (passion/killing of Carmen) and over nature (bullfight/killing of the bull). Having in mind that all these stand as forms of human and natural catastrophes, it may be argued that human catastrophe in its social aspect is dominating *Iraq*, is more indirectly referred to in the *View*, and furthermore indirectly implied in *Carmen*. At this point, it could be noted that text-wise, apart from the killings of the heroes, the directors of the *View* and of *Carmen*, did not have to represent human catastrophe on stage, as it was not plainly written in the text of the plays. Consequently, it may be supported that the representation of human catastrophe on stage in these productions were directors' choices, according to their visions for their plays. Furthermore, despite differences in the texts of the plays and the sizes of the spaces, audiences, financial and other resources of the three productions, apparently there were similarities among the directors regarding their approaches for setting human catastrophe on stage.

Firstly, the similarities in the focus of the visions of directors, including self-destructing passion (*View*, *Carmen*) and desire (*Iraq*) and aspects of human catastrophe such as killings, social inequalities and violence in all the three plays, may arguably be considered as leading to similarities to the design approaches for the posters of the three productions, mirroring the visions of the directors. In this sense, the posters of all the three productions were more or less based on the same colours, black and red. Red for desire (*Iraq*) or passion (*View*, *Carmen*), black for a dark background setting the overall darkness of the scene, as one of human catastrophe (*Iraq* 2023, *Carmen*), or black as human catastrophe setting-sketching the image on a fully passionate-red background (*View*).

Additionally, all directors shared the idea of bringing the play to a modern version, to *today's* audience. In this context, they had common approaches in terms of the means they used to represent human catastrophe on stage, with a special focus on scenography and costumes. More specifically, they all introduced real-life human catastrophe references on stage, such as costumes- life-vests (*View*, *Carmen*), hooks, a float (*View*), fence, trailer and overall scenography of a refugee's hotspot (*Carmen*), and/or scenographic symbols to real-life human catastrophe such as death representation of massive killings with the shoebox (*Iraq*, Image 10). In this sense, directors employed their staging means as their on-stage response of the real-life today

at the time, which included wars and femicides (*Iraq*), a migration crisis with refugees drowning in the Mediterranean Sea (*View, Carmen*), or trapped in refugee hotspot camps and a sharp rise of human trafficking<sup>36,37</sup> (*Carmen*) (Table 1).

Table 1. Human Catastrophe on stage.  
Comparative presentation of the three case studies.

Human tragedy in...	<i>Iraq – Nine Parts of Desire</i>	<i>A View from the Bridge</i>	<i>Carmen</i>
<b>Play and author</b>	Throughout text, wars, killings, violence, rapes, desire as justifying women's oppression	Directly for passion & killing, indirectly social injustice, poverty, illegal migration	Directly for passion & killing, indirectly freedom against social norms, yet self-destructing
<b>Vision – directors' highlighted motives</b>	Meeting the East, awareness on their suffers, <i>today</i> approach, humour	Fate of working class and illegal immigrants, <i>today</i> approach	Freedom Vs Captivation, <i>today</i> approach
<b>Relevant real-life context at the time</b>	Wars, femicides, train accident, rise of far right, fascism especially against Muslims and East	Refugees drowning in the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas	Refugees drowning in the Mediterranean, Europe building walls and camps, rise of human trafficking
<b>Means</b>	Acting code, scenography, shoes-box, roots, costumes, symbols, experience theatre, always present, no violence on stage	Scenography – float, hooks, costumes – life-vests, real-life human catastrophe & violence on stage	Scenography – fence, trailer, guards house, videos, costumes – life-vests, real-life human catastrophe & violence on stage
<b>Challenges</b>	Stage size, space, seats, finance, promotion, politics	No major challenges	No major challenges
<b>Perception</b>	Scepticism at first, warm welcome afterwards	Scepticism about life-vests	Divided opinions on relevance of life-vests, refugee hotspot

<sup>36</sup> Mustafa O. Attir, "North African Regular and Irregular Migration: The Case of Libya," *New England Journal of Public Policy*, 2018, 30(2), p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> Fransje Molenaar, and Floor El Kamouni-Janssen, *Turning the tide. The politics of irregular migration in the Sahel and Libya*, CRU Report, The Hague, Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael', 2017, p. 6 [online].  
<https://sahelresearch.africa.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/170/Irregular-Migration-in-the-Sahel-and-Libya-2.pdf> (accessed November 30th, 2023).

