

Eclectic Encounters in the Forest Festival of Thessaloniki

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Katerina Delikonstantinidou*

2nd International Forest Festival of Thessaloniki, Greece,
June 28-July 6, 2018



**2nd INTERNATIONAL
FOREST
FESTIVAL**
in the framework of the
4th Dassous Festival
27.6 - 6.7.2018

The official poster of the festival's 2nd edition



Forest Theatre (or *Theatro Dassous*), Thessaloniki, Greece. Photo: Geo Kaza

In 2015, the National Theatre of Northern Greece (NTNG) collaborated with the Hellenic Festival to organize the first Forest Festival of Thessaloniki in an effort to enhance the outreach and diversity of local theatre. In 2017, a two-week International Festival was added to the Forest Festival. The nascent institution has sought to introduce new theatrical approaches, trends, and directions that are under-represented in Greek theatre. Four productions hosted by the 2nd International Forest Festival testify eloquently to that.

Video 1



<https://youtu.be/cGzkcyqLOfM>

2nd International Forest Festival Promotional Video

The first is *Vangelo (Gospel)*, a piece that draws together physical theatre, documentary theatre, and operatic strands. The highly original musical performance was created and directed by Pippo Delbono and presented by himself and the members of the Pippo Delbono Company. With *Vangelo* Delbono offers up for contemplation a multimedia sermon, humane, transgressive and paradoxical; as paradoxical as the premise of its creation, since a self-proclaimed non-Christian has crafted an interpretation of the gospels for a faith-troubled age with playful and benign devilry.



Bobò, the late Vincenzo Cannavacciuolo (1936-2019), and Pippo Delbono. Delbono's encounter with deaf and mute Bobò in 1996, while the latter was interned in a psychiatric hospital, marked a turning point in his work.

Photo: ERT and Pippo Delbono

Delbono, master of ceremonies in this ritualistic performance, explains early on that the show has been developed as his response to his mother's dying request to create a work on the Gospels that would convey the message of love. Disparate elements spun their way into it: holy and unholy Virgin Marys, nuns and go-go girls; Christ-like figures, pop Christ-related products and contemporary refugees-*cum*-martyrs; spectacular devils and caricatured buddhas; his own struggle with AIDS and others' experience of disability, social stigma, oppression; and lots of allusions to high and low culture, ancient and modern, some evocative and others obscure. Finally, he composed a visual panorama, bizarre and enchanting like a Hieronymus Bosch painting, which comes to life through dance and music—the latter owing much to Enzo Avitabile's musical genius. Delbono's words, whether drawing from the gospels, his autobiography, or others' (hi)stories, sew seams where seams could not be imagined. They are touching, raving, feverish, their truth taking us by the throat, their humour by surprise. At times, they allow us to navigate through his composition and, at others, let us get lost in it, disarmed and vulnerable.



Music is one of the most captivating elements of *Vangelo*. Enzo Avitabile's contribution to its sweeping power has been immense. Photo: Luca DelPia

Delbono's peculiar "sermon" can become more effective and convincing if speech does not remain the reserved domain of its creator, too often reading from his notes and far too wordy. That way the inclusivity Delbono reputedly strives for would not be limited to the level of scenic presence and his two-hour-long monologue would not end up raising suspicions of an undercurrent of self-gratification. That way the excluded of the world, those really excluded from the privileged narratives of the world and lacking the means of conjuring a stage for themselves, could acquire an actual voice of their own, and thus the possibility of enhanced agency, besides a far more easily marketable visibility.



Hybridation, presented by Olivier de Sagazan in the 2nd Forest Festival. Photo: NTNG

Through Olivier de Sagazan's two performance pieces, *Hybridation* and *Transfiguration*, the festival audience was allowed to re-enter the realm of ritual and mysticism. In Sagazan's pieces, as the artist sculpts and mutates his (and his partner's) body using wet clay, allusions crop up not to some big-name religion but to the local shamanic traditions of Congo where he was born.

