

the simplest truth, the most basic physical fact, that when someone is dead, he/she is gone; extinguished; not present any more, in any shape or form. To our human hearts the absence of the beloved dead has its own presence, which is actually an especially strong presence. This is perhaps the greatest of human paradoxical abilities, the dual and contradictory culmination of our rational and emotional powers.

Cordelia does not die “in the gutter” as her sisters, but in her father’s arms. Her death brings him back to his senses, but also brings him his greatest ever and unsustainable grief. This moment is illuminated by one spotlight, which then fades out, ending the play with final and all-encompassing death instead of its original hope for the kingdom’s future. “So dark” are Sturua’s Lear’s final words, a phrase opposite to the one which initiated creation. The end of the world in this production is on a personal and existential note, not on a familial, social or political one.

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Shakespearean Challenges on the Athenian Stage

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During the theatre season 2006–2007 several Shakespearean productions (including adaptations), both old (such as Eleni Merkenidou’s monologue *Tempest*, directed by Damianos Constantinidis, with Efi Drosou) and new, were presented in the Athenian theatres. The new productions included *Much Ado about Nothing*, directed by Rania Oikonomidou and starring, in the roles of Beatrice and Benedick respectively, Renia Louisidou and Charis Romas, mostly known from television series, but also excellent stage actors; an atmospheric *Twelfth Night*, directed by Nikos Kamtsis (also starring actresses mostly known from TV series, such as Yro Loupi as Olivia and Katerina Tsavalou as Feste); and a fresh, inventive, and really enjoyable *Comedy of Errors* by the theatre group “Petai” (mostly consisting of graduates and students of the Art Theatre “Karolos Koun” Drama School, one of the oldest and most prestigious ones in Greece), directed by Dimitris Degaitis for one of the two stages of the Art Theatre “Karolos Koun”.

There were also a couple of adaptations: *Romeo and Juliet: Like a Tale* (where Shakespeare’s story was paralleled – though perhaps not very convincingly – with the tale of the lead soldier and the ballerina) by the group “361 Grades”, adapted and directed by Spyros Steriadis, who also played the male title role, and hosted by Nikos Kamtsis at his theatre, “Topos Allou”; and a very interesting *Macbeth*, directed by Giorgos Gallos. The all-male cast of the latter,

consisting of Pandelis Dentakis, Giannos Perlengas and Gallos himself, adapted the play and shared all the parts among them (Gallos performing, among other parts, a convincing Lady M., though clad in his military uniform). The minimal set, consisting of movable concrete blocks, enabled quick set changes and made the production breathtaking as well as atmospheric. There was also a production called *Much Ado and Nothing*, based on Shakespearean tragedies and histories (*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Richard III*), staged by the choreographer Constantinos Rigos at the New Stage of the National Theatre, the cast including mostly graduates of the National Theatre Drama School.

The “Theatre of the New World” (“Theatro tou Neou Kosmou”), where the all-male *Macbeth* was staged as part of the season’s repertoire, also hosted an all-female production of *Twelfth Night* by the theatre company “Polis”, established in 2003 in Syros, a cycladic island with notable theatrical tradition, and one of the few surviving neo-classic theatres in Greece. It was not the first time that the Greek stage saw an actress in a male Shakespearean role; Aemilia Ypsilanti as Prospero and Kariofyllia Karabeti as Hamlet are two relatively recent examples. However, there is more behind “Polis”’s all female cast. Considering that Shakespeare’s play was originally performed by an all-male cast, the director Eleni Georgopoulou argues that it can only work with actors of the same sex, and with this staging of *Twelfth Night* she meant to explore if and how the play worked played by an all-female cast, with the sexes inverted. Georgopoulou argues that, when performed by actors of the same sex, the play reveals that for Shakespeare love goes beyond sexes and social conventions.

