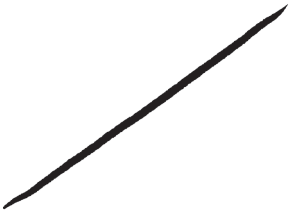


THE "OTHER" *PERSIANS* OF THEODOROS TERZOPOULOS

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Abstract: This article focuses on the 2006 interpretation of Aeschylus' *Persians* by the Greek theatre director Theodoros Terzopoulos. Through his systematic method, Terzopoulos incorporates actions and traditions into his productions, drawing from rituals, practices, and ceremonies from the East. Terzopoulos' rendition of the historical play *Persae*, which examines the reception of the news about the Persians' defeat by the Greeks in the "other" Persia, correlates "otherness" with universality. By employing a Greek and Turkish cast as well as rituals from "other" cultures, the director makes a claim that human attitudes and reactions are universally shared among all human beings.

Keywords: Theodoros Terzopoulos, *Persians* by Aeschylus, otherness, method, interculturalism, lamentation, universality.

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Introduction

In the light of contemporary theatre theorists, the theatrical and performance space represents the "otherness" which is realised, mainly, through bodily representation.

Within the spaces of theatre and the performing arts, the differential bounds demarcating otherness, such as national, cultural, religious, socio-political, sexual, gender, and diasporic delineations, are continually and constantly dramatised, disrupted, negotiated, and redrawn. (Sebedtyén, 2016, p. 5)

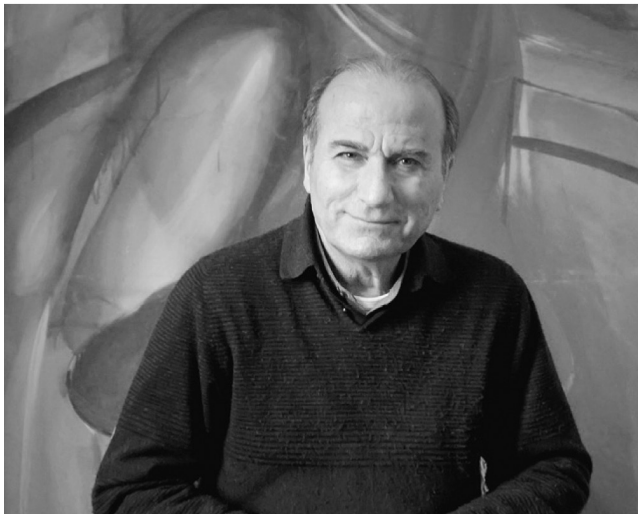
In the case of Theodoros Terzopoulos¹, "otherness" is expressed via interculturalism. The director through his Method incorporates in his approach actions and traditions of the Greek world using rituals, practices and ceremonies from East, thus creating a new mythology based on corporeality and rituals. The actor's "Energy body" (*The Return of Dionysos*, p. 15), through painful exercises of his biodynamic method, acquires a "ritualistic dimension" which transforms it into the Dionysiac body. According to Erika Fischer-Lichte "Dionysus is also the god of endless transformations. He appears as a man and woman, as God and beast, as a lion, snake or bull, permanently blurring the line between madness and reason, order and chaos, I and non-I" (Fischer-Lichte, 2019, p. 11). At the

¹ Greek director Theodoros Terzopoulos has gained international recognition through his numerous performances which have been staged, since mid-1980s, around the world. His production of Euripides' *Bacchae* (1986) marked an alternative approach to Greek tragedy based on the bodily, ritualistic training of his actors and actresses and on the geometrical, abstract stage design.

same time, Dionysos, the dominant god of Terzopoulos' theatre, embodies the intercultural nature of his Method. Significantly, the book in which the director analyses his Method is entitled *The Return of Dionysos*, while his own theatre venue based in Athens is called "Attis," after the Winter Dionysos, who arrives from Phrygia (Terzopoulos, 2000, p. 74). Apparently, Terzopoulos' theatre "is closely related to the god Dionysos. One could even go so far as to state that it is an ongoing attempt to lure the god into returning from his exile" (Fischer-Lichte, 2019, p. 9). In an interview with Frank M. Raddatz, Terzopoulos made the following statement:

