

An Interview with Stratis Panourios

The interview has been conducted by
Magdalena Cieślak (University of Lodz, Poland)

Magdalena Cieślak (later as MC):

Let's start with a little bit of background for the project—both the workshops and the eventual production. Could you tell us what ideas and premises were the driving force for having *The Tempest* performed at the Korydallos Detention Centre?

Stratis Panourios (later as SP):

Let me start by indicating some thoughts and questions that I noted in my Director's Notebook, before selecting the field of Shakespeare (and his *The Tempest* later) for the workshop material.

I already knew the power of Shakespeare's texts in the reintegration of prisoners since I've had seen that they have been used in other prisons for many years. So, I started with some research questions: How can theatre be done in prisons? Why do we want theatre to become a thing in a prison? Can a theatrical group be created in prisons? Can team members without previous experience perform a classic text? Why Shakespeare in prison? In what area of the prison could such a demanding theatrical project be performed? How many performances would we give? To what spectators? What would be the translation of the work? Who would play the role of Miranda? What if she was a professional young actress? How could this be supported by the National Theatre? Who would be the costume designer, the set designer? When would we start and when would we end? Those were the questions that were being gradually answered over eight months.

I knew very well that if I asked any colleague, actor or director, if they could stage *The Tempest* with a group of prisoners who had never worked professionally in the theatre in about one hundred and eighty hours of rehearsals,

the answer would be no. Even professional troupes would find it difficult to stage it in any theatre in such a short time. Especially in a prison. But the issue was not only to stage a play, but to stage this exact play with those actors and, of course, in that space.

The choice of Shakespeare wasn't incidental, because his most significant plays concern the study of his villains' psyche. Such plays give us the opportunity to become acquainted with characters who have committed crimes, who have overstepped all limits, legal as well ... I felt that, by getting in touch with a Shakespearean play, all the participants would have the opportunity to compare, through acting, and each one for himself, their past experiences, their current choices and also their future potential.

MC:

Why did you decide to select a play by Shakespeare?

SP:

Who was Shakespeare? What do we mean when we say "Shakespeare"? Who can understand what Shakespeare writes? Who has the right to perform Shakespeare?

In the fourth workshop meeting, I mentioned the name of William Shakespeare for the first time and found that almost everyone had heard his name. Every person had their own references, so I realized that that English writer may have died four hundred years ago but his name and fame is so big that almost all the participants of the Theatre Workshop in the prison knew him. I also told them about the version of his name that can seem a nickname: "Will I Am Shake-speare"—I am the will, I hold a spear.

I asked if there were any of his plays in the prison library and immediately Nikos, the librarian, brought us twenty different works that for some reason were there. Until then, no one had sought them. My suggestion was that we all start studying these works together as single plays: that everyone would take a book and after reading it, in the next meetings, they would present it in their own way for the group. *The Tempest* was among the plays.

We then talked about how everyone felt about how the works were created and about the need to create this universal mosaic of stories. Suddenly, Shakespeare, the great writer, became more familiar and would become even closer to us the more we talked about him. We even imagined a dramatization of his life in relation to his works and talked about the films that have been made on this subject.

After a while, our team would present a version of the "Shakespeare Phenomenon:" an entire world, a universe of people, words and themes that could not but become the name of our group, "Phenomenon."

We also found that the so-called “villains” of Shakespeare, such as Richard III, Iago and others, were the most exciting to play. It is also interesting to see how the “outside” society rewarded the actors who played the villains, that is characters who, paradoxically, committed many unspeakable crimes. For example, a few years earlier an article commented on the performance of an actor: “Outstanding performance of Richard III in Epidaurus.” We discussed at length this particular case of duplicity of the society which, while imprisoning those who have committed wrongdoing, enjoys seeing such people on stage commit heinous crimes, and appreciates them in laudatory reviews. Theatre and life are, however, different things, but what does it mean that the most interesting dramas are built on villains?

MC:

What motivated your specific choice of *The Tempest*?

SP:

But what is *The Tempest*? We consist of a multitude of “Egos”, a number of different people who run scattered all around, pushing each other, creating storms at times. This is perhaps the inner life of a person, I thought, which at any time can calm down or break out into a storm. It is in this inner psychological space that we worked, in the inner storm of a human. From the beginning this was the exciting thing about this work, this thirst for the unification of one’s inner life. The decision was taken unanimously by everyone.

MC:

How did you decide to approach the rehearsals for *The Tempest*? How did you adapt the text and cast the roles? What were the choices that governed the design of the music, costumes, and setting?

