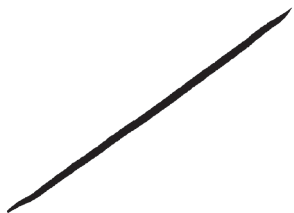


ELLI PAPADIMITRIOU'S *KOINOS LOGOS* (COMMON DISCOURSE) – NARRATING COLLECTIVE TRAUMA ON STAGE

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Abstract: This article delves into *Koinos Logos (Common Discourse)* by Elli Papadimitriou, along with its highly acclaimed stage production at the 2013 Athens Festival, directed by Vangelis Theodoropoulos, which significantly influenced contemporary Greek theatre. The issue raises several challenges that extend beyond the performance itself and into the dramaturgy, as the work is based on oral testimonies of female refugees from Asia Minor, collected by Papadimitriou in the aftermath of the Asia Minor Catastrophe. The study focuses on both textual and performance analysis, with particular emphasis on the directorial approach. It contends that the director successfully navigated the challenges posed by the narrative-driven text by relying on certain key concepts. These included emphasizing emotional resonance over the depiction of violence, engaging the audience's imagination in a manner evocative of ancient tragedy, foregrounding the element of chorality, and intertwining personal and collective narratives. Ultimately, these choices imbued the entire endeavour with a sense of *ahistoricity*, which is, to a great extent, inherent in the oral testimonies themselves.

Keywords: Oral history, Theatre of the Real, reception of historical events, testimonies, Vangelis Theodoropoulos, Elli Papadimitriou, *Koinos Logos (Common Discourse)*, refugees, Asia Minor, Athens Festival.

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In this article, I focus on *Koinos Logos (Common Discourse)* by Elli Papadimitriou and its highly engaging performance at the Athens Festival 2013, directed by Vangelis Theodoropoulos, which left a significant mark on the contemporary Greek stage.¹ The topic presents several challenges that pertain not only to the performance itself but also to the dramaturgy, as the latter represents a genuine example of oral history.² Therefore, this article emphasizes both textual analysis and performance analysis, with a focus on the directorial approach, to highlight the ideological content of the work, showcase its unique qualities as a dramaturgical material, and illustrate how the director successfully transposed this content to the stage, overcoming difficulties posed by the text's "anti-theatrical" character. The article briefly touches on issues related to the reception of the performance and attempts to situate it within the context of contemporary Greek theatre.

1 Production Details: Direction: Vangelis Theodoropoulos. Set and Costume Design: Antonis Daglidis. Song Selection and Instruction: Kostas Vomvolos. Movement Direction: Angeliki Stellatou. Lighting Design: Sakis Biribilis. Photography: Marilena Stafylidou. Video: Nikos Mandarakas. Cast: Lydia Koniordou, Eleni Kokkidou, Maria Katsandri, Eleni Ouzounidou, Tania Palaiologou. For the trailer of the performance, see https://www.athinorama.gr/theatre/performance/koinos_logos-10028406/

2 For discussions on the use of oral testimony in historiography, see, among others: Thompson (2017); Perks and Thomson (eds) (2015); Portelli (1991); Grele (1985).

Based on the power of unpretentious and authentic language, Elli Papadimitriou's *Koinos Logos* stands as a true example of oral history. It consists of oral testimonies of female refugees from Asia Minor, collected by Elli Papadimitriou during the 1930s, which were published in multiple editions from 1964 to 2005.³ In these texts, the first-person narrative is exclusively employed, lending immediacy, persuasiveness, and verisimilitude to them, as well as a quality of confidentiality and confession. These testimonies constituted the primary dramaturgical material for the performance directed by Vangelis Theodoropoulos, intertwining individual with collective memory to convey the violence and traumas of war and displacement.