Dionysos came from India. We find the same god as Osiris in Egypt, Adonis in Syria, while in Thrace is named Dionysos again. He is always on the move. Each of these cultures considers him as a traveller. That is the history of his metamorphosis. This phenomenon does not mean that one culture imitates the other. Rather, it testifies a profound dialogue with the energy of the Other, the foreign culture. (Terzopoulos, 2006, p. 169)

Thus, Theodoros Terzopoulos' intercultural theatrical experience is strongly related to the idea of employing and integrating the foreigner, the "other" into the performance.



Theodoros Terzopoulos, © Johanna Weber

Photo source: <https://urania.szfe.hu/2023/03/the-return-of-dionysus/?lang=en>
(*The Return Of Dionysus*, András Kozma's Interview with Theodoros Terzopoulos,
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The 2006 Persians of Theodoros Terzopoulos

Within the above context of universality, achieved through the ultra-cultural tools of Terzopoulos' Method which goes beyond the limits of certain cultures and explores the "otherness" in the performer's language and movement (Pavis, 1996, pp. 1-21), my article will focus on the staging of Aeschylus' *Persians* in 2006, directed by Theodoros Terzopoulos with Greek and Turkish actors co-produced by the Attis Theatre, the Istanbul International Festival, the Athens-Epidauros Festival and the 4th Theatrical Olympiad. Besides, the Aeschylus' *Persians* (472 BC) are placed in the realm of "otherness" and dramatise, in the context of the different culture, the management of the crushing defeat from the point of view of the "other" Persians.

"Otherness" is highlighted in the lines of Aeschylus's play, mainly in the themes of exaggeration which moves away from the attic measure as seen in the bulk of Persian troops and the description of their expeditionary means (Verses: 1-117, 302-330) as well as in the issue of wealth and opulence. In the original play, the Persian wealth is, in many cases, stressed as such as the following examples indicate: "great wealth" (Collard, 2008, verse 163) and "O, you land of Persia and great harbour of wealth" (Collard 2008, verse 250). In other cases, the theme of wealth is indirectly recurrent in textual references to rich garments: "Two women in fine clothing, one attired in Persian dress and the other in Greek" (verses 181-2), "And now you, Xerxes' aged and loving mother [...] Fetch suitable fine clothing and go to meet your son; tatters of his embroidered garments hang in torn shreds round his body, wholly from grief at his disaster" (Collard, 2008, verses 831-5). Finally, the Aeschylean text emphasises the different conception of political power, as the verse: "They call themselves no man's slaves or subjects." (Collard, 2008, verse 242) referring to the Greeks is in stark contrast to Atossa's phrase: "but were he to have bad success—he is not answerable to the people, and if he is saved, he is no less the ruler of this land" (Collard, 2008, verses 212-213), which refers to Persians. At the same time, in the text of Aeschylus, hubris emerges as a threatening example, common to all human beings.

The *Persians* of 2006 was Theodoros Terzopoulos' fourth approach to the text of Aeschylus. He first presented the play in 1990 with his Attis Theatre Company. This was a static staging which clearly pronounced the embodied threnody over the woes the war imposes on human beings. His second approach of 1991 (Attis Theatre Company) focused on the pattern of fortune's reversal and the entailing state of mourning. However, Terzopoulos' third approach to the Aeschylus' play, produced by the Moscow Meyerhold Foundation in 2003, had a strong political interpretation. The director, in an interview, states that "the play is about the lost and defeated Soviet Union" (Terzopoulos, 2003). Terzopoulos in all