Video 2



<https://youtu.be/nqikjL1Us9s>

Selected moments from the performance of *Hybridation*

With *Hybridation*, Sagazan lends a thoroughly visceral and tragic dimension to the philosophical notion that a human being only discovers their individual self through and in relation to another self. Two humans (Sagazan and Stéphanie Sant) strip off their everyday clothes and start sculpting each other with clay and paint. They use their naked bodies as canvases and portals to the abyss of human love. As layer after layer of matter covers them, the two sculptors are materially and existentially drawn to one another, their dialogue of mutual re-creation marked by eager experimentation with ways of achieving togetherness, until they merge. Literally and figuratively blind within their new, shared flesh of clay, the creators soon begin to consume one another at the same time as they struggle to change the other's self into their own. Creator thus turns into destroyer, closeness into rivalry, love into tragedy. The effort to create the perfectly compatible "other self" ends up a cannibalistic game, ultimately leaving one human sculptor lifeless and the other life-drained; both alone.



Transfiguration, a profoundly affecting study into the human existential quest. Photo: Valeria Tomasulo

Fortunately, the spectators who left *Hybridation* with a heavy heart would have the opportunity to cheer up two hours later with the solo piece *Transfiguration*. Employing his characteristic method of creating a living sculpture out of his own body, the artist sets out on a journey to discover the essence of the human presence and the ultimate meaning of life through successive stages of transfiguration: into an animal, a spirit/demon, a monster, a hybrid posthuman entity. A series of masterly staged breakdowns (in the human), breakaways (from the physical), and breakthroughs (toward the spiritual beyond), allow the sculptor/sculpture and the spectators to confront and be strangely emboldened by the truthfulness of ugly distortion which echoes the truth of existential agony. Alas, the wandering/wondering creature soon realizes that even as bird it cannot fly, even as spirit it cannot abandon human need, even as monster it cannot defeat fear, even as hybrid it cannot be free of identity. Raging with despair, it thrashes around and against the background of metal walls—the bars of its proverbial cage. Yet, by the end of the piece the very source of despair emerges as a source of energy, as the cradle of possibility. The human manifests the species' triumphant resilience. While it cannot go on, it will go on—Beckett's influence hard to miss. And we can all stop holding our breath.



Your Kingdom by the Hungarian Forte Company, an imaginative reworking of Sándor Tar's short stories using the tools of physical theatre. Photo: NTNG

Finally, Forte Company's *Your Kingdom* (*A te országod*) is another instance of physical theatre. Since its foundation, in 2005, by director and choreographer Csaba Horváth, this Hungarian company has been experimenting with a rigorous kind of physical theatre in which speech and text, gesture and dance, voice and music, as well as the human body are enlisted for the development of an alternative "stage language." Their *Kingdom* speaks in that tongue and invites the audience to rethink what they know about storytelling, dramaturgy, and the performance space as the site par excellence on which narrative worlds are erected and fall into ruin in the blink of an eye.

Video 3

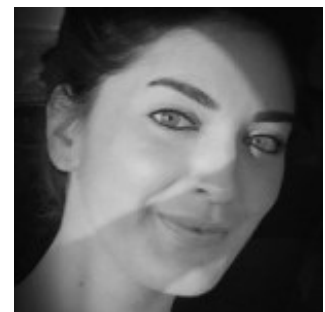


<https://youtu.be/p-zpeK10Mgo>

Forte Company's *Your Kingdom*

The narrative worlds this work engages are those of Sándor Tar's (1941-2005) short stories. In this reworking of Tar's fiction, a literal dimension is given onstage to the historical edifice of socialism and to the human building blocks, scaffolds, and machines used to elevate, support, and operate it, the ones that were buried in the debris of its crumbling under the weight of reality: the un-dealt-with workers, the disenfranchised fringe figures of recorded history. It was these figures that Tar's work sought to rescue from the ruins of selective, because conditioned, memory, and the disintegration which unfolds onstage is both the disintegration of an era and the mental disintegration of those most pitiful bearers of the former's devastating consequences. Praise is due to playwright Judit Garai, writer Tibor Keresztury, and the performers of Forte Company for their nuanced treatment of Tar's oeuvre, but also for managing to make their take on Tar's view of the Hungarian *Kingdom* resonate with the audience of the Greek "kingdom."

***Katerina Delikonstantinidou** holds a PhD in Theatre Studies from the School of English, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Her articles have been published in numerous volumes and journals, her research work has been presented at national and international conferences, and she is the recipient of several grants and scholarships. She is currently employed as a lecturer in Adult Education institutions while working on her post-doctoral research on Digital Theatre (in) Education. She has



been a member of the web team for and a regular contributor to *Critical Stages* since 2014. Her research areas include Theatre and Performing Arts, Greek Tragedy, Ethnic Studies, Digital Literacies and Education.