Elli Papadimitriou⁴ (Smyrna, 1906 – Athens, 1993), originally from Smyrna, was born into a wealthy and prominent family and received a middle-class education. She came to Greece after the Asia Minor Catastrophe and systematically documented the experiences of Asia Minor refugees from 1922 and the Population Exchanges between Greece and Turkey (Volume I)⁵, as well as those of various witnesses of the Occupation during the Second World War and the Greek Civil War (Volumes II and III, respectively). It should be noted that, at the time, systematic engagement with oral history, also known as “History of the Common People” or “History from Below,” was a rather pioneering endeavour by Greek standards. Papadimitriou’s interest in this field grew during her apprenticeship at the Centre for Asia Minor Studies, founded by the Merlier couple (Melpo Logotheti-Merlier, of Asia Minor descent, and Octave Merlier), who were her friends and collaborators in her early professional years. In the spirit of the 1930s and the ethos of folk expressionism, Papadimitriou, influenced by figures like Fotos Kontoglou, Yannis Tsarouchis, Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghikas, Nikos Engonopoulos, and Karolos Koun, devoted herself with genuine research interest to the collection of elements of folk narrative, the recording of vernacular speech, various dialects (such as Pontic), as well as Byzantine hymnography, folk poetry, and musical traditions. It is no coincidence that the use of interspersed folk songs in the performance of *Koinos Logos* by the director underscored the tragedy of the narratives at times, while at other times the songs served as a counterpoint to this tragedy.

3 Papadimitriou, Elli (2015). The testimonies were published in three volumes under the common title *O Koinos Logos (The Common Discourse)* with the following subtitles, which indicate the historical periods covered by the testimonies: First Volume: *First War, Second War*. Second Volume: *1941-1945, 1945-1950*. Third Volume: *The Decade 1942-1950 (Resistance Texts) We Hear Your Voice, Homeland (Resistance Texts) Of Peaceful Life (Decade 1930-1940, Decade 1965-1975, Undated)*.

4 For a fascinating biography of Elli Papadimitriou, see also Petropoulou, I. (2022).

5 Her interest in the oral testimonies of refugees arose during the fulfillment of her duties as an agronomist, assigned by the Venizelos government in the land distribution service for refugees from the regions of Turkey.

Vangelis Theodoropoulos's choice to stage Elli Papadimitriou's *Koinos Logos* represents a groundbreaking endeavour for the Greek theatrical landscape of his time.⁶ Theodoropoulos had previously engaged with Papadimitriou's text.⁷ His first amateur attempt to bring *Koinos Logos* to the stage took place in 1988 alongside the University of Athens's Student Housing, a student theatre group, under the title *Askissi Afigissis (Narrative Exercise)*.⁸ This was followed by a second, professional production in 1997, staged at the courtyard of the Fix Brewery, marking the inaugural performance for the newly established Theatre of Neos Kosmos.⁹ This performance left a significant mark on the theatre scene of the 1990s and largely defined the character and overall identity of the Theatre of Neos Kosmos under the direction of Theodoropoulos.¹⁰

The 2013 Athens Festival performance was based on sixteen testimonies from Papadimitriou's book, primarily originating from the experiences of Asia Minor Hellenism. One of these testimonies refers to the exodus of Pontic Greeks, while three more refer to the Occupation of Athens during World War II.

Papadimitriou's title *Koinos Logos*, which was retained in Theodoropoulos's performance, refers both to the testimonies of ordinary, everyday people and the

6 Regarding his acquaintance with Elli Papadimitriou, V. Theodoropoulos said: "I met her at Kedros Publishing, where I worked for a while in 1974 when I was a student at the Athens Conservatory drama school. Elli was over 70 years old at the time, and I was in my twenties, but we became friends. We talked about everything you can imagine. I, still an inexperienced actor, was captivated by the narratives of *Koinos Logos* and had been imagining since then how it could be staged in the theatre". Interview of the director on July 12, 2022 in <https://www.olivenews.gr/el/sumvainoun/prosopa/elli-papadimitriou-mia-zoi-ti-mikrasiatikikatastrofi-anevainei-theatro/> [Accessed 15 July 2024].

7 For Theodoropoulos' relationship with this text, see also: Theatre program for *Koinos Logos* (2013, pp. 7-8).

8 V. Theodoropoulos recalls: "The first time I became involved with *Koinos Logos* was in 1988 when I took over the Student Residence of the University of Athens theatre group. [...] Nearby was where I was born, and on the other side was Kaisariani, with many refugee houses where many of my mother's relatives lived. [...] In this first attempt at a theatrical presentation of *Koinos Logos*, our effort was not to imitate the narrators, but to discover the rhythms and colors of a language as genuine and direct as the events of life it conveys." Interview with the director, conducted by the author, 4 November 2023.