Notably, although *Iraq* had the text of most present human catastrophe and violence, it was the production with the least presence of on-stage violence, and the most presence of humour as direction and acting figures. Acting was also most likely the most important of the means used in *Iraq*, to stage human catastrophe in different nuances, compared to the other two productions were scenography and costumes. One may argue that this could be the only choice for a production facing financial, spatial and overall implementation challenges. Yet, according to director's words<sup>38</sup>, even if given all the resources needed for a big production, she would still invest in acting as her main means for staging of human catastrophe, because she herself is an acting coach and strongly believes in her method for enhancing the transmission of the play's messages and the engagement and experience of both, actors on stage and audience off stage, which comes in accordance with findings of the literature<sup>39</sup>.

Nevertheless, regardless of the director's intentions, the first launching of the play was perceived with scepticism, as it was also the case with the real-life references of human catastrophe in the *View* and in *Carmen*, setting therefore scepticism as one more similarity among the three case-studies. It was even supported by critics, that in *Carmen* the director employed such references as a tool for impression<sup>40</sup>. Indeed, it may be considered as common knowledge of arts critics that the level of questioning a society's convenience zone is well-established among the metrics of what makes an artwork of high intellectual quality. In other words, the level of denouncing a society's defects is one of the characteristics discerning low art from high art, popular culture from high culture.

On the other hand, commercial art works that mostly spread pop culture and are easy to consume, lead at the same time to high commercial revenue, or at least higher, compared to high art. After all, the latter, comparingly less spectacular, overall more difficult intellectually or even emotionally inconvenient or at times a heavy experience, appear of less possibility to a viewer's purchase decision when buying theatre tickets, to have some fun on a Saturday night, after a long working week. Nevertheless, it is more or less this argument that makes high art as art for the few and intellectuals, yet for artists themselves this is not always a viable choice in terms of earning their livelihood through their craft. Bearing in mind all these parameters, it is interesting to see to what extent artists would choose to include a political perspective in their project and whether such a decision would affect the adequacy of their economic resources or a possible threat for the project's economic success. This is especially true for *Iraq*, where on top of financial limitations on the project's production, the play's political challenges, previously explained, could further increase the financial risk of a ticket-selling failure.

In other words, in *Iraq*, this play, as the staging of human catastrophe, was against its financial survival odds, while in the *View* and in *Carmen*, it was needless and against the policy of the government, who was the payer of the production, which arguably makes the choice of the directors not only deliberate, but also political and transforms the theatre stage to a platform of political debate. Arguably, some critics' or audience's participants' scepticism on staging human catastrophe not plainly requested by the texts of the plays, may reflect that not all parts of society are ready

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<sup>38</sup> Meravoglou, Interview..., *op. cit.*

<sup>39</sup> Verducci, "A moral method...", *op. cit.*

<sup>40</sup> Karasavvidis, "We saw Carmen...", *op. cit.*

to face its mirror. It may also be supported that the directors in these cases are not merely criticising a society, only to make some noise. They rather appear as artists who, despite any possible negative consequences of such a choice against them, they act politically through their art, doing art directed to their audience, to society and not art for the sake of art, eventually giving art a political role.