SP:

Rehearsals began with lessons on the fundamentals of theatrical art: an introduction to the world of theatre and especially acting. At the same time, the members of the group read and presented plays by Shakespeare on a weekly basis. A small group was also created to edit Shakespeare’s poetic text and make the necessary adaptations. What has been added is an actual “release” at the moment when Prospero releases Ariel, a moment in the project that created a special emotion for everyone, participants and spectators. Regarding the distribution of the roles, the choice was made by the participants themselves after discussions we all had together. Costumes were chosen by the costume designer of the national theatre, Mr. Sakis Xaxiris. Our stage area would be the garden-island and our main and unique object in it would be the iron double bunk bed.

MC:

One of the central characters in your production is Gonzalo. Can you explain why this particular character is of such importance for your reading of the play? In what way are his ideas of a utopian state crucial for the social role of the project?

SP:

Gonzalo, as Shakespeare mentions him in the list of characters, is an honest old advisor from Naples, and I see him the same way. Although he was appointed to dispose of Prospero and Miranda at sea, he actually helped them survive, giving them water, food, clothes and books that Prospero considered important. He is the one who tries to calm the crew on board when the shipwreck occurs. He is the one who firmly believes that Ferdinand is alive. He is a positive thinker, who believes in the will of Heaven, one who is able to notice the miracle of the dry clothes of the shipwrecked. By giving him the “we split” lines on the ship,¹ we could treat him as a family man with a wife and children, and a brother as well. While both Prospero and Alonso have brothers, they do not resemble them, they are like snakes. On the other hand, Gonzalo is the only one who seems to have a great relationship with his brother, because when the boat sinks he says his goodbyes to him:

GONZALO: We are sinking! Farewell, my wife and my children! Farewell, my brother! We are sinking!

These lines are not always attributed to Gonzalo, as it depends on the edition, but they compliment my interpretation of the character.

The issue of strife and betrayal between siblings is a common occurrence in prisons, and some of the participants had real problems with their siblings, who led them to prison for hereditary and financial reasons.

The moment of the shipwreck, as we discussed it in the workshops, is similar to the moment of an arrest by the police, where the person arrested is saying goodbye to his loved ones. It is the point of no return when one realizes that a peculiar death of sorts is coming.

Prospero identifies Gonzalo with Divine Providence, which he mentions to his daughter Miranda talking about the moment they were at sea:

MIRANDA

How did they get ashore?

PROSPERO

Divine Providence helped us: we had some food, some water, that a brave Neapolitan, Gonzalo... supplied us.

¹ The director refers to the following section from act I scene 1: *A confused noise within*: “Mercy on us!”—“We split, we split!” “Farewell, my wife and children!”—“Farewell, brother!”—“We split, we split, we split!”

These lines from Vasilis Rotas' Greek translation of *The Tempest* gave us an opportunity to discuss the matter of fate. A question hovers among the detainees when they are in their cells. Is it fatal to go to jail? Could they do something so that their actions, and consequently their current life, were different?

We referred to Ioannis Stovaios who states in his anthology: "Things are done in four ways. Necessarily, by destiny, by choice or by will and by chance."² Dividing the facts of life along these four laws, many of the participants began to understand the mechanism of events that had led them to prison. They distinguished incidents that belonged to one of those laws. They saw that their seemingly fatal choices had been either random events or done necessarily and not at will. We found that the third law, of conscious choice, was rare.

The role of Gonzalo could well be played by an elderly prisoner philosophizing about life, with an experience of many years of incarceration. In our production, however, the role was taken by a young man, 35 years old, who maintained a very good friendly relationship with the man who played Prospero. It was their desire to play "friends" since they were also friends in the prison wing. Thus, they had time to discuss their roles and assist each other in learning the text. In the theatre, Prospero and Gonzalo may not even know each other and may have to imagine or create a friendly relationship during rehearsals, while in our case the friendship was a strong bond there at the beginning.

The participants are baptized again through the performance. For the duration of the rehearsals and their presence on stage, they are reborn. This is particularly visible in the participant who plays Gonzalo, as he becomes a different person, even if just for a few months. His inmates call him Gonzalo inside the prison. And during his famous monologue, when he says "And were the king of it, what would I do?", he becomes a king, president or prime minister of the country. After this monologue he cannot be himself, but he acquires respect and prestige, even if this is related to a theatrical monologue.