9 For the Theatre of Neos Kosmos, see also: <https://nkt.gr/> [Accessed: 4 September 2024].

10 Regarding this production, as well as the theatre tour of *Koinos Logos*, the director commented: "The play was first staged in the courtyard of the FIX beer warehouse, where the Neos Kosmos Theatre was later built. The natural set included a dilapidated house with a well in front, alongside scenic interventions by Antonis Danglidis. Even though the area was far from any established theatre district, and we were a new troupe, word about the play quickly spread, and reviews were unanimously enthusiastic. The production stayed on for months. [...] The following summer, the play was performed again at the Herodion, toured across Greece, Cyprus, and Germany, and was revived a few years later [...]. Shortly after, during the 2004-2005 season, it was performed on the main stage of Neos Kosmos Theatre, and in April 2005, it travelled to Adana, where a packed theatre of Turkish spectators wept for the hardships of the Greeks during the Asia Minor Catastrophe!". Interview with the director, conducted by the author, November 4, 2023.

concept of a common, collective experience of violence, in order to ultimately convey the timeless human condition of suffering and violence, even from the very birth of humanity.¹¹

When *Koinos Logos* was first presented, it was one of the early performances of its time to utilize non-theatrical texts, aiming, as the director mentions, to explore the appropriate theatrical means for rendering narrative discourse on stage. At this point, the performance intersects with landmark works in the history of contemporary Greek theatre, such as *Morfes (Figures) from Vizyinos's work*,¹² which was staged in 1993 under the direction of Dimos Avdeliodis with A. Kokkinou in the lead role, and *The Murderess*, adapted and directed by Sotiris Hadzakis, featuring Lydia Koniordou in the title role, in 1998. These performances, highlighting genre fluidity, the end of dialogue, and performativity over-representation within the framework of postmodernism, are considered pioneering, as they paved the way for new theatrical practices, specifically an abundance of performances based on texts from other literary genres.¹³

In contrast to the traditional theatrical function of representing events, the performance in question exclusively utilizes narration. However, what is particularly groundbreaking about *Koinos Logos* for Greek theatre at the time is the connection it establishes between the theatrical and the real. The source text is not merely narrative; it consists of authentic testimonies by anonymous refugee women, conveying traumatic historical events that they experienced. In this context, the performance aligns with the contemporary trend of documentary theatre and more specifically verbatim theatre, a practice that brings oral testimonies to the stage.¹⁴

A similar approach was later adopted by many theatre companies in Greece. Typical examples include the 2012 performance *Sons and Daughters*, directed by Yiannis Kalavrianos, based on interviews conducted by the actors with elderly people; *That's Life* in 2013 by the Vice Versa theatre group, based on personal testimonies of 20 individuals from different countries, primarily focusing on social inequality; the 2013 performance *Telemachus: should I stay or should I go?*, directed by Anestis Azas and Prodromos Tsiniokoris, based on testimonies about the migration of Greeks and their return to their homeland; and *Witnesses of Athens* by Manos Karatzogiannis in 2020, focusing on testimonies of people who

11 Theatre program for *Koinos Logos* (2013, p. 11).

12 For related information on the topic, see: Kyriakos, K. (2008).

13 The bibliography on the subject is vast. I will cite, as an example, the classic study by Lehmann (2006).

14 On the subject, see, among others: Forsyth and Megson (eds) (2009); Hammond and Steward (eds) (2008); Martin (2006); Paget (1987).

experienced the events of the liberation of Athens from the Germans in 1944 (Rosi, 2021, p. 280).

The staging of *Koinos Logos*, however, presents greater complexity for several additional reasons: the five women coexist on stage throughout the performance without interacting with each other. Each one serves as the silent listener to the others. Even though these narratives contain features of the monologue form, the performance does not adhere to the conventions of that genre, since the coexistence of multiple speakers on stage ultimately creates a polyphonic narration of history. Moreover, the complex nature of the endeavour arises from the interplay of different temporal levels, from the phase of collecting the testimonies to their staging. In the first stage, the oral discourse was transcribed into writing. Naturally, the written text lacks the speed of speech, the expression of emotion, the rhythm of narration, the tone of voice, the articulation of local dialect, and the meanings that these very elements convey. Additionally, there has been an initial interpretative mediation of these narratives through musical punctuation (ellipses, exclamation marks, quotation marks, question marks).

