

**MYTH – MEMORY – METHOD:
TERZOPOULOS' JOURNEY
INTO THE NIGHTMARE OF HISTORY**

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Abstract: Myth, Memory and Method constitute the three fundamental elements of Terzopoulos' work on Ancient Greek Tragedy. In the following text we will explore the inner world of these elements and the way they formulate the theatrical universe of Terzopoulos, while, at the same time, how they transmit inspiration and knowledge to artists of younger generations so as to pave their own way into the adventurous territory of theatrical creation.

Keywords: Terzopoulos, tragedy, myth, memory, method, performer, bodymind tempo-rhythm, laboratory.

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"History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake."
James Joyce

Introduction

For over four decades, Theodoros Terzopoulos has returned to the roots of Ancient Greek Tragedy, uncovering in its mythical core a profound and enduring source of theatrical power. His work resists superficial storytelling and instead plunges into the ontological depths of human existence, where myth is not merely narrative, but a primal, chthonic force that challenges both performer and audience. This article explores the radical theatrical philosophy and methodology developed by Terzopoulos; a process rooted in myth, memory, and a body-centered practice. Specifically, it examines how his performances, from *The Bacchae* (1985) to *Oresteia* (2024), dismantle conventional theatrical form and reconstruct it from within the performer's bodymind. Through a dynamic interplay of breath, rhythm, and transformation, Terzopoulos redefines the theatre as a living organism that does not avoid the monstrous and the unbearable, but confronts them as a path to both social and existential emancipation. In a time of theatrical homogenization, Terzopoulos' method serves not only as a tool for the performer's psychophysical training but as a philosophical stance: an insistence on theatre as a space for personal and collective awakening.



Oresteia by Aeschylus, director Theodoros Terzopoulos, 2024 – *The Chorus*
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Source: https://www.n-t.gr/el/events/oresteia_25