his stagings of the play makes the best of elements inherent in religious ceremonies, which focus on the deep-rooted human and at the same time universal pain of the loss. Through controlling their breath, the performers develop somatic awareness, embody the rhythm and pronounce sounds rather than words. After all, the director is not interested in the conceptual interpretation of speech but in its description, in the image of the structure of the word, that is, its internal cause (Terzopoulos, 2000, p. 57). Therefore, his approaches are dominated by the ritual lamentation that materialises through “radical kinesiology” (Sampatakakis, 2019, p. 27) and the pulsating body of the actors. Terzopoulos’ theatre is neither intellectual nor cerebral, but physical which projects rhythm, gesture and Dionysian ecstasy. The somatization of the rhythm of speech makes possible the multilingualism (Greek, Turkish and ancient Greek) that characterises the all-male multinational ensemble of the *Persians* of 2006. At the same time, Terzopoulos believes that dialogue is based on rhythm (Terzopoulos, 2000, p. 61). According to the director, there is no need for someone to understand the lyrics, which are nonetheless reinforced by “the description produced by the hands and the head” (Terzopoulos, 2000, p. 61). Terzopoulos’ actors have also “perfected the energy force of the human sound”, which is a “primeval cultural element of communication and action by transforming the word into a rhythm” (Tsatsoulis, 2019, p. 116).

The most important, therefore, element of “otherness” in the 2006 representation of the *Persians* is the use of different languages. The Greek translation of the play by Eleni Varopoulou alternates with the Turkish translation of Gungor Dilmen Kalionsu and the ancient Greek of the original. According to Varopoulou, “the translated text, partially integrated in Terzopoulos’ performance with an idiom not easily accessible, was a valuable conceptive and acoustic material in this genre of proximity and distance” since the ancient text came from distant antiquity (Varopoulou, 2021, p. 149). The Turkish, mournful *amanesh* is delivered by all fourteen members of the Greek-Turkish Chorus and marks the *Kommós* (dirge) that would follow the disastrous campaign of Xerxes. Retorting to the use of the “other” language for the expression of the innermost pain by the members of the Chorus is an element of “otherness” as well. At the same time, the scene of the invocation of the dead Darius in ancient Greek, the repeated phrase “despot, despot, appear!” (“Despota, despotan fanethi!”/“Master! O, master, appear!”) (Collard 2008, verse 666) is an additional element of “otherness” as all the members of the Chorus express themselves in a “different” language than their own. “Otherness” expressed in the use of different languages (for example, Darius’s Turkish and the mournful cries of Xerxes and Chorus) defamiliarises the text and runs through the whole performance. At the end, as it will be shown below, language is self-deconstructed.

The second element which refers to the director's use of "otherness" in his approach to the play, although with the purpose to reject it at the end and turn it to "universality," is the choice of the performances' venues of the 2006 production: The church of Saint Eirini in Istanbul, a place ideologically, politically, religiously and culturally charged, initially hosted the Greek and Turkish actors in this intercultural approach of Theodoros Terzopoulos. Then Epidaurus, the predominantly "ideological" place of representation of ancient Greek tragedy in which the perception of the "correct interpretation" was cultivated in direct relation to the utterance of speech and the conceptual content of the word. Terzopoulos' stage realisation of the "other" *Persians* overturns the status quo regarding the performance of tragedy in the same place where it was cultivated.

