

## TIME AND DISTANCE IN THE FACE OF CATASTROPHE AND ARTISTIC CREATION: A THEATRICAL EXPLORATION

In this paper I will be exploring the importance of time and distance in relation to human catastrophes in terms of creating and presenting theatrical works to audience through my own personal perspectives and experiences as a writer/director. There will be four different personal examples: two plays, *Old Child* (2016) and *Last World* (2006) I wrote and directed, one project, *Istanbul Testimonials* I created in 2014 and questions and explorations for my new play *Aksak* or *Delirium* (pending name), in process of creation right now.

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I think theatre is a powerful tool in terms of recreating reality. In life we cannot change reality but on stage we can. This aspect excites me and opens the doorway to limitless possibilities. The exploration of time and distance in the context of human reality can be considered as a central theme in theatre history. Theatrical representation has always dealt with this main question of delivery of reality of life into the reality of the stage; a kind of a way to translate life into stage. From Bertolt Brecht's alienation effect to Aristotle's concept of catharsis to postmodern deconstruction to Hans Thies Lehmann's "post dramatic theory", each theoretical lens offers a unique perspective on the dynamic interplay between reality, aesthetics and politics within the theatrical domain.

As we navigate through such surreal times as these after 9/11 and the recent 2020's pandemic which hit us in every possible way with fierce reality we also realize that this is a time, a beginning of a century which somehow was prophesized by the very same sentences of Antonin Artaud, almost a century ago during last century's plague: "In the theatre, as in the plague there is a kind of strange sun, a light of the abnormal by which it seems that the difficult and even the impossible suddenly become our normal element."<sup>2</sup>

At Galata Perform, our theatre and performance company in Istanbul, we have been doing New Text New Theatre workshops since 2006 actively. In one of our workshops, I vividly remember Ensatt Playwriting Department's Director and playwright/musician Enzo Cormann talking about the myth of Medusa in relation to playwrighting. Medusa in Greek mythology, as everybody well knows, the most famous of the monster figures known as Gorgons, was usually represented as a winged female creature having a head of hair consisting of snakes; she was sometimes represented as very beautiful. Medusa was the only Gorgon who was mortal; hence her slayer, Perseus, was able to kill her by cutting off her head. Because the gaze of

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<sup>1</sup> Writer, Actor, Director of Galata Perform, Istanbul.

<sup>2</sup> Antonin Artaud, *Theatre and Its Double*, New York, Grove Press, 1958, p. 30.

Medusa turned all who looked at her to stone, Perseus guided himself by her reflection in a shield given him by Athena and beheaded Medusa as she slept.

In his workshop Cormann referred to this myth and talked about how theatre and plays should be and that directly providing the reality itself to the audience would turn the audience into stone; meaning dead which means that this would not change anything. So, the shield of Perseus is needed but how and how much were the main questions. I find this a very valuable discussion although I tend to disagree to some point since, in my works, I choose to confront harsh realities of our times especially after my personal experiences of so many catastrophes that somehow slid through my life. In dealing with such experiences as in ‘translating’ them to a theatrical language onto stage I almost always preferred to use a shield, as Enzo Cormann mentioned, but to what extent? Moreover, given the fact that theatre always takes its main strength from the representation of reality where does fiction and reality start and finish? And how do we balance esthetics with reality and politics?

Aristotle states that the purpose of tragedy is to arouse ‘terror and pity’ and thereby effect the catharsis of these emotions<sup>3</sup> in contrast to Plato’s idea that representation should be controlled and monitored. These general questions lead us back to the core of theatre in terms of representation, imitation and replication. In this respect I would like to go back to the idea of changing and/or reimagining reality in relation to staging human catastrophe on stage in order to discuss time and space in the creation of my works and their effect on representing reality on stage.

