



Transcending the Borders in *Persians* of Terzopoulos

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, two dimensions of transcending the borders in the theatre of Theodoros Terzopoulos is discussed through the main dynamics of the performance of *Persians* in 2006. The first of these dimensions, the more easily recognizable and observable, is the political dimension. However, the perception and experience of the political is only possible with the more complex and holistic ontological dimension. In the *Persians* of Terzopoulos, reconstruction of the text of Aeschylus reveals a de-construction of the body of actors. Thus, the political and ontological dimensions melt into each other and the dialog with the "other" of our own body, our sister and victims of self-deception offers the audience a peaceful and democratic means of communication resulting from shared suffering.

Keywords: Theodoros Terzopoulos, Aiskhylos, *Persians*, the biodynamic method of acting, ecstatic body



My inferences can be considered as personal, but I hope that they will also give the reader a theoretical approach in understanding the dynamics of the production of *Persians* in 2006. It is inevitably personal because, the staging of *Persians* has a special and crucial place in my life. The rehearsal process of the play also ran parallel with my research on Terzopoulos' acting method and his theatre. It was a process that I felt with all my being, and it carried me to brand new worlds, both as an actor and an academician.

My book on the theatre of Terzopoulos was ready for publication about a year after the *Persians* performances ended. Although it is mentioned in a very small part of the book, the experience I had in the *Persians* production inspired a title for my book: *Transcending the Borders Through Tragedy*. Coincidentally, the publisher created the cover of the book with a photograph from magnificent artist Johanna Weber from the *Persians* in Hagia Eirene (photo 1). This was not something I planned but, this coincidence meant a lot to me. Why, “Transcending the Borders”? And, “How”? I will try to talk about this briefly.

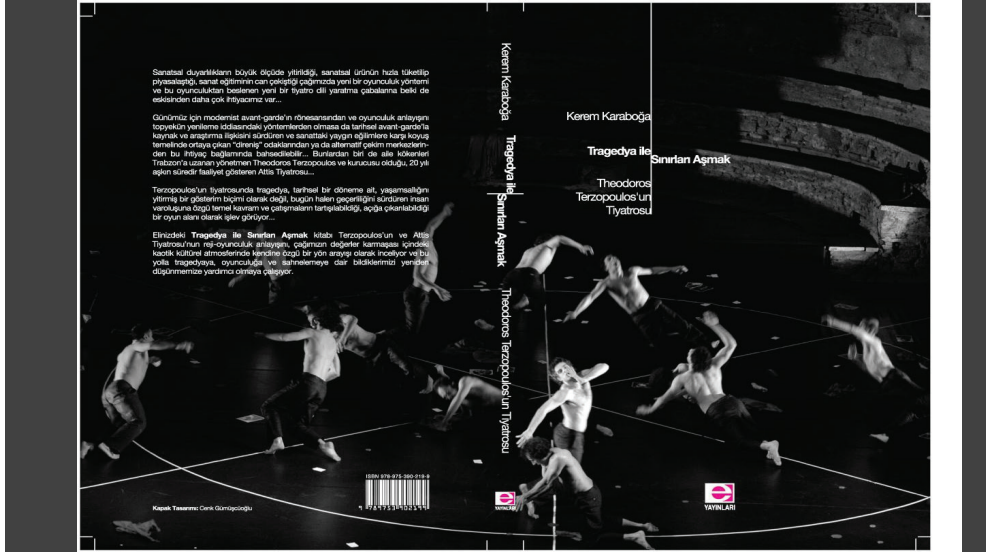


Photo 1

In my opinion, in the theatre of Terzopoulos, transcending borders has two dimensions, two layers of meaning, which complement each other like the faces of a coin or that functionally add to each other. The first of these, the more easily recognizable and observable, is the political dimension. However, the perception and experience of the political is only possible with the more complex and holistic ontological dimension.

When we look at *Persians* in particular, we find the core of the political dimension in the narrative of the dream of the Persian Queen Atossa in the text of Aeschylus. Atossa mentions

two sisters from the same parentage. “*And, for a fatherland, a home, one was allotted to Greek soil, the other, great world beyond*”.¹ Atossa’s son Xerxes attempted to rush them to the chariot and when one of the two sisters shatters the yoke, he rolls down. It is well known, that the whole play of Aeschylus is based on the incarnation of what was seen in this dream and the anxiety it created.