At the same time, however, the written word is detached from the spatio-temporal context of its production and gains a sense of autonomy within the course of historical time. Thus, the discourse each time becomes the discourse of the “here and now,” boasting yet another fundamental similarity with theatrical discourse.¹⁵ At a much later point in time, it acquires the identity of the dramatic, i.e. its primary aim is to be performed on stage. Nevertheless, even here, there is an appearance of orality in the discourse, as the actors have memorized the written text, which they deliver intending to convey an impression of naturalness and improvised speech.

In order to manage this complex character of the project, director Vangelis Theodoropoulos relied on certain key concepts, which I will summarize here before proceeding with their further analysis: 1. The performance, like the text, focuses not on the narrated actions but on the emotions. It does not so much emphasize the power of violence as its imprint on the human soul in the form of pain. 2. Narrating the violence has a cathartic effect on the narrator. 3. The dominance of speech and the non-representation of violence lends the narrative a quality of powerful emotional tension that stimulates the audience’s imagination in a way reminiscent of ancient tragedy. 4. The connection to ancient tragedy is further derived from the emphasis on the choral element: even though each narrative is drawn from the unique, personal story of the anonymous witness, it is integrated into a collective, cohesive narrative, like a body of voices that have ex-

¹⁵ For the topic, see Carlson (2009, pp. 139-172).

perienced the same condition, in a way that functions complementarily.¹⁶ Thus, a merging of the personal and collective drama takes place, ultimately imparting a sense of *ahistoricity* through the shared condition of human suffering. Finally, both in the performance and the text, memory plays a pivotal role. As Papadimitriou herself comments:

In the narration and writing of ordinary people, there is a subconscious desire to keep memories alive and to ensure that their stories do not fade. For this reason, they follow unwritten rules, that is, the rules of art. (Theatre program for *Koinos Logos*, 2013, p. 7).

I would say that these rules of memory, oblivion, or repression of traumatic events were also followed reverently by the director: he attempted to allow the voice to be heard as unmediated as possible, as refracted through memory, to convey the living memory of violence in the way it is perceived by the ordinary people of an earlier era—the forgotten subjects of history—and can become the subject of narration at a later time. In any case, the violence of authority becomes the subject of narration without being represented on stage.

In the performance of *Koinos Logos* there are constant references to tragic events, atrocities, imprisonment, human casualties, hardships, and executions of loved ones, painting a picture of the inhuman reality of war. Here are some examples:

“I don’t even know how many were executed. [...] She had seen him once more at the Transport Division. In terrible shape, beaten. They had tortured him. His clothes were in tatters, and they wouldn’t let me get close if I said I was his fiancée.” [...] (Theatre program for *Koinos Logos*, 2013, p. 50).

“He was caught in Elefsina, don’t ask me how. I lie on the mattress. And in Goudi, they executed him, in 1944, a year marked with a cross. The other one came down from the mountain that same year.” [...] (idem, p. 53)

“They had beaten him and they paraded him through the village, drenched in his blood, as if he had been dipped into a pool of his own blood.” [...] (idem, p. 54)

16 As Ververopoulou aptly comments there are two ways in which the Greek theatrical scene incorporates the testimonies of refugees/migrants: the first pertains to the migration experience of modern Greeks, and the second refers to the recent reception of “foreigners” in the country. (Ververopoulou, 2023, p. 179). Ververopoulou’s book is a comprehensive study of the Theatre of the Real, with representative samples from Greek theatre. For *Koinos Logos*, see pp. 160-161.

However, in these women's narratives, there is an oxymoronic coupling between the atrocities of war and their theatrical staging that focuses on emotion and human suffering. The excerpt from the monologue of a mother who finds her child buried, splendidly performed by Lydia Koniordou, is characteristic of this:

“[...] with our nails, we were digging and wailing, going around in circles, the pit grew deeper, now the comrades dig them deep, as tall as a man, for protection so that the others won't find them. And suddenly, the little bones of the skull appeared, like pearls, my daughters, we started lamenting, searching, and sifting, we found a piece of khaki cloth, we found buttons, clasps, oh, your blood drains away at such moments, you become like a dry sponge, we found a leg too, but not the other one. Could it be that some bones decay better, or was my child maimed? We gathered even the buttons and kissed them, «My son, I sewed these on one night when you came down secretly», and oh, how the place was fragrant... Oh, my boy, is that you? My lion, my strong pine, and I am holding you in a little bundle, oh, under my arm...” (idem. p. 56)