At the same time, the scenery of the 2006 performances of Aeschylus' *Persians* is dominated by the circle (Photo no. 1: The circular setting of the performance in Saint Eirini's church). The circular surface, highlighted in white colour "establishes direct references to ancient Greek theatre where the disc of an orchestra was surrounded by rising tiers for the audience, thus to emphasise the vertical" (Dreyer, 2019, p. 36) which leads to depth, to the inner structure and to the "deepest layers of the psyche" (Terzopoulos, 2000, p. 50). Moreover, the circle delimits the space of "otherness" which is differentiated from the space of social activity and marks the diverted frame within which the performance's ritual will take place. According to Dimitris Tsatsoulis, "actors and actresses enter the threshold of no space in which trespassing is forbidden" (Tsatsoulis, 2011, p. 77). Therefore, the performance space is differentiated from the social space which surrounds it. At the same time, the circle marks the protective boundary, the safety net, of the actors and actresses. However, Darius's eerie ghost appearance transcends the boundaries of the circle since the former King possesses "the archetypal knowledge of the dead past" (Sampatakakis, 2008, p. 116) which the people inside the circle can't decipher. Darius's epiphany takes place at the same stage level but at the back of the stage. Consequently, his prophetic words cause upheaval, evident in the Chorus's escape movement on the elevated benches of the church of Saint Eirini, outside the safety of the circle which is abolished by the news of the imminent destruction and the ensuing lamentation. The scenery of Giorgos Patsas is completed by the two diagonals that intersect the centre of the circle. The geometric space and the intersecting lines seem to determine the actors' relationship with the space and, at the same time, with themselves (Tsatsoulis, 2011, p. 71). Moreover, in the centre of the circle, at the point of intersection of the diagonal lines, the Messenger (Savvas Stroumplos) will stand, in order to deliver the news of the ultimate destruction of the Persian army which will mark the reversal of fortunes of the people inside the circle, and it will trigger suffering and lamentation. At the same time, Messenger's speech will dissolve

the linear arrangement of Chorus' members, who abandon the harmony of the straight line as they try to escape the truth.

The all-male company of the 2006 production of Aeschylus' *The Persians* consisted of Greek and Turkish actors and thus, Terzopoulos managed to even transcend the already existed "otherness" of the original play which was set in the capital of the defeated, "other" Persians. Accordingly, in Terzopoulos' approach, Greek and Turkish actors who are historically identified as "others" participate as members of the same community in the lamentation over the destruction of a city as a fatal consequence of the expansionist, aggressive war. In fact, "Turkish and Greek actors suffer together, after Persians were killed due to the policies of Xerxes and mourn for all the ones that died in the wars" (Karaboğa 2019, p. 156). At the same time, the part of Xerxes is shared by one Turkish (Yigit Ozsener) and one Greek (Antonis Myriagkos) actor. Devrim Nas as Darius addresses his people and his wife, Atossa, the only female role of the original, who is played by a man (Meletis Helias). Therefore, "otherness" in the form of gender identity is also integrated in Terzopoulos' approach of 2006, through the enactment of the female role of the queen and mother of Xerxes by a male actor. Moreover, the theme of sexual "otherness" is further stressed as the male Atossa appears holding two white dresses which illustrate the Queen's dream (Photo no. 2: The two white dresses on the hands of the male Atossa), and, at the same time, they make a direct reference to the dressing of the dead body before the funeral service. The emphasis given by the original text on costumes is associated with the ornament "kosmon" (833, 849) and the bliss ("olvon" 164, 252, 709, 756, 826).



Theodoros Terzopoulos, *Persians*, 2006

Photo no. 1: The circular setting of the performance in Saint Eirini's church.

Source: <http://attistheatre.com/en/show/persians-2006/>



Photo no. 2: The two white dresses on the hands of the male Atossa.

Source: <http://attistheatre.com/en/show/persians-2006/>



Photo no. 3: The representation of the combat.

