

‘I could live on a slice of lemon’:

Making theatre in the time of recession

**KATIA
GEROU**

Translated from Greek by Ioli Andreadi

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Let us speak about how we can ‘keep our energy up’ during this Kafkaesque recession. A friend once told me: ‘You know I am a big spender by nature, but I could live on a slice of lemon, if I had to.’ I got excited by this phrase and I am using it all the time. She did not say ‘I could live on a pittance’ for example, which would radiate misery. Her phrase did not imply that she would lead the life of a beggar but the life of a magician. Constantly inventing. In other words, she turned the threat of poverty into something transparent, something fine. She suggested possibilities. Can there be beauty, finesse and creativity in times of financial crisis? Yes - if you direct your own life and improvise constantly, yes, there can be.

Back in the 60’s my parents managed, tracking every penny they spent, to build a small house in Agrinio. We moved in before it was finished, the floors were still just cement and there was no money to buy furniture. My mother got hardboard boxes from the market, made cushions, covered them with cloths. If you had come into our house you would think it looked beautiful. I remember that each time a visitor came, I would remove the cloths and reveal the hardboard boxes, saying: ‘Look at what my mother made!’ After the visitor was gone, she would tell me: ‘It is not a shame to have hardboard boxes as furniture, but they are not pretty, can’t you see? That’s why I keep them covered. There’s no need to show them to people.’ But I went on with the revealing ritual because in my childish mind my mother had managed the impossible. To create a beautiful world out of nothing, out of rubbish. Likewise, after my father left his job at the army, she would take his old military clothes, dye them and sew clothes for

us. My sister and I were wearing what looked like haute couture, despite us being one of the poorest families in the neighbourhood.

My taste was formed out of such conditions and I fell in love with making things out of nothing and feeling complete, rather than obsessing about greener pastures. That's why later on, in the theatre, I was never moved by revolving stages, big video walls, rich costumes etc. I felt that miracles can happen with a prop or two, minimal costumes, an empty stage, a good text and well trained actors. I saw it happen at the Karolos Koun Art Theatre in Athens.

But what about the present? We're now going through a period of collective mourning, a national catastrophe. Yet this pop art, 'anything goes' kind of art has emerged, of playing with the postures of statues and such. And I got jealous and wanted to do the same. However even pop art demands a certain IQ; you cannot for example have Aphrodite of Milos as the protector of offshore companies, as some 'artists' have done. She is too fine for that part. Still, it's not her who becomes ugly by this process – she has been through tougher treatments anyway, having lost her arms, having migrated – it is you, who thought about this 'art', who becomes ugly. I would very much like, for example, to have Aphrodite of Milos with her head bent, an image somewhat like Rodin's *Thinker*, deeply sad, unconsolable, thinking about the last seventy years of this tormented country, thinking about the fights against the Fascists, the Civil War, exiles, mass immigration, dictatorship, this nonstop struggle, this never giving up. Thinking about all these dignified, brave, hard-working, wounded people, who've had no Land Rover parked in their garage, no swimming pool in their house, waking up one morning only to find out they had become even poorer than before and nothing could be taken for granted.

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Not that much could have been taken for granted in the first place, if we consider that this small country, this dot in the map, this crazed country, is currently fifth in terms of highest military expenditure in the world (third until 2005!). And that before the recession, one out of four people here were living on the poverty line. Under such circumstances, we are lucky to still exist and to be able to talk about art, like we are doing now, we are lucky enough not to have vanished into thin air.

What can we do under these new circumstances? How can artists work in the time of recession? Of course we will have to cut down our needs. We could listen to words of wisdom spoken by men like the painter Yannis Tsarouchis in the documentary by D. Vernikos: 'The first thing an artist must do is not to have many needs.' We could listen to Michalis Katsaros in 'Passion of the Sadducchees': 'Don't forget to bring lots of water with you. Our future will be rather dry.' We could listen carefully to Koun's words: 'Everyone is helpless when alone; together we might manage to do something' or 'I lived in a minimal, simple way because I never had much money.' Or we could listen to Lefteris Poulivos' lyrics: 'Bad times, times of courage lost, with poetry in the heart of downtrodden people.' Or we could renegotiate: when did we last relax too much, when did we betray our principles, when did we do things that were too easy or too cold because of the profit they would bring or because they were considered 'trendy'?