He is also given the opportunity to speak on behalf of all the prisoners to say that he imagines their own world, outside the prison. A world that is "upside down" or "opposite" to today's world. In the monologue, Gonzalo says: "I' th' commonwealth I would by contraries / Execute all things." In our rehearsals we pondered on whether this world should be the norm and not the other way around. For a moment we thought of replacing the word "contraries" but eventually followed the original. This verse opened a whole world to us. Through extensive discussions during rehearsals we achieved a connection between the world of Gonzalo and Platonic ideals.

² This is an alternative transliteration of Stobaeus's name: Joannes Stobaeus, (Stobaeus, Iōannēs Stobaïos or John of Stoboi), c. 500 AD, author of *Anthology (Florilegium)*, a collection of works by other Greek writers—ed. AK-P.

Since the staging of our play not only involved rehearsals but also a lot of research, one of the participants took the initiative to guide us with a lecture, making an introduction to Plato's work *Politeia* or *Peri Dikaiou*. As a modern version of Socrates, a prisoner, he spoke to us about the importance of justice and how much happier a righteous person is from an unjust one. He spoke to us about the definition of justice, the structure of society, property and privacy, and philosophers-kings; he spoke about the allegory of Plato's Cave and the importance of the truth for different regimes; and about art, utopias and dystopias. Our room was transformed into the "Gallipoli" of the book and all of us into philosophers-kings. We could talk for hours and hours about the issues in Plato's *Politeia*, so we decided for the time being that maybe one of our future performances would have the theme of *Politeia*, where we could all study it thoroughly.³

As reference books and texts on the ideal state, we studied Thomas Moore's *Utopia*, written in 1516, presenting a story taking place on a strange island somewhere in the South Atlantic Ocean off the coast of South America. We could not help but associate Shakespeare with the reading of this book, making sure that the decision to link the prison to Prospero's Island was the right one.

This reading was followed by references to the Biblical Garden in Eden and the Protoplasts, Sir Philip Sydney's *Arcadia* (1580), a summary of Michel De Montaigne's *Of Cannibals* (1580), and we ended our study with texts written by the participants on the subject of their own vision of an ideal state. The adaptation of Gonzalo's monologue in our show was based on the texts by the participants.

The participant who plays Gonzalo had now the opportunity to talk about his ideal state, a world without crime and prisons. Until then, his voice was heard only in his apology in court, while now his monologue was addressed to the spectators. And the spectators are by no means jurors. On the edge of the stage, he was free not only to apologize but to share something very important: his own discovery and the thoughts of an ideal utopia.

His words are dominated by a big "if". "If" the world was different, maybe he would not have to be in prison, he would have the opportunity to live like other people. He would live a normal life and his childhood would be full of wonder and hope. Because in the conversations we had, we likened this time to childhood, which for most prisoners may have existed as an idealised state. In the rehearsals, of course, we experienced this through the joy of creation.

³ Following these discussion, a series of books on Plato's *Politeia* are now available for reading in the prison library.

MC:

You mention that you didn't want to bring anything into the production from outside the prison. And yet, there is one critical outside contribution—the professional actress playing the role of Miranda. The role could have been played by one of the prisoners, considering that Shakespeare's theatre only had men playing all the parts. What is the motivation behind your decision? How does Miranda's presence contribute to the discussion of utopia in the production? Would it be possible to create a utopian space with an all-male cast?

SP:

The choice of a professional actress came to establish the theatrical utopia that was being built step by step. Her existence in the rehearsals for five consecutive months created a unique meeting of a utopian space of coexistence. She gave the team the concentration and the will to complete our course at all stages of the process. She was the official guest on the group trip bridging the life in the immobile dystopian world of the prison and the life outside. Each rehearsal was a potential visit from the outside world, a window through which they could gaze upon the life that would await them after their release. Here I remember Miranda's words,

Oh, wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O, brave new world
that has such people in 't!

and the emotions they generated among the participants in the rehearsals as well as in the performances for the audience.

We do have an idea for a future show with an all-male cast. There is a thought to deal with plays by Aristophanes, who is more related to the Greek tradition and mentality.

MC:

How did the philosophical aspects of the discussions about law, justice, property and the organization of society in the utopian (dystopian) context, which started from the analysis of *The Tempest*, resonate with the participants of the play and become the key (like a protagonist) to the production?

SP:

Vasilis Rotas, in his introduction to his translation of *The Tempest*, the one we worked with in Korydallos, notes the following thoughts that have been a compass throughout our journey: "To hold power, to have been treated unfairly, to have the strength to punish, to hold the unfair in your hands and to

use your power only to forgive the unfair, to give them the chance and the way to rediscover themselves...”. Throughout the research period and the rehearsal process we worked along the path between opposites: storm—calm, revenge—forgiveness, island—land, theatre—life. Working towards bridging these opposites helped us tremendously in developing psychological and philosophical discussions that were used on our interpretation of the play.