Source: <http://attistheatre.com/en/show/persians-2006/>

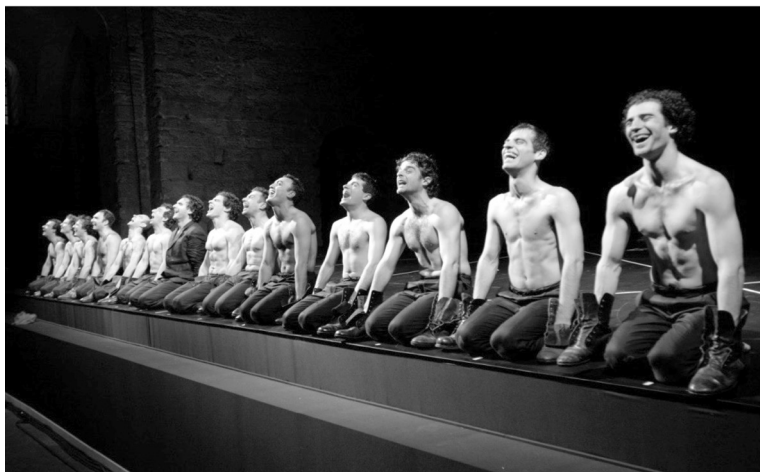


Photo no. 4: Soldiers' boots on the hands of the actors.
Source: <http://attistheatre.com/en/show/persians-2006/>

However, both words are deconstructed on stage by the director as his actors wear black costumes, a clear reference to mourning, and they are barefoot. The naked, from the waist up, bodies of the members of the Chorus strongly contrast the textual description of the old men. Consequently, Terzopoulos advances the issue of "otherness".

Furthermore, Theodoros Terzopoulos, transcends the borders by using "otherness" to underline the "identity" and the "oneness" of all people's suffering. At the same time the "universality" of peoples' needs and concerns is stressed (Tsatsoulis, 2011, p. 55), through director's, deep knowledge of the different cultural traditions, on the one hand, and his awareness of the communal character of the human rituals on the other. Thus, Terzopoulos' intercultural approach and his ultra-cultural Method highlight the community of emotions and reactions of all human beings to common problems that concern their existence. The director's intercultural approach becomes possible through the use of myth and the mythological motifs, which exceed the space-time limits of a particular social and cultural background. The mythical stories depict the universal concerns of the human beings and their reactions to situations and phenomena, which are also "universal". As Decreus argued, "Terzopoulos staged a great number of stories that were important for the common identity of our culture" (Decreus, 2019, p. 73). Subsequently, the actors and actresses of his performances, by somaticizing the expression, control physically their body which "starts thinking, sensing, listening and speaking" (Stroumpos, 2019, p. 101). Thus, the performer's body

becomes the source of communication and moves away from the conceptual content of the word. Nevertheless, the ecstatic body refers to “primordial ritual practices and religious rites” (Arvaniti, 2011, p. 100). Therefore, Terzopoulos’ body idiom becomes a universal stage language and expresses the needs and worries of all humans through cultural processes common to most peoples.

In the 2006 production of Aeschylus’s *Persians*, Terzopoulos uses elements inherent in ceremonies that focus on the universal pain of destruction and loss. It concerns “the historical lament for the fall or destruction of cities” (Alexiou, 2002, p. 160) as expressed through ritual practices common to most peoples, especially in the East. And because “laments for cities are inspired initially by historical events” (Alexiou, 2002, p. 160), the structure of Aeschylus’ *Persians* appears to have been traditional to the lament for cities:

In Aeschylus’ *Persians*, the news of the defeat of the Persian army is brought by the Messenger. Four lines of lamentation spell out the extent of the disaster (249-52) ... There follows a *kommós* in which the lyrical lament of the chorus is interrupted by the Messenger’s bald statement of facts ... (268-73). The theme is taken up in lyrical form in the first stasimon (532-97), in narrative form by the spirit of Dareios (759-86), by the chorus again (852-906) until the climax is reached in the closing *Kommós*, where the chorus’ persistent questions about the fate of Persia’s heroes are answered by Xerxes (955-77). (Alexiou, 2002, pp. 160-1)