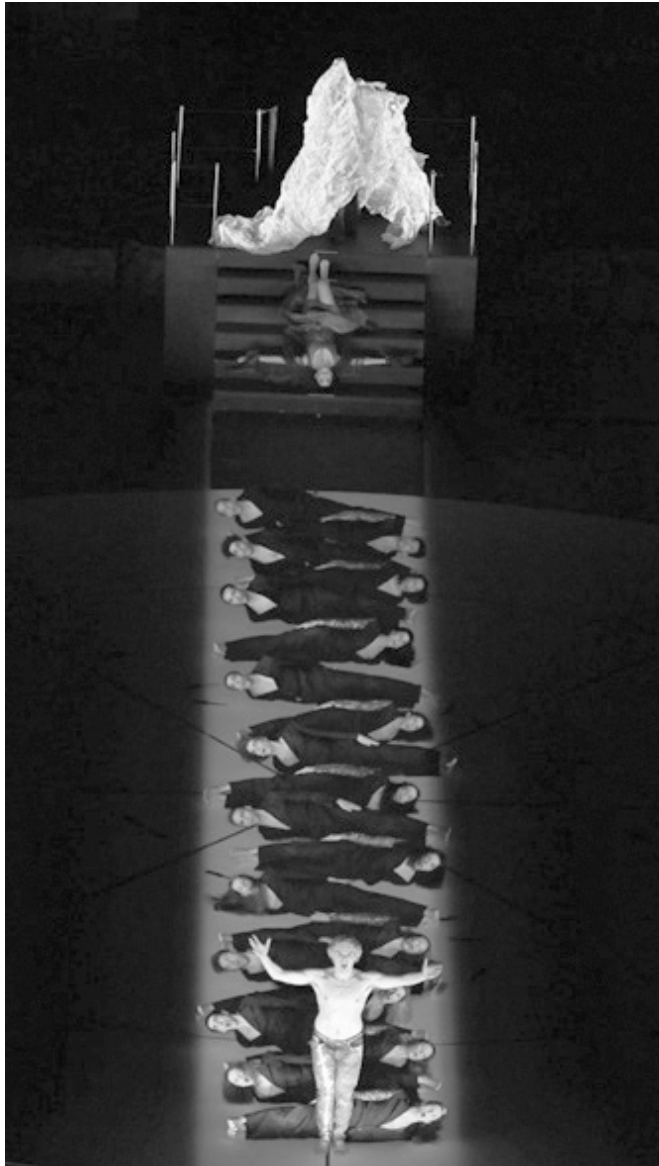
Myth

Theodoros Terzopoulos, through his assiduous work on Ancient Greek Tragedy for more than forty years, keeps insisting: **“In order to approach the tragic material we should return back to the myth”** (Terzopoulos, 2023, p.108). In his performances, from the *Bacchae* by Euripides (1985) till *Oresteia* by Aeschylus (2024), the structure of the performance has been created out of a direct confrontation and contact with the mythical core of each play. This process engraves deeply the *bodymind* of the performer and the *tempo-rhythm* of the performance, creating a landscape of mania, awe and transcendence, which challenges the spectator to accomplish a mental and emotional journey through the profoundly sensorial experience of watching a world taking shape on stage.

We cannot avoid posing the question: What is the myth? Ancient Greek Tragedy is based on myths, not just on stories, or fairytales. So, the myth cannot really be restricted to this or that story, which can only constitute its surface. Underneath the surface many agonizing questions are being posed concerning the human condition. What is the human being, this ontologically unknown

creature? In tragedy we meet the ambiguous word *δεινός* (*deinos*) which at the same time means *terrible* and *terrific*. This word concentrates the contradictory nature of the human being, which bears inside it the potential of a monster. Ancient Greek Tragedy does not want to hide the monster, does not want to present an idealized image of it, or even to pretend that such a thing as the human being/monster does not exist. This is exactly the locus of the myth: the monstrous dimension of the human being, with its wide range of instincts and nightmares; the form of the unbearable, this which we cannot stand, which is difficult for a single human being even to accept it for itself. Ancient Greek Tragedy wants to reveal this unbearable locus of human existence, challenges us to confront with it, without suppressing not even an inch of it.

The territory of this process is twofold; both the human history and existence. *War* (Πόλεμος) and *Eros* constitute the two main points of reference for almost every play of Ancient Greek Tragedy. The tragic landscape is a permanent battlefield consisting of both the human body, but also of history as a body. There is no exit from the nightmare of history, there is no exit from the nightmare of the body. We are condemned to live and die with this fact. But, this is not a mere pessimistic process and it has nothing to do with a passive fatalism. On the contrary, it can constitute a laboratory of social and existential emancipation, under the prerequisite that we cultivate the courage to confront and communicate with this dark and unknown side of our being, to open a dialogue with the monstrously unknown inside us, no matter how fearful it might be. Suppressing, idealizing or ignoring the monster, pretending to serve a political and religious morality, suppressing the locus of myth within the human being, what it really remains is a mechanized and frustrated being, hateful toward the others, with a void instead of an identity, eventually an anthropological type which resembles to what fascism would like to create.



Oresteia by Aeschylus, director Theodoros Terzopoulos, 2024.
Agamemnon – Savvas Stroumpos. © *Johanna Weber*
Source: https://www.n-t.gr/el/events/oresteia_25

We cannot forget that Ancient Greek Tragedy has been born by the Athenian Democracy and Philosophy. The actual deepening of the democratic social bonds in artistic/poetic terms was the main task of Tragedy. Although, this process could not really be accomplished without social and political critic, without doubting about everything and everyone, even reaching the point of transgressing a law when that was not serving the needs of the city-and-the-people. At the same time, the process of deepening the democratic social bonds and standing critically to the laws and the institutions of the city was not enough. This active gaze to the society and history should also be directly connected to the agonizing function of casting a glance within one's self, of posing all the possible and impossible questions concerning the human being, not in a safe territory, but in the extreme conditions concerning nature, history and existence.

Having gone through these thoughts concerning the notion of the myth, we need to return back to the work of Terzopoulos. His quest of the mythical material takes place within the bodymind of the performer. He does not start the work through various ideas. Collaborating with the performer, listening carefully the person who is in front of him on stage, they gradually co-create a field of mutual acceptance, where the performer is encouraged to let behind different social or psychological defences and dive into the tumultuous waters of the creative material, while the director follows step by step this process in silence, giving the necessary feedback, trying to shed a bit more of light into the process. Through time and through the reliable participation of the director, a weird relationship is being created which helps the performer reveal the most valuable and rare sides of its potential.