### ***OLD CHILD – Lives Unlived Becoming Lives Reimagined on Stage***

*Old Child* is a play I wrote in the aftermath of the specific years of 2014-2015. The play focuses on the lives of four children who have lost their life because of war, migration, terrorism and violence. In the play these children from real life are imagined in a utopic world where they actually live a life. Cemile Çağırga who died in the East of Turkey in Cizre during a shooting Cemile who is 8 dies in front of her house with a random bullet. She has to be kept in a deep freezer because of the ban for Kurdish citizens to leave their houses. Alan Kurdi who is Allen in the play is the Syrian refugee child who died in the Aegean coast of Turkey. The third child is Cemal Ellian who dies during a bombing in Phalestine in a children’s park where 8 children die. The fourth of the four children is Deniz Veysel Atılgan who died in the Ankara Peace Walk where hundreds die during a bombing.

Eylem Ejder in her review about the play mentions that “all of these children are dead, but now living in a kind of utopia, created by Yesim Özsoy.”<sup>4</sup>

I think in this play I especially felt the power of theatre making and the idea of changing reality the most. Theatre’s main mission for that reason for me is to provide another an alternative reality to the one we are experiencing. Another way of seeing the world. I mean the power of changing that reality on stage something we feel helpless and unable to do in real life like in face of catastrophes. Expressing the reality on stage as a mirror versus showing a world of ideals on stage appears to be

<sup>3</sup> Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia, "catharsis". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11 Sep. 2023, [online]. <https://www.britannica.com/art/catharsis-criticism>, (accessed 22 January 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Ejder, Eylem, *A Drama of Unlived Stories: Old Child by GalataPerform*, Arap Stages, Martin E. Segal Theater Center Publications, Volume 7, Fall 2017.

our main dilemma most of the time. In this respect we may say that the play constitutes a ‘post-realistic’ approach to theatre.



**Figure 1.** *Old Child* at Garajistanbul venue, photo credit: Ali Gürler.

This is the creative aspect but there's also the aspect of time and space as soon as this confrontation with the current reality, in this case the catastrophic experiences that we went through as a society, is represented on stage and the audience shares this area of recognition through theatrical means. My personal experience with expressing such strong losses of our times right when the society was about to heal its wounds created an effect in which they felt too soon to deal with that open wound. What I am trying to say is that as we are passing through such strong feelings of despair, grief in life, sometimes representing these wounds too early on stage becomes problematic. Maybe if this play is to be staged now or other stories are derived through this play, it can have a different effect on the audience. I think as plays travel through time and space, each specific staging of the play in another geography and/or time changes the play itself.

Miriam Falton-Dansky writes in the introduction of the book *Viral Performance* about Caryl Churchill's play *Seven Jewish Children* which was staged at Royal Court Theatre in 2009. Ironically it was about the Israeli and Palestinian conflict. Dansky gives the play as an example of how theatre can be viral and how 21<sup>st</sup> century's practices of theatre can have this effect in relation to the performances of the text. The book was written before the pandemic and I believe it is quite meaningful for our times of pandemic, digital age and performance, in many ways. After the play also was performed at the New York Theatre Workshop, the text sparks local and later on international controversy, opening a discussion on the topic of Israeli and Palestinian conflict, not only for the audience, but also for the people who had not seen and only heard about the play:

Not only did *Seven Jewish Children* go viral. It was, I believe, designed to do so. The play's eloquent brevity, its sparse staging requirements, and its deliberate political provocations suggest that it belongs to a new species of performance, self-consciously created for rapid international circulation: viral performance for the twenty first century. If Churchill could not have predicted how artists, audiences, and reading and listening publics would respond to her text, the play's form still suggested openness to rapid dissemination and radical reimagining. So did the terms under which Churchill offered other artists the production rights, which were openly available at no cost, as long as audiences were not charged admission and the producing artists collected funds for the organization of Medical Aid for Palestinians.<sup>5</sup>

This is how Churchill imagined the travelling of her play as the text is reinterpreted in relation to the political reality of its subject. Just as I wonder how *Old Child*'s utopic world, in which I imagined the dead children to live their lives, can be pluralized and maybe performed after its close attachment to the times that the events took place, I also wonder if *Seven Jewish Children* can open a new discussion now, as the war is at its peak in the region.