Photo 2

The production of Terzopoulos reconstructs Aeschylus’s text with the presence of Greek and Turkish actors (photo 2). The choir, which consists of half Greek and half Turkish actors, can be assumed to represent the two sisters of the same parentage. In one of the crucial moments of the performance, they embrace each other at the intersection of the dividing boundaries but are scared away from this and drawn to their own border lines (photo 3). They are the pawns of the power game shaped by their political leaders. The simultaneous performance of Xerxes by Turkish and Greek actors clearly highlights the reflection of the relationship between leaders and their subjects (photo 4). We can see bodies as the one in the appearance of the multitude. The differences are exactly the same in their interchangeability. And this reveals the deeper layer of the desire to rule through wars. The source of this desire is embodied as a kind of self-hatred, and self-pity which comes after, it is also nothing more than a distinct manifestation of narcissism, the mechanism of a narcissistic mirror. The words of Darius’ ghost can be reinterpreted in the light of this very fact: “... *when stubborn pride has flowered, it ripens to self-deception and the only harvest is a glut of tears*”.²

1 Aeschylus, *Persians*, trans. Janet Lembke & C.J. Herington (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 6.

2 Aeschylus, *Persians*, 23.



Photo 3

Throughout its long history, Turkish-Greek relations have always been governed by stubborn pride. And it produced an endless abundance of tears. In the *Persians* of Terzopoulos, Turkish and Greek actors suffer in company with each other and mourn for all the ones that died in wars (photo 5). Mourning together is an effective and healthy step to establish an unmediated bond and to engage in a real dialogue with the “other”. However, it takes more to break out of the self-deception loop. Commonality is much deeper. In fact, it is suggested that the Turks and the Greeks, who were separated from each other by ethno-nationalism’s armed forces, compose a single social community, like *two sisters of the same parentage*. This separation was realized at all costs and through the force of politics. At the very beginning of the performance, the choir carry photographs of those who were lost in wars and cry their names in rage (photo 6). Mourning is intertwined with rage, and lament with rebellion. Thus, self-hatred turns into not accepting the role assigned to it, and at the same time self-pity turns into holding accountable those who cause grief. The only way to break the narcissistic mirror is to refuse to look at it for self-knowledge, to tear it apart. Even if this causes self-destruction in order to establish a new wholeness.



Photo 4

The text of Aeschylus is unique in the history of the theater. The pain of the defeated is presented to the victors at the scene of tragedy. He associated the Athenians with the anxiety and pain the Persians felt for their friends and relatives, which they lost in the war, and lead them to understand and share the loss and defeat of their enemies. On the other hand, the Athenians are warned and honored by reflecting the defeat of the Persians as a *hybris*. With this feature, the play builds the founding norms of democratic civilization within the elements of *isonomia* and *harmonia*. While the death instinct, Thanatos, is purified and sent to his own country, Hades, civilization is formed in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine human individuals, into one great unity, the unity of humankind. However, in the narcissistic society of our time rising in the ruins of this civilization, it is necessary to reveal the ideal of Aeschylus by turning the scene into the arena of Eros and Thanatos' endless conflict. That means, performing to uncover or drag up the myth from dramatic text. As Terzopoulos said, “*The energy of the text is the fire and the body has to dance on it*”.³ And this is one of the typical characteristics of Terzopoulos' theatre. In the words of Konstantinos Arvanitakis, “*a dialogue between formalism and formlessness*”.⁴

3 Frank M. Raddatz, “The Metaphysics of the Body- Theodoros Terzopoulos in Conversation with Frank M. Raddatz,” in *Reise mit Dionysos. Das Theater des Theodoros Terzopoulos: Journey with Dionysos. The Theatre of Theodoros Terzopoulos*, ed. Frank M Raddatz (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2006), 168.

4 Konstantinos Arvanitakis, “Terzopoulos' Jenseits – The Psychoanalytic Foundation of Terzopoulos' Theatre,” in *Dionysos in Exile: The Theatre of Theodoros Terzopoulos*, ed. Benedikt Maria Erhold (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2019) 85.