MC:

How is utopia presented in the production?

SP:

During the rehearsals, I was looking for a main stage object that with its presence, use and functionality would be emblematic of our performance in this space. I did not want to bring anything from the outside, from the cellars of the National Theatre, or to build something especially for our performance. I had to think of an object that would be unique and would create different interactive spaces.

So, I started to observe and consider objects I encountered in various places, until I remembered again the stage instruction of the play at the beginning of the second scene: “In Prospero’s cell.” Then the idea of a bunk bed came to me. Yes, a bunk bed, this iron double bed, associated with prisons and the military, could symbolize the ultimate object of the show. What else can symbolize Prospero’s incarceration for twelve years on this island? And what else could connect our show with the prison itself?

In the rehearsals, I let this idea be tested by the participants. I think it is very important for the director to share with his actors the development of the project so that they can together move forward towards their goal. Indeed, the comments we all made together and the stories about life in the cell led to a unanimous choice of this particular object. For the prisoners, the bunk bed symbolizes the island of Prospero, the place where he spends most of his time. On the bed, he travels between past, present and future. It is an immobile object that has the innate ability to move the imagination.

The bunk bed also had many stage advantages. The actors could move on three levels: under the bed, on the first bed and on the top bed, sitting, lying down, but also standing. Also, with its four corners, it created other additional spaces of actions that would help our scenes, and its physical weight would give safety and stability to the actors’ movement.

Visually, nothing could compare to the bunk bed in the middle of the prison garden, placed in front of a tree. There, the bed transformed into an entity beyond imagination. The actors who climbed the bed seemed to be somewhere far away from that place, on a real island, young and free for a new life.

But the most important thing was that the prisoners who saw this object star in the show would miraculously see their own cells grow bigger; they would see them transformed in front of them into a vast garden and, thus, their life stories would come to life.

MC:

What is utopian in the Korydallos Detention Centre *The Tempest*?

SP:

The act of the performance itself. A group of twenty-five participants after eight months accomplished something that no one had imagined. People who until then had no direct connection with the theatre discovered Shakespeare's poetry. They spoke in his words. They created new revelatory connections with life and theatre. In a way, they gave a gift to themselves, to those involved in the performance process, as well as to the audience. Through their actions, they freed theatre from all unnecessary things. From the arrogance of its elitist side. They called out the purpose of theatre's existence and its truth. The spectators who came from outside to watch the show also experienced their own utopia. They would never have expected in their lives that they would see Shakespeare's *The Tempest* inside a prison, inside the prison's island garden. It was a lesson in freedom for all.

MC:

You see theatre as a medium of important social mission, one with immense potential impact on people. Could you comment on how the prison project demonstrates that power (role?) of theatre?

SP:

Theatre is a free and non-binding instrument of communication between people and societies through its aesthetic values. An instrument that always asks questions through the performance, both in reflections on the contemporary world, and in age-old questions about individual and social existence. It is an instrument that, after the performance, mobilizes the audience, giving either a signal of danger or an impulse for the regeneration of another world of values.

No adjacent theatrical form, like cinema or television, can mirror its essence and its mission because theatre is an art form realized by the presence of the person, the individual and the group together. Theatre itself uses human presence as a medium to create an arena of representation and confrontation of social values and human relations, essentially becoming the same as the dialectic of life. It is the bearer of dialogue, abolishing the monologue of the first poems about the god Dionysus. Thus, theatre historically expresses social changes and

keeps the values of the historical periods in its form. The mission of theatre is to trouble the complacent as well as the anxious. The theatre itself as an artistic creation was the highest form of individual and social criticism.

It became the highest institution of dialogue, “tormenting” through on-stage performance the emotional and mental world of a human being, as well as the ideas, thoughts and perceptions of us as political and social beings. As Walter Puchner said in his speech about “Democracy, dialogue, theatre,” “Dialogue, a delicate balance, which requires discretion, attention, tolerance, respect for the neighbor. It is a subtle value, the more complex and numerous society is. Dialogue means sociability; it is the basis of friendship, love, family, society, democracy”.⁴

MC:

How do you see Prison Shakespeare’s role in shaping potential dystopian/ utopian spaces for their inmates?