Georgopoulou’s staging was clearly based on group work. Her actresses, perfectly orchestrated under the directions of Natalia Partheniou, who choreographed their movement, were all constantly present on stage, forming the background of the scene when not in it. The set and props were largely replaced by bodies and shadows (the lights were designed by Linos Meitanis), filling the stage with the appropriate atmosphere. The music, composed and performed live by Thanassis Vlavianos, was in a constant dialogue with the actresses’ voices and bodies, adding to the amazing unity of the production. The timelessness of Clare Bracewell’s colourful and inventive costumes (Bracewell also designed the costumes for the aforementioned production of *Much Ado about Nothing*) seemed to underscore Shakespeare’s universality; in the beginning of the production part of each character’s costume was worn by an actress playing somebody else, denoting perhaps the randomness of roles in Shakespeare’s world and ours. The translation used for this production was by Christina Babou-Pagourelis, one of the most well-known Greek translators for the theatre. The cast consisted of Maria Tsima (Feste), Amalia Tsekoura (Orsino), Aemilia Valvi (Viola/Sebastian), Elita Kounadi (Olivia), Anneta Kortsaridou (Maria), Stella Rapti (Sir Andrew Aguecheek), Irini Grammatikopoulou (Sir Toby Belch), Irini

Tzanetoulakou (Malvolio), Elena Lariou (Antonio) and Ioanna Asimakopoulou (Valentine).

While the members of “Polis” were experimenting with their all-female production, another newly founded theatre group was facing a different challenge. The group “Arena”, consisting, like “Polis”, of young people, attempted a new staging (including a new translation) of *Titus Andronicus*. Thirty years after its first Greek production (in 1977, by Spyros Evangelatos, now a well-known stage director not only in Greece but also abroad), Alexandros Sotiriou, who also took up the title role, decided to stage his own version of the play.

Considering that *Titus Andronicus* was Shakespeare’s first tragedy, Sotiriou regarded his venture as an attempt made by a group of young people to express on stage what a young playwright had tried to express in his time. Sotiriou argues that the play has much in common with our own world, which largely justifies his choice; the issues of anarchy, violence, and power at large are as central today as they were in Shakespeare’s time, or indeed in the era described in his play.

If a play staged as often as *Twelfth Night* subjects a new production to comparison with a long line of previous ones, as Eleni Georgopoulou argues, a play that is rarely performed, such as *Titus Andronicus*, most probably involves staging problems; what makes directors have second thoughts about staging *Titus* is very likely its gory scenes. Another challenge for “Arena” was the group’s low budget, which makes things particularly hard in the case of such a play. Nevertheless, Michalis Topkaras solved the budget problem very effectively by using a cheap but quite impressive material for the set: the black plastic of which garbage bags are made. This material also made things easier with deaths and mutilations, solving the problem of representing the play’s infinite gore: the characters that were killed or wounded were represented by puppets wrapped in this black plastic, and red strands of the same material stood for their bleeding or missing bodyparts. Lavinia, for example, was substituted by a puppet with red strands in the place of the hands and tongue. At the same time, this material did not allude to a particular era, which once more helped to underscore the timelessness of the play.

The new translation by Eva Simatou, who also played the part of Tamora, is significantly theatrical. As the translator says, while translating the play she had the actors’ bodies in mind, also taking into consideration the director’s notes and comments. The outcome was a living translation that has also retained Shakespeare’s poetry.

Sotiriou in the role of Titus gave a character weary of Rome’s wars and his sons’ loss but still strong and in control, even in his excellently performed moments of madness. Simatou’s Tamora ideally combined queenly grace and barbaric cruelty. Maria Georgiadi interpreted successfully Lavinia’s dutiful

behaviour but also her inner power. Alexis Saripanidis gave an Aaron figure that retained both the exotic and the Machiavellian element. The secondary parts were shared between Alexis Klimos (Saturninus, Marcus, Chiron, Quintus) and Nathaniel Rundle (Lucius, Bassianus, Demetrius, Martius), both of whom handled with ease every single role. Most actors graduated from the Drama School of the Art Theatre “Karolos Koun”, where the production was hosted as part of the season’s repertoire.

Last, but not least, the music by Giorgos Diamantopoulos, mostly based on wind and percussion instruments, but also including vocals and objects that are not commonly used to produce music, contributed to the atmosphere of the play by creating a relevance between the sounds and the action or an antithesis between them.

On the whole, the 2006–2007 theatre season had much to offer to the Athenian audience. Most importantly, the majority of the productions were created by young people, who gave a fresh view of the Shakespearean plays.