Photo 5

Here, we come to ontological dimension of transcending the borders. “*Myth should not only be appreciated for its narrative and symbolic function in relation to an inconceivable reality, but also for the immediate revelation of those that the body and soul hide*” says Terzopoulos.⁵ With this characteristic and through the concept of “immediate revelation of those that the body and soul hide”, the reconstruction of the text can only be performed by deconstruction of the actor’s body, in other words, deconstruction of the triangle. This is the cornerstone of the method of Terzopoulos, named the *biodynamic method*, and it creates the idea of the group. This idea was crucial in the performance of the *Persians*. As in the treatment ritual in the temple of Amphiatrion which is an inspiration for the birth of Attis acting method, the circle was the place for physical experiment and bodily emancipation for all performers. The physical practice performed around the circle before the daily stage rehearsals and shows that the performer has control over the pelvis area so that s/he can turn the creative energy coming out of there to a tool of artistic expression by spreading it to his/her whole body. The actors of the production of *Persians* discovered their autonomous energy flow by, going through different stages and even in different levels and obtained an artistic existence on the proportion that they can share that with others. Just then the song in different languages become familiarized, all kinds of resistance are eliminated and comprehending of the independent, ecstatic body enabled the different cultures to dance together. In the words of Freddy Decreus; “*Instead of standing (as a sign) for something else, this body no longer serves the implicit goal of representing a dramatic person or character, but becomes part of a flux that keeps going on endlessly... functions as an energetic stream of energy in a process of continuous transformation*”.⁶

5 Theodoros Terzopoulos, *Myth and Innovation Road*, Unpublished Text.

6 Freddy Decreus, “Bodies, Back from Exile,” in *Dionysos in Exile: The Theatre of Theodoros Terzopoulos*, ed. Benedikt Maria Emold (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2019), 73.

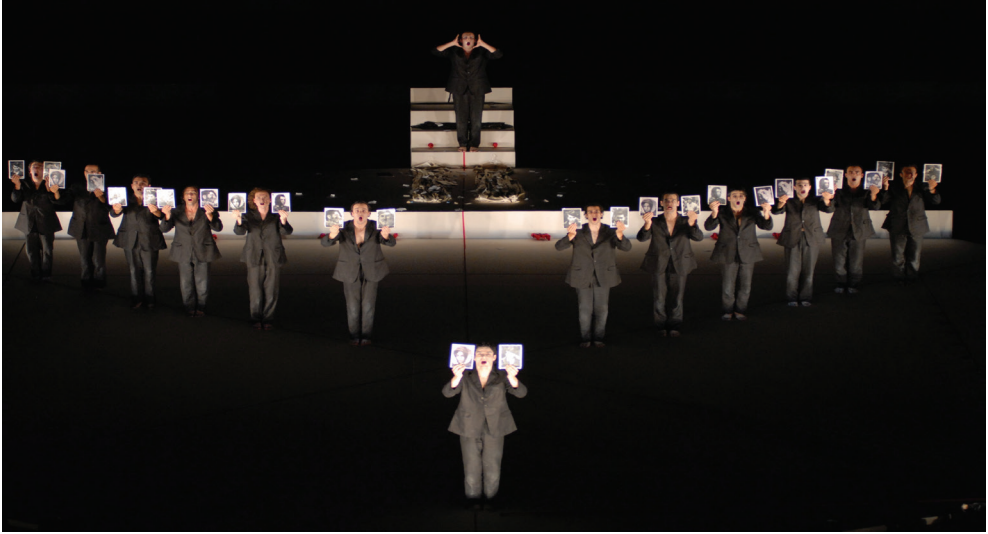


Photo 6

The ecstatic bodies in Terzopoulos are primitive bodies in their pure vulnerability devoid of all prejudice and habits. The ecstatic bodies of the performers, on the borderline between order and chaos, are open and perforated, exposed to all kinds of stimuli. It is the result of a yet inseparable renewing/destructive energy in the perpetual dynamism of Eros/Thanatos. The meeting of Eros and Thanatos in the same body, when considered in Freudian terms, corresponds to becoming civilized or in Lacanian terms to the stage before transforming into a cultural ‘subject’, that is, to the phase before “the feeling of who I am now”, or should I say, more properly, before “ego” is formed. Ego emerges by repressing the “primitive I feeling” and separating “who I am” from “who I am not”. Arvanitakis proposes “*to locate the root of the tragic in this “Primary Trauma of Origins” which violently limits to the human experience, limits that are never fully accepted*”.⁷ That can be associated with the phase of prohibition of incestuous intercourse with the mother and castration anxiety the father instills in the child, when it has been considered in both Freudian and Lacanian terms.