Another time and space in my life which is at the core of these political events and my artistic preoccupations, is 2001 in New York, more precisely the 11<sup>th</sup> of September.

### ***LAST WORLD*<sup>6</sup> – As People Fall Off Skyscrapers A Dystopia is Prophesized**

The Woman: Beneath water and time... Swamps... In between the two big rivers...<sup>7</sup> I vanished inside that country of mud, music and words.<sup>8</sup> I disappear. I sink into my past. Ahh and there it is. It is the Hor!<sup>9</sup> The Hor, the Hor, the Hor! That dear swamp. I am drowning, I am drowning inside you and yet you are so beautiful. (*Last World*)

Three characters appear in the play *Last World*; the Woman, the Man and the Third Person. The Woman represents the East and her words have references to Eastern texts like for example Gilgamesh Legends, Quran, 1001 Night Tales and details from the geography of Mesopotamia; current Middle East in between the two big rivers of Firat and Dicle also situated in the East of Turkey. These geo-cultural references are also representative of the idea of catastrophe in relation to history.

I wrote the play *Last World* four years after my experience in New York of 9/11. Times have passed and I had also moved out of New York back to Istanbul and so I had some distance to the event because I was far away from where it had happened although it felt as if it had happened everywhere in the world, we all felt the consequences of this disaster even years after.

<sup>5</sup> Miriam Felton Dansky, *Viral Performance- Contagious Theaters from Modernism to the Digital Age*, Evanston/ Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 2018, pp. 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> The play has premiered at the 15<sup>th</sup> edition of Istanbul International Theatre Festival, in 2006. All quotations will be from the original manuscript, not yet published.

<sup>7</sup> Noah's Ark is said to embark between Firat and Dicle rivers in current Middle East and Eastern Anatolia into a mountain.

<sup>8</sup> In between Firat and Dicle rivers there is Şatt’ül-Arap swamp.

<sup>9</sup> In Mesopotamian Arabic “hor” means swamp.



**Figure 2.** *Last World* at Yeni Melek Theatre, photo credit: Ali Öz.

When the catastrophe happened it was early in the morning of September the 9<sup>th</sup> I had been living and working in New York City for some time with my husband and my son who was born there. I had produced two of my plays in off-off Broadway. My husband was working as a web designer, and he was also attending exhibitions and creating art but for some time it was as if we had been feeling the stress of the city because we were already discussing moving back to Istanbul. For that reason, we had left our son, Sinan Can, to my mother in Istanbul. For one last time we were going to think about what we should do. I was walking in the park when it happened. A deranged guy came up to me and said “they are gone, they are both gone I can’t believe it!” he said. I could not make sense. I went home in the upper West side of the city and I realized that nothing was working; the tv, the phones... After some time, my mother could reach me from my old-fashioned mobile. She was in panic. She had just watched everything on tv but still I did not know what had happened in the city I was living in. After that I remember the dark smoke over the city, the weird smell that persisted for days after, the guy at the Hungarian coffee shop looking at me weirdly when I told him my name to write on the cup he was holding, the name which I realized had a kind of a Middle Eastern sound, our American friends whom after seeing Osama Bin Laden on TV, screaming at the top of their voices to nuke the Middle East; the geography where my son was so close at the time and the geography where I came from. It was time to move back. There was no question in our minds.