Shedding light into darkness is not a static process. It does not resemble the image of our daily life when somebody steps into a dark room, just turns the lights on and gets acquainted with the room. On the contrary, we have to have the sense that we enter vigilantly into a dark room, where we turn on our small flashlight and we shed a bit of light into the darkness; through time we get a bit acquainted with the space we are able to see, later on we make some steps into the room, but the dark part of the room expands more and more... This image is an example of the infinite character of the creative process and of the dynamic relationship between director and performer in Terzopoulos' work.

There is not a specific end to the process, the quest for a ready-made result is eliminated, while new questions and new issues keep coming forth, new unexplored possibilities arise, while the research of this which does not yet exist keeps opening new, unexpected and unknown fields of creation. It is not by chance that Terzopoulos for more than 40 years mainly works with his ensemble of Attis Theatre performers in the context of a laboratory, negating the canonical

ways of doing theatre. The space-time of the laboratory is an open territory full of questions and doubts, occupied by the desire to search the unlimited potential of the human being and, eventually, to create a performance out of this process.

Memory

During the laboratory process Terzopoulos works according to his ideal, that the performance should be engraved in the memory of the spectator. This process can be accomplished not in mere aesthetic terms, but through the dilation of time on stage. The dynamic performative space-time breaks the social, ordinary and linear flow of clockwork time and becomes a living organism; it breathes, senses, expands and contracts, accelerates and retards, moves through unexpected jumps, creates ruptures in the dramatic flow of the performance, challenging the spectator to accomplish a sensorial and emotional journey in numerous unexplored landscapes of its perception.

“The performer’s body gives birth to time, time gives birth to space” (Terzopoulos, 2020, p. 66), utters Terzopoulos so as to stimulate the creativity of his performers into the process. As we have already mentioned, the bodymind of the performer is the main field of creation. Time cannot be a separated element which is suddenly imposed from the outside. On the contrary, it is born during the process of research out of the performer’s activated being on stage. The performer needs to concentrate, to gather all the mental, sensorial and physical powers so as to accomplish each given task. This process lies far away from dramatic and representational processes on stage. The performer does not try to imitate a social behaviour, to interpret a character, or to reproduce a feeling from daily life.

In Ancient Greek Tragedy the persons are closer to living structures or to archetypes than to characters. During the rehearsals period, the bodymind of the performer becomes a womb of multiple other hidden bodies; it is transformed from within into a territory of multiple psychophysical functions, which transcends the notion of daily life behaviour, within the restrictions of a socially orientated bodymind. Terzopoulos’ point of reference is Dionysus, whom we cannot perceive solely as the god of theatre, or of wine, according to mythology. Dionysus symbolizes nature’s power of permanent transformation. That is why we cannot really tell if we have a male or female deity; that is why Dionysus is able to transform itself from a god into an animal, from an animal into a human being etc. For Terzopoulos this is the main paradigm of the performer’s bodymind, which optimally becomes a wide open channel of energy flowing in all the unpredictable ways, as the performer gets into the state of permanent psychophysical transformation.



The Persians by Aeschylus, director Savvas Stroumpos, 2023
The messenger – Anna Marka Bonisel. © Giannis Chatziantoniou
Source: <https://simeiomiden.gr/shows/aischyloy-perses/>

There is an image we often use during the working process: We have a glass of water. We normally know that the water takes the form of the glass. During the psychophysical work, things happen the other way round; the glass should take the form of water. It means that through the process the bodymind becomes an open channel, totally flexible, able to assume all the possible forms which stem from within the performer's material.

The landscape where the performer's material is being cultivated and eventually emerges, or else the locus of myth within the human being, sets the discourse of memory not in the canonical daily life way, where we need to remember this or that incident, but in a much more profound level. While the performer's material stems from the deepest layers of its existence, which have

been unknown till the special moment of creation, the process of psychophysical research opens up the sources of collective memory. This process constitutes the way of releasing the performer's unlimited and hidden potential, which has nothing to do with a kind of choreographical way of moving, or with a way of mere singing, uttering a text etc. On the contrary it is an act of revealing one's chthonic substrate of creativity, showing the unique way that the performer's bodymind wants to speak, sing or move, following special and unique corporal and vocal axes of energy.