“The transition from myth to memory, thanks to the mediation of its mythical protagonist, Dionysus, is deeply engraved in the body and soul of the creator, who seeks the energetic components of the body and, through them, his origin, memories and visions”, says Terzopoulos.⁸ Mythically, Primary Trauma is the death of Dionysus in his mother’s womb or ‘the first death’ of Dionysus symbolized by his body being torn into pieces by Titans. The human body knows this pain, and this is where the deep source of tragic pain resides. When considered politically,

7 Arvanitakis, “Terzopoulos’ Jenseits – The Psychoanalytic Foundation of Terzopoulos’ Theatre,” 82.

8 Terzopoulos, *Myth and Innovation Road*.

it is the pain stemming from being thrown into a culture one does not want to be a part of and being imprisoned by its laws⁹. (photo 7)



Photo 7

In “*Persians*” of Terzopoulos, bodies which try to liberate themselves by contacting agonizing memories in the collective memory are presented to bodies which destroy themselves by surrendering to ordinariness. The actors travel to Hades so as to leave the audience face to face with their shamelessness towards themselves, the mistake of identifying their body with their culturally acquired identity and their obsession to view the individual only as a mental, logocentric entity. Their self-destruction in agony and their resonances of cry crashes the narcissistic mirror (photo 08). Thus, political and ontological dimensions melt into each other, re-construction of the text reveals itself on de-construction of the body. The aim of dialog with the “other” of our own body, our sister and victims of self-deception is to find peaceful and democratic means of communication resulting from shared suffering. And when it comes to Turkey and Greece, what we really most need is such sort of intuition and awareness.

As I wrote about in another production of Terzopoulos, Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* in 2010, working with Terzopoulos as an actor is a challenging journey. I think it is possible to

9 The content of the discussion about Eros/Thanatos and Primary Trauma is partly excerpted from my published speech at the Return of Dionysus -Tribute to Theodoros Terzopoulos event held in Delphi in July 2018. For full text, see. Kerem Karaboğa, “The Acting Method of Terzopoulos as a Means to Confrontation with Our Age of Total Decay” in *Terzopoulos Tribute Delphi*, ed. Attis Theatre (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2021), 86-90

think of this challenging journey to a rite of passage. “*This journey transforms and matures you. As you are farewelled to kommos from Attis, you are a new persona. Without noticing, after this long odyssey type of journey you will still be longing for going back to agon*”.¹⁰

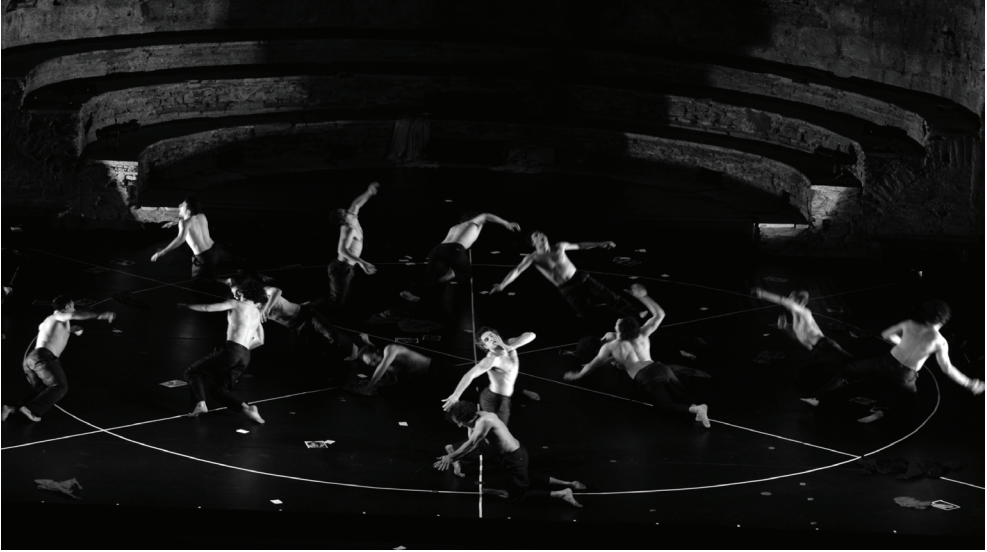


Photo 8

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10 Kerem Karaboğa, “The Journey of a Performer with Theodoros Terzopoulos in Prometheus Bound,” in *Promethiade*, ed. Frank M. Raddatz (Essen: Klartext, 2011), 127.

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