This political role may be a reason why the directors in these cases went beyond staging human catastrophe, to staging human tragedy, going beyond from a static snapshot of reality (staging catastrophe) to a critical view of the dynamics that led to the situation photographed (staging tragedy). After all, catastrophe, etymologically comes from Greek and it is composed of two words, *cata-* (κατά) which means down and *-strophe* (στροφή), which means turn. So, catastrophe stands for downturn and as it is used in everyday language, it is about a disaster that comes suddenly and of a massive extent, leaving nothing behind. On the other hand, a *tragedy*, as it is considered in theatre and in life, brings at some point a *catastrophe*, yet it does not hit suddenly, but rather comes as a consequence, while it is also connected with a *crisis*. The latter stands for a decision-taking-process based on certain *criteria*, and at the same time, for a turbulence created after a catastrophe, often without realising that the critical situation eventually leading to the disaster, was already there beforehand. In tragedy, the *crisis* of the tragic hero is fogged by his passion (*πάθος*) and his cloudy judgement leads him/her to committing *hubris*. Therefore, a tragedy, follows a scheme of stages, as the irreversible fate of the tragic hero who commits a *hubris*, such as Eddie in the case of the *View*, a play considered as related to ancient Greek drama<sup>41</sup>. Followed by *ate*, as he is blinded by his passion and commits an even more serious crime (betraying Rodolpho), leading to fate's intervention/Gods' wrath which is *nemesis* and, eventually followed by his fall, his disaster, (himself is killed), which is *tisis*. So, contrary to *catastrophe*, which is of static nature, in *tragedy*, which comes as a dynamic process, any disaster is fatal, follows stages and is caused by one's series of actions and choices-decisions (*crises*), who therefore bears responsibility.

In this context, it may be supported that the directors staged catastrophe as tragedy, in the sense that in all the three cases they were interested in a staging of the plays that would be *critical* to society and that would leave viewers with food for thought and a *critical* view of their everyday real-life. In *Iraq* raising awareness on the shared values among the East and the West, the war sufferings and women's perspective were clearly stated as the director's vision as set in a real-life dominating narrative against the East. In the *View* and *Carmen* directors' visions clearly included mirroring society's *hubris* on stage, regarding the way the West treats illegal immigrants and refugees, as set in prevailing real-life daily news.

Overall, the directors expanded from human catastrophe to human tragedy, stressed the political aspect of theatre and re-set the stage as a space of political dialogue and at the same time, as a reflection of society. In other words, the directors eventually questioned the limits between stage and real-life, allowing for audience participants to form their own *crises*/judgements on the *crises*/critical situations and responsibility bearers, through staging them as intertwined with real life.

Finally, one may argue that there is nothing new in discovering the political role of theatre, which is documented across the centuries, with a plethora of plays

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<sup>41</sup> Li, "The Idea...", *op. cit.*

from different eras and authors such as Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Brecht and Beckett, to name only a few examples. Yet, the point of the present is that beyond authors, there is also a political role of theatre directors. Directors, as set-stagers interpret any play and present their own narrative. As creative artists themselves, directors may as well be sensitive to society's stimuli and inter-act politically through their art. After all, in *Carmen* and in *View*, there was no need from the texts-plays to present any such human tragedy on stage, nor to connect it with real-life, while for *Iraq*, the staging of the particular play at the particular timing was a political act in itself.

Finally, the fact that perception of their work included scepticism arguably suggests that their perspective is mostly needed. If nobody reacted, it would have meant that no-one would feel inconvenienced, that no-one would care and that human tragedy in real life would have prevailed as a norm. Yet, there was a reaction, which triggered a dialogue. Most importantly, when there is still dialogue, there is still hope.

### **Conclusions**

To sum up, this paper aimed at examining human catastrophe as represented in different case-studies of the contemporary theatre stage of Greece, under the same study – parameters. Despite differences among the performances in terms of the themes of the plays and the sizes of productions, audiences and spaces, artists shared a common need to stage human tragedy, even if not needed by default, as not plainly referred to in the texts of the plays. They also shared an overall *today* approach on the interpretation and staging of their plays, where human tragedy would arise through an overlap between stage and real-life on stage, through different means, mainly scenography, costumes and method acting coaching.

Reasoning for directors' choice to set human tragedy on stage would include raising awareness and critically mirroring society, providing the audiences with food for thought. Perception of the productions was not rather welcoming, possibly implying that society is not yet ready to accept such criticism. Nevertheless, in the case-studies examined, the stage served as a space of political debate, as deliberately and creatively set by the relevant theatre directors.

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