These women, by speaking about their losses caused by the war, place themselves at the centre of the narrative. The emphasis is not so much on what exactly happened but rather on how they themselves experienced it, highlighting the subjective nature of their storytelling. At the same time, they recount these events from a distance, conveying a sense of *ahistoricity*. Interestingly, despite their tragic losses, they do not perpetuate violence or hatred. In doing so, they expand the horizons of official history, which often focuses on the brutality of violence and power, effectively transforming its social significance. Moreover, references are made to instances where the oppressor sheds their harsh demeanour and acts with solidarity towards the oppressed:

“The Italian guard sees me—God bless him, wherever he may be, may he have my blessings—he asks me what I want. I tell him, «I'm looking for my child, I come and go, my knees have given out, what can I do, oh...» And then, this Italian starts crying, crying hard, saying «Mama, Mama» and pointing up with his hand, «Which floor is he on?» «I don't even know if he's alive, and you're asking me about floors?» «Nome, nome.» I tell him the name, «Alekos», and he sends someone to call out. The child heard, «Oh, they're going to kill me...», that's where his mind went, he told us later.” (idem, p. 51)

The repetition of tragic events in narrative form or their repression by the victims as part of defense mechanisms often results in their beautification and healing within memory. Oral memory, in particular, is shaped not only by past events and the speaker's distance from them, but also by the present and the collective social memory (Connerton, 1989, pp. 22-25). The transformation of lived traumatic experience into narrative discourse, while agonizing for mothers who lost their children or women who lost their husbands, also serves as a form of psychotherapy, providing relief through storytelling and the filter of love, free from the agendas of official history. This process leads to a renegotiation of memories, often affirming life and the struggle for survival.¹⁷

However, the performance, despite its groundbreaking nature, as evidenced by the above, contrasts sharply with contemporary theatre, which is inundated with forms of violence—not only in thematic content but also in stage practice—where audiences are exposed to the most extreme and repulsive manifestations of violence. These include daring scenes (intense verbal abuse, as well as depictions of rape, mutilation, and dismemberment), aiming to awaken and shock the audience into sensory overload. The prime example of this is “In-Yer-Face” theatre—preceded by Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty—which emerged in the 1990s in England as a response to the country’s socio-political condition.¹⁸ In this context, the performance of *Koinos Logos* once again recalls its connection to ancient Greek theatre, where violence was always implied but never depicted on stage.

The director utilizes all aspects of the performance in a way that highlights the dissonant fusion between the experience of extreme violence and the expression of emotion. The emphasis on emotion is evident from the very casting of the play: in contrast to Theodoropoulos’s first, amateur attempt with *Koinos Logos*, where the narrators were boys and girls, in all subsequent performances—including the one under discussion—the cast is exclusively female. As Theodoropoulos himself noted in an interview: “I chose women’s narratives because women are usually the ones who recount familiar tragedies through the filter of emotion, and this is a more theatrical method for me” (Theodoropoulos, 2013).¹⁹

The five women remain on stage throughout the entire performance, yet do not engage in dialogue with one another. Consequently, the performance does not adhere to the conventions of the typical monologue genre, as there is not just one speaker on stage. Although monologic elements are present in the narratives,

17 For more on this function of testimony, see also Thomson (2007).

18 See, among others, Sierz (2001).

19 Interview of the director with Chara Koulopoulou, “Through *Koinos Logos*, we will hear how people’s decision to survive was expressed by preserving their values and dignity”, 29 August 2013, <https://kalamatain.gr/new/vagelis-theodoropoulos-interview/> [Accessed: 2 September 2024].

their juxtaposition creates a polyphonic recounting of history. Within this context, the concept of “chorality” emerges: while each narrator highlights her own distinct personal story, it becomes part of the collective, cohesive narrative of the others, forming a unified body of voices that have shared the same experiences. This recalls what Ryan Claycomb terms “communal subjectivity,” due to the complementarity of the testimonies (2003, pp. 95-122).