It was three or four years after the disaster I was living in Istanbul, I had founded my own theatre. It was our fourth production on stage. I was pregnant with my second child whom I refused to give birth to in US although many advised to do so since it was very desirable and convenient because of visas etc. since as Turkish citizens we were treated like a third world Middle Eastern citizen potential for terrorism; almost all countries asked for a visa, so some of us tried to get citizenship

and/or give birth in other countries so that our children are not exposed to such discrimination. I never thought it would be more and more difficult for a Turkish citizen to get a simple visa as time passed but here we are now and borders are more tightened and anyone who is not an American, European and/or British might as well be a terrorist so we are exposed to more tightened regulations for getting visas with refusals, short amounts of time permitted or no appointments attained for even more than a year... Distance and time worked together with the symbolic aspect of the play which makes me wonder as in representing human catastrophe on stage whether it affects us as artists in a positive way or maybe not? For both the audience and myself as the writer of the play everything has become a representation, a symbol and I found myself creating an abstract world of symbols representing these strong moments of my life and the world's timeline.

The subject of the play is about a plane crash and three characters who are suspended in the open air; not being able to define where they are. Somewhere on the borders of Europe, a plane crash happens. Three people on board the flight numbered Noah 71/71 find themselves in a place they cannot describe. They are unaware of each other. For a while, they try to understand this indescribable place. Are they dead? Has time stopped? Has the end of the world come? Where are they? The Woman, The Man and The Third Person represent the East/West and the 'neither that nor the other' proposition that undoes and releases this equation. The fall of the plane is actually the harbinger of a collapse taking place or is about to take place. In this sense, *Last World* aims to propose an interpretation to the concept of the 'end', starting out from the representations of its characters. Is it possible to end? What does the end of life mean? Does love for people, the world, the creator end? Can the world end, die out? What does the end mean? How do we end? The text of the play draws strength from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, blends and incorporates many texts ranging from Indian, Turkish, Arabic and Persian culture to Shakespeare's *Richard the Third* and *Hamlet*, from Dante's *Divine Comedy* to Rumi, from Sophocles' *Oedipus* to Fuzuli's ghazals and to Sevim Burak, from tarot cards to Attila İlhan, from everyday utilisation bills to the oldest love poem thought to be written by a Sumerian nun.

The visual reference of the play is based on contemporary artist Genco Gülan<sup>10</sup>'s *Daily Mythologies and Scream* series. Gülan also built a stage installation for the play. The play symbolically draws references and attributes an oath to the people who died falling off the skyscrapers in or to escape their death in the falling buildings at the aftermath of the disaster of 9/11.

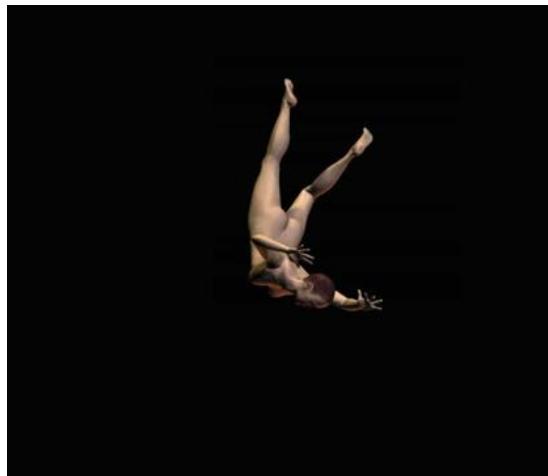
A personal experience which turned into a play after two years with a distance to the main event shows that the distance affects one's creation and interpretation process immensely. Jerome Bell's words about theatre in an interview after his work "disabled people" centered on the collaboration with Theatre Hora which is a theatre created for artistic work with people of learning disabilities resonates with. For Bell,

[...] theatre is precisely about being able to see what you're not used to seeing, what's hidden and concealed from view. Theatre that shows what you know by heart, that doesn't take a risk in the performance, that doesn't question the performance, that doesn't push the performance to its limits is of no interest to

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<sup>10</sup> Genco Gülan artist's website: <https://gencogulan.com> (accessed December 14, 2023).

me. If you don't go to theatre to be a voyeur and see what you're not allowed to see, I don't understand why you go.<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 3. Woman** *The Fall of Super heroes*.  
2003. Digital print on canvas, vernic.  
90cmx90cm. (Turan Özcan collection).