SP:

Nikos Kazantzakis, author of *Zorba the Greek*, travelled to England and wrote a book about his impressions, *From England: A Travel Journal by Nikos Kazantzakis*. In the long chapter on Shakespeare, he says: “An infinite spirit, from the depths of hell to the summit of Paradise. If the whole of humanity was to send a single representative to speak for its rights before God, it would send him. He is also the only one who could represent our planet at some giant interplanetary conference. No one ever used human speech with such power and at the same time such sweetness as Shakespeare, with such harshness and at the same time such melody and so magical an aura” (p. 261).

Through his plays, Shakespeare creates dystopic or utopic spaces and worlds but not just happy places. He enters into the participant’s inner world, which is reflected in his own experience of the above worlds and in reality. Through the power of his transformative ideas he creates a context which allowed the participants of the theatre workshops to search where they came from, where they are now—in prison—and where they wish to be when they go out of the prison. There are many emotions and intellectual wealth in Shakespeare’s plays, and through *Universal Dramatic Actions* his work can touch and affect every aspect of human relations. His work, therefore, is capable

⁴ The quote in Stratis Panourios’s translation, see: Walter Puchner, «Δημοκρατία—Διάλογος—Θέατρο» [Democracy—dialogue—theatre], Α. Αλτουβά / Κ. Διαμαντάκου (επιμ.), *Θέατρο και Δημοκρατία. Με αφορμή τη συμπλήρωση 40 χρόνων από την αποκατάσταση της Δημοκρατίας. Αφιερωμένο στον Βάλτερ Πούχνερ. Πρακτικά Ε’ Πανελληνίου Θεατρικού Συνεδρίου (5-8 Νοεμβρίου 2014)*, 2 vols., Athens 2018, vol. I, pp. 55-9—ed. AK-P.

of replacing the perspective of the participants through the transformation of their dystopian everyday life into a projection of their own personal utopias, which each of them would like to build in the now, in before and after, in the future. So *the Utopian world of reintegration* no longer seems to be far away from them, or impossible, but seems real and possible.

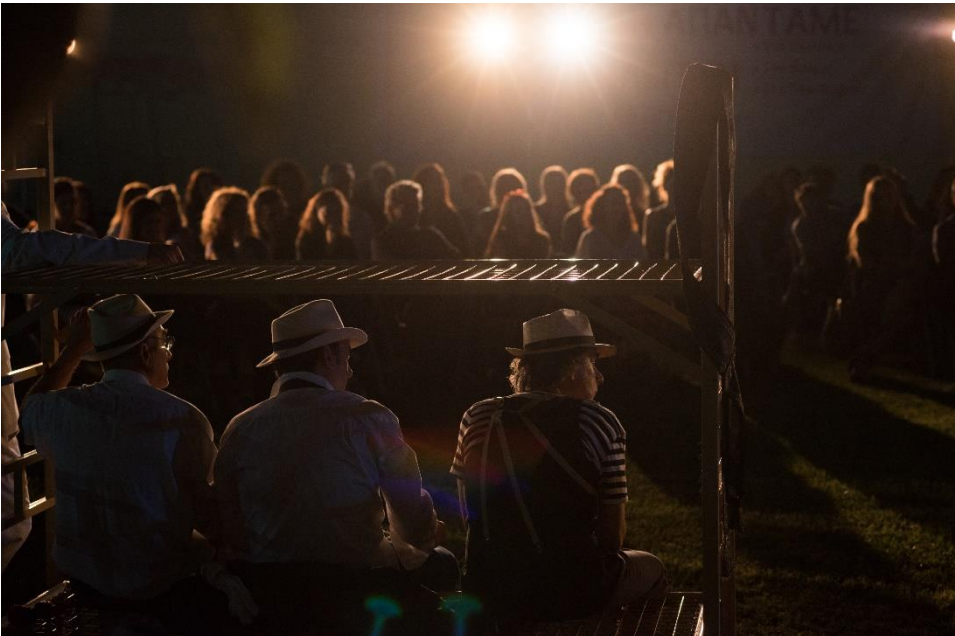
Theatre allows introspection that can change your way of thinking and ultimately let you escape to discover a new you. It is not incidental that next to Asklepieio of Epidauros, at the sanatorium of the body, there also existed a theatre, the sanatorium of the soul. Theatre enters the psyche of an individual, influencing their feelings and thoughts, and essentially making a remarkable difference to both. In a single word, I would say that it can produce a “psycho-metamorphosis.”



Photograph by Constantinos & Petros Sofikitis



Photograph by Constantinos & Petros Sofikitis



Photograph by Constantinos & Petros Sofikitis



Photograph by Constantinos & Petros Sofikitis



Photograph by Constantinos & Petros Sofikitis