Theodoros Terzopoulos, in his 2006 approach to Aeschylus’ play, projects the collective lament following the mourning rituals of the grieving people. However, the director chooses to stage the common elements inherent in the religious ceremonies of lamenting between two peoples who are considered “opposed” to each other. Thereby, he aims at deconstructing the “otherness” and stressing the communal reaction to the pain and loss. This is achieved, mainly, through actors’ vibrating and ecstatic bodies. Moreover, in the particular approach, the conceptual content of the words bears no significance since the words are delivered in three different languages—Greek, Turkish, ancient Greek. It is rather the way the words are reflected in the actors’ bodies. Hence, through the embodiment of words of tension and of ecstasy, Terzopoulos’ stage language is transformed into the universal language of the ritual lamentation. Through controlling their breath, wheezing, and extending the syllables, the actors embody the rhythm and pronounce the “pain-word”. The controlling of the breath also characterises the ritual of the modern historical laments. For Theodoros Terzopoulos, Aeschylus’ tragedy forms a common field in which two conflicting nations, who share the same *psyche*, are united through the common lamentation ritual.

Within the same context of the common reaction to the issues of loss and utter destruction in both Greek and Turkish cultures, Terzopoulos' approach to the *Persians* highlights the ubiquity of grief by focusing on the "otherness" of Greek and Turkish actors who share moments of collective suffering and anti-war sentiment. According to Avra Sidiropoulou, "the transnational scope and strong anti-war sentiment can certainly vouch for Terzopoulos' use of joined lamentation as across-cultural bridge, albeit imaginary" (Sidiropoulou, 2021, p. 212). Greek and Turkish actors express their deep sorrow and grief through mournful cries of pain and despair in ancient Greek (io, io, moi, ee, oioi, oa, ototototoi). The bewailing cries emanate directly from the body and render the seamless continuity of the ritual. At the end of the performance, Greek and Turkish actors mourn as they are cast down on the ground and make an effort to exit the stage in crawling mode. Before that, two actors reenacted the fatal combat and the violence of the battlefield (Photo no. 3: The representation of the combat). The mournful melody at the end of the performance alludes to the Byzantine melody of the funeral service, whereas the Eastern music at the beginning is reminiscent of the Imam's call to prayer. Thus, in Terzopoulos' approach, "otherness" is a connotation of identity as it is expressed through the common manifestations of mourning and religious rituals in Greek and Turkish cultures. At the same time, as in previous versions of the play, the men of the Chorus appear holding black and white photographs of the real war victims: Greek, Turkish, Cypriot and Kurdish casualties are displayed on stage, reminders of the common fatality of wars to all people involved. At the same time, the Chorus' members display pieces of paper featuring names of the dead Persian generals, "thus highlighting the political dimensions of a remote historic fact" (Sidiropoulou, 2021, p. 212).

Furthermore, the people's common reaction to the devastating consequences of the war is also depicted by the ecstatic mutism of the Chorus' leader as he hears the news of the war defeat: this is one of Terzopoulos' recurrent facial image caused by extreme anguish which results in mouth freezing into a gaping hole and "vocal inaudibility due to lack of breath and vocal control" (Jarema, 2019, p. 147). Moreover, towards the end of the performance, the Chorus members appear with the soldiers' boots in their hands, signalling the common condition of war and the subsequent destruction of all men involved (Photo no. 4: Soldiers' boots on the hands of the actors). Additionally, the red kerchiefs of the Chorus members symbolise the blood of the war fatalities indicative of the human plight which transcends the limits of space and time. Finally, the ontological focus of the performance on the identity of human suffering which emerges from the stage management of "otherness" is reflected in the desperate embraces of the Turkish and the Greek actors. According to the director: "when

we meet the other, the foreigner, and we look at him in the eyes ... there are two options for us: either we reach eros in its ontological meaning, or war, in its literal meaning” (Dimadi, 2006).

Conclusion

Theodoros Terzopoulos approached Aeschylus’ *Persians* in 2006 with a mixed cast of Greek and Turkish actors, uniting on stage two nations that represent the “otherness”. The director’s intercultural approach became possible using the myth, the biodynamic movement of the actors and the integration of ritual events of “other” cultures. He, thus, became the collective voice of human suffering, “Terzopoulos’ ultra-cultural Method highlighted the community of emotions and reactions of all human beings to common problems that concern the ‘Homo Universalis’” (Arvaniti, 2021, p. 224).

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