We have to admit that we had fallen victim to 'everyone out for themselves' mentality, before the recession. A tornado of bad taste had hit us and we did

nothing to stop it. We also thought that our country belonged to the club of the lucky ones and we were caught unawares. One of the characters in K. Katzourakis' film *Small Revolts* says at some point: 'Our place is dying, I find it harder and harder to recognize it, fuck progress, fuck it.' I'm constantly murmuring to myself of late 'fuck progress, fuck it', aware that this is not politically correct. However the crisis might invoke in us a collective self full of creativity and solidarity, so far dormant by the lullaby of fake wealth. Who knows? Everything remains to be proven. I can be sure of one thing: now is the time to act. Now, when we have absolutely no idea what will happen tomorrow.

It is the beginning of summer 2010. We are all trying to listen to the storm that is coming towards us. We do not know: will it be finite? Will it be final? We do not know how many houses will be swept away, how many boats, we do not know how many the dead will be - financial storms have their own dead and their own refugees. The first signs are already here. The number of homeless people has multiplied, there are more and more desperate men who shoot heroin on the streets, unemployment has gone up, wages and pensions are being reduced. At night you see less and less people out. Where? In Athens, a city that was full of people 24/7. And fuck it, we don't believe in reincarnation, so that we can live in hope that we'll come back when things get better. Around this scared city, mountains deformed after repeated fires stand as silent witnesses of this very fear. There is no tree, not a single green leaf in the central square of Omonoia, symbolically enough. Only concrete, concrete that slowly sneaks into our souls, like that piece of glass in Andersen's *Snow Queen*, freezing our heart and making it impossible to have feelings. People sit on the benches there, their heads bent - Rodin comes to mind again and the *Burghers of Calais* - as if they have just given away the keys to the city. To whom? Why? 'Why' gets stuck in our throats and can't get out, become a word, break free. Such paranoid calmness cannot be a good omen.

And what is to be done now? Will we, as a society of citizens, seek what unites us and not what divides us? Will we then use that desire in our fight for survival or will we devour each other instead? Will the atmosphere be full of screams of hatred, where no one is listening to anybody? Or will we talk to each other about things that matter, for the first time in many years? Will we leave our houses, while the ground is shaking because of earthquakes and aftershocks, and reach out to our neighbors who suffer as much as we do? Will we rush to drag survivors out of the ruins or will we all start swallowing anti-depressants, bombarded by numbers we cannot understand and bills we are not able to pay?

And how are we going to do our job, whenever we happen to have one, half-heartedly, believing in nothing and no one? How can we work with so much poison inside us? How can we sustain some spirituality, some vision? You are not in the mood to look around you right now. However this may be the only way to resist. To have a look around you. To fight back with love. Strong is the kind of love that comes out of rage, because something is being ruthlessly destroyed - ourselves, others, our country.

The themes for our projects are pulsating all around us, they are alive. Who, for example, is going to confront the rising racism? The parents, of course; the teachers; everyone; but the artists too. We know that in times much harder than

ours, art resisted and articulated powerful meanings. Maybe what can save us in the near or distant future will be the collectives, small or large ones. And even if we have to find jobs that are irrelevant to our profession, in order to survive (students at Drama Schools are doing that anyway, that's why they arrive to the class exhausted), we should know that, once or twice every week, we will pick up the pieces, meet our comrades-in-arms and practice our art. And maybe once a month we could go out and offer our art for free to people who can't afford to pay for it. So, let's 'keep our energy up', our lust for life. And let me suggest a few phrases-slogans: Theatre with poor means. Theatre outside the theatres. Timeless theatre. Theatre despite adversity.

Maybe all this sounds like I'm talking about a war situation. Ultimately, everything is war. Going against the depression of our times is war. Escaping one's own professional clichés and comfort zone is war. Articulating a personal text without making it anodyne so that it's acceptable to the mainstream, is war.

Once I saw this extraordinary documentary, *Suite Habana*. The camera was following simple people in Havana, Cuba (note what I have just said: *simple people*, I wonder who the complex ones are... but allow me to leave this as it is, traces of personal stupidity can be useful), obviously poor, who were doing different sorts of jobs during the day, but at night transformed into dashing birds from paradise. A man was playing the saxophone in a band, a woman was singing, another man was dancing. They were artists, important artists. So, after *Suite Habana*, let us be part of a Suite Athens.