I believe *Last World* was for me a play where I wanted to carve out my heart about my close experience sadness of 9/11 for the voyeuristic purposes of the audience to see. It was so close to my heart, but I needed time in order to process and bring forward the conceptualization of the reality of life at the time.

Another pivotal time in my life happens to be the Gezi protests in Istanbul in 2013 in Istanbul.

#### ***Istanbul Testimonials – Utopia becomes our Dystopia***

**Istanbul Testimonials / Tanıklıklar** was a project dedicated to what happened on the 31st of May in 2013 and during the month of June in Istanbul regarding the protests against the Turkish government by its own citizens, entitled loosely in the media as “Gezi Events”. The project brought together four new playwrights: Şenay Tanrıvermiş, Öznur Şahin, Sami Özbudak, Burak Safa Çalış from GalataPerform's New Next New Theater Project. The play consisted of four different testimonials of the month of June 2013 in Istanbul by four different writers who all experienced the events in very different ways. I edited and directed these testimonials. Walking between the lines of fiction and reality the project aimed to reflect an insider's view on Istanbul's resistance which mainly evolved out of a protest against the destruction of a park in the middle of the city and spread to the whole of Turkey in defense of freedom and human rights; environmental, women's, elections, freedom of expression etc...

<sup>11</sup> Jérôme Bell, “Interview about *Disabled Theatre*,” [online]. <http://www.jeromebel.fr/index.php?p=2&s=15&ctid=1> (accessed December 14, 2023).

The project was important because, again, it was in the aftermath of the Gezi protests. This experience was very different from a previous similar project called Gezerken in which sets of four different playwrights were called to write plays to be performed at the Gezi Park as the protests were happening. I was actually involved and called to write a play with three other playwrights in the second round of playwrights to write. The first four playwrights who wrote plays about Gezi and they were staged during the protests in the park. But as the second round of playwrights of which I was a part of, we all discussed the power of the events and the performative strong aspect of it superseding whatever we were supposed to write and/or will write. So we preferred not to write for the project at the time. One year after the protests and as Gezi was politically and literally overrun by the government, we were called by teatr.doc and playwright and festival director Mikhail Durnenkov to write about what had happened in order to do a play reading in Moscow, which we could at that time; it was the right time for us to understand what had happened and how we could convert such a strong experience into words.

*Istanbul Testimonials*, with its testimonials of the June 2013 protests, became a space for shared witnessing and collective reflection. It was written and read almost two years after the Gezi protests in another country. At the time people had advised me not to promote it in the Turkish press because of political implications, which was not so apparent at that time for us, so we did not hesitate and promoted it<sup>12</sup>. But, later on, all who were involved in the Gezi protests were announced as terrorists against the government. In time a utopia became our dystopia.

#### **“Aksak or Delirium” – A Work in Progress on the Idea of Madness and Falling**

In 2004 I wrote and staged *Aksak İstanbul Hikayeleri* (*Limping Tales from Istanbul*) which got to be translated to French (*Histoires Syncopées d'Istanbul*) by Maison Antoine Vitez<sup>13</sup> and later on was staged at the Greek Theatre Festival in 2015 under the name *Històries d'Istanbul*<sup>14</sup>.

The play is based on the reflection of the Ottoman music structure on acting and text. The text consists of 12 characters and their monologues; deconstructed and interjected. The sections of the play are designed to resemble a music piece. In the way that the stories come together, syncopate and the feeling of rhythm, the “syncopated style” of the Ottoman Classical Turkish Music is taken as reference point. The irregularity of the stories is envious of the 9/8 rhythm, which is referred to as “syncopated” (*aksak*) in the Turkish Classical Music. As most Turkish musicians would agree although the syncopated style (*aksak*) is considered as irregular and asymmetrical, with repetition a harmony and symmetry is attained. So the play discusses this idea of symmetry/asymmetry of East/West, tradition/modernity through the stories of two different families and their affinities from Istanbul; a city that

<sup>12</sup> Nerdun Hacıoğlu, “Gezi eylemleri Rusya Sahnesinde,” *Hurriyet*, Istanbul, January 20, 2014, [online]. <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/kelebek/gezi-eylemleri-rusya-sahnesinde-25604575> (accessed December 20, 2023).