*Photo no. 1: Koinos Logos, 2013 Athens Theatre Festival.
Scenes from the performance.
(V. Theodoropoulos's personal archive)*

The five actresses (Photo no. 1)—Lydia Koniordou, Eleni Kokkidou, Eleni Ouzounidou, Tania Palaiologou, and Maria Katsandri, the last one being the only actress who had also performed in the 1997 production—convey the psychological fluctuations of the narrators while simultaneously commenting on the events from a distance. As K. Georgousopoulos noted in his review of Theodoropoulos's 1997 *Koinos Logos* production, the actresses “had to «perform» the text, to feel it, while simultaneously maintaining the necessary distance so that the director's intent—the preservation of the linguistic and emotional treasure, which was Papadimitriou's aim—could be realized” (Georgousopoulos, 1997). The stage presence of the women follows the dynamics of the narrative without excessive performance, within a realistic acting framework that captures the natural flow of speech with all the idiomatic nuances and linguistic specificities of their origins. A standout moment is the scene in which Eleni Kokkidou speaks in Pontic Greek.

An indicative review by Ioanna Kleftogianni states:

Elli Kokkidou continues her success from *The Woman of Patras* by Chronas. She delivers a performance of restrained exuberance, demonstrating a mastery of her craft. Lydia Koniordou, in her recent departure from the realm of ancient Greek tragedy, sings (superbly), dances, and mourns her grievous fate with restraint and measure, without wailing. (Kleftogianni, I., 2013)

The performance begins with the song “I brought you an earring, a single one, the button needs pounding,” and from there, the torrential, heartrending, emotionally dense yet direct monologues of the protagonists are artfully intertwined with interspersed verses sung on stage. These songs, selected, arranged, and taught to the actresses by Kostas Vomvolos, sometimes align with and emphasize the tragic nature of the narratives, while at other times they contrast with this tragedy, offering a cheerful and light-hearted tone that underscores the need for survival and continuity in life.

The inclusion of these interspersed songs, which dates back to the 1997 production of *Koinos Logos*, serves as another link to ancient tragedy. I quote here an interesting observation from a theatre review of that initial production in 1997:

The performance evokes ancient tragedy. The narrative always carries within it the song—when it is not entirely a song in itself. The same occurs in ancient tragedy, which is deeply rooted in centuries of choral and lyrical storytelling, as seen in the great epic tales or myths. (Christidis, 1997)

These musical interludes often interrupt the overall stillness of the narration—since the actresses mostly sit or stand—with a notable example being Maria Katsandri’s performance of a traditional wedding song, “Get up, my groom, and change,” which she addresses to her child while dancing (Photo no. 2). Similarly, Lydia Koniordou’s narration is followed by her static rendition of the well-known traditional lullaby from Smyrna, “Margaritarenia.” The performance concludes with the women addressing the dead, singing together the lines “Look at the smoke, look at the fire rising from my little house and spreading over the whole world,” underscoring the universal and timeless condition of pain and violence.



Photo no. 2: Koinos Logos, 2013, V. Theodoropoulos's personal archive.

In terms of set design, the transition from the realistic shell of the 1997 production, with the natural landscape of a ruined house at the Fix Warehouse, to the 2013 performance is significant. Here, the stage is transformed into a minimalist box, designed by Antonis Daglidis, with the only set pieces being white benches on which the protagonists alternate their positions (Photos 3&4).



*Photo no. 3: Koinos Logos, 2013 Athens Theatre Festival.
Scenes from the performance.
(V. Theodoropoulos's personal archive)*



Photo no. 4: Koinos Logos, 2013 Athens Theatre Festival.
 Scenes from the performance.
 (V. Theodoropoulos's personal archive)

A panel featuring black-and-white, timeworn photographs of the dead—many of whom, as revealed by the director, are relatives of the actresses or himself—enhances the evocative atmosphere. At times, the women narrate their stories directly to the audience, while at other times they turn towards the panel of photographs as if engaging in a dialogue between the living and the dead (Photo 5). One particularly emotionally charged scene involves the five women lighting candles in front of the images of the deceased.

Conclusion

Drawing on the dynamic of the unadorned and authentic language found in the oral testimonies of Elli Papadimitriou, which gives voice to the unsung heroes of history, the director managed to overcome the challenges of a demanding and daring stage project for its time. His focus shifted away from the power of violence and instead centred on its inscription in the human soul in the form of pain, as refracted through memory. This approach highlighted the element of “chorality” while merging personal and collective drama, imbuing the entire endeavour with a sense of *ahistoricity*, which is, to a great extent, inherent in the testimonies themselves.

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