<sup>13</sup> See abstract and translator’s point of view at *Maison Antoine Vitez*, [online]. <https://www.maisonantoinevitez.com/fr/bibliotheque/histoires-saccadees-dstanbul-669.html> (accessed December 20, 2023).

<sup>14</sup> Synopsis and other information on the performance at Teatre Barcelona website, [online]. <https://es.teatrebarcelona.com/espectacle/histories-dstanbul> (accessed December 20, 2023).

somehow reaches harmony despite all its chaos. *Aksak* is also a term used in Turkish language for something that does not flow, that goes wrong. Like a glitch, an abnormality in a perfectly normal world.

I would like to carry on with this idea of abnormality, *aksak*, syncopated rhythm of life, and integrate it to our current reality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century on the brink of madness in a digital, viral and post truth world. In the *Lesser Known Monsters of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Kim Fu writes stories of science fiction, fantasy, and even crime fiction blended together where the lines between reality and fiction blurred and layers of normalcy reveals the weird, creepy things at the core of each story.

Just as Haruki Murakami mentions about life and reality as “the best way to think about reality is to get as far away from it as possible,”<sup>15</sup> Kim Fu submerges this reality in a masterful way. In line with a Turkish story, writer Gamze Arslan’s world, as she also looks to the abnormal beyond the normalcy in her stories compiled under the title *Kanayak*<sup>16</sup>, in which normalized violence permeates her stories. In the same way I would like to take real stories mostly of women and create a play in which the madness becomes normal, normal is pregnant to madness and nothing is without a glitch.

In Bill Viola’s video art “The Raft”<sup>17</sup> we see a group of bystanders unaware of each other, even though they are disinterested in each other’s lives, they still stand together. As a flood takes over and they suddenly are confronted with a catastrophe as they fall, hurt, feel themselves at the edge of life they hold onto each other and for the first time they really see each other.

As we see human catastrophe as a break, a glitch that disrupts the flow of life, nature and beings, universe in its totality our personal stories in relation to madness, misdoings and flaws in life still continues with some kind of a weird harmony. Just as the asymmetry with repetition becoming harmonious. I would like to fictionalize real stories, in order to visually, verbally and physically represent the cracks of our times politically in relation to the personal.

In such crazy, pandemic, digital, dystopic, viral, crisis times of newly risen wars, unbelievably true climate crisis, re-fascistic politics, the death of humanity for once and all in face of the approaching sea of the digital world, constant sickness of the body and the soul all this seems quite logical for me.

Cihat: I had a teacher. I used to visit her sometimes. She used to say, I sometimes think that everything happens for a reason. With a magical stick everything is put into places. Lives cross, divide, break up, end, depart and another one comes right after.<sup>18</sup>

In line with the pivotal times and experiences I had in my life specific to the catastrophes that went parallel to my life and everyone else’s; some close and some far away, the idea of physical and abstract distance becomes determinant in the way we create works. Similarly post 2019 years entail turning points in the world. In years

<sup>15</sup> Haruki Murakami, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Random House, 2011, p. 231.

<sup>16</sup> Gamze Arslan, *Kanayak*, İstanbul, Can Yayınları, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Bill Viola, *The Raft*, May 2004, [online]. <https://youtu.be/4Ili9pvlxdk?si=fKLUMNo7NNChY4QB>, (accessed December 15, 2023).

<sup>18</sup> Yeşim Özsoy, *Aksak İstanbul Hikayeleri* [original title: *Limping Tales of Istanbul*], İstanbul, Habitus Yayınları, 2019, p. 50.

we will also look back upon these years and most probably chronicle the devastating effects on our and each other's lives in a strange and beautiful fatalistic way grounded and merged in harsh realities of life.

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