Method

Theatre is praxis. Theorising or philosophising about theatre might mean nothing if the flesh-and-bones of the performer, of the living human being, do not really participate in the actual process. We could also claim that the only possible way to give birth to theory out of the theatrical phenomenon would be through a close connection to praxis, through a dynamic and inspiring dialogue which would be able to stimulate both the artist and the theoretician to search for new ways of being involved into the strange world which we call theatre.

Starting from the *Bacchae* (1985) Terzopoulos was engaged in the process of creating a working method. The main question he and his group were confronting with was how the bodymind of the performer could incorporate the bacchic state in psychophysical terms. This question was the starting point of what we call the "Method of Theodoros Terzopoulos", which we keep developing till nowadays.

Before we focus on the fundamentals of Terzopoulos' method, it would be interesting to open our discourse to the notion of the method itself in theatrical terms: Why do we really need a working method? Is it possible for a method to give answers to all of our questions and even to solve all of our problems in the creative process? Working through a specific method does it mean that we are engaged in a specific aesthetical language?



The Persians by Aeschylus, director Savvas Stroumpos, 2023
Atossa – Evelyn Assouad. © Giannis Chatziantoniou
Source: <https://simeiomiden.gr/shows/aischyloy-perses/>

The art of doing theatre gives us the chance to experience the mysterious world of the stage, full of questions and unresolved enigmas. At the same time it is common place that being on stage demands an extra daily form of activating the powers of one's own organism. Starting from the first theatrical laboratories back to end of the 19th century, we see that the practitioners of previous epochs were posing simple but very important questions: how can the performer stand, walk, listen, speak, breathe, watch, communicate etc. on stage. We believe that these questions remain open even nowadays, but they also reveal something fundamental: the performer's being on stage constitutes a whole new world in comparison to the analogous daily life functions of a human being. So, the first and very important reason why we need a working method is this: we need to re – formulate our organism so as to exist on stage in a creative way. This is the first step, we need to continue.

When we come in contact with the material of the great poetical texts of Ancient Greek Tragedy we sense that the tragic persons experience unfamiliar and hyperbolic states of mania, fear, awe, mourning, lament, rage etc, which we cannot really assimilate and express through a *one-dimensional* process of imitation, or in a mere sentimental way which stems from our daily life experience. What it is really at stake is the issue of the performer's psychophysical transformation. This is the next step. A working method should be able to open possible paths for the practitioner to *re-consider* practically how can one approach the extreme states of the tragic persons without violating itself physically, mentally, psychologically etc.; it should also stimulate the performer's perception to *re-discover* what it means to incorporate a role beyond a mere representational level. From the performer's perspective, speaking about the possible ways of approaching a role, we should not ignore the main tasks of psychophysical activation and concentration which are demanded so as for the whole being of the artist to participate organically in the process. Speaking of which, *the material of Ancient Greek Tragedy is the basis of the theatrical craft*; that is why the contact with these issues is considered fundamental for the performers' training and education worldwide.

Following this thread of thoughts we need to examine **the fundamental principles of Terzopoulos's method**. The core of the method is the breath or rather vital energy. From the first day of work the performer starts getting acquainted with the basic elements of diaphragmatic breathing, which are gradually being developed into more advanced functions within multiple tempo-rhythms. Through time the performer experiences the sense of activated softness, where the bodymind is freed from unnecessary tensions (muscular, mental or psychological) and starts becoming an open channel of unhindered circulation of energy. The body and the voice of the performer are trained though this process: each movement and each sound are the result of a special use of the air either of inhalation or of exhalation. Later on, during the process of deconstruction, where the pelvic region (the "triangle" in the language of the method) is being released and vibrates till the whole body starts vibrating, new corporal and vocal axes are revealed within the performer's bodymind. The process of infinite improvisation challenges the performer to discover the unlimited potential of the bodymind. Having gone through all the previous steps of the method, the performer is ready to step into the territory of creativity. The work on energy continues. The performer focuses on a rhythm created by a physical point, keeps working on it and, step by step, the work on the point-and-the-rhythm becomes a whole world of rhythmical gestures and vocal axes. The bodymind dances on the traces of its deep memories, opens up unexplored territories of research, the whole organism as a dynamic unity participates in the accomplishment of each gesture and the performer experiences in a profound way the sense of creative freedom where all the possibilities are wide open.



Oresteia by Aeschylus, director Theodoros Terzopoulos, 2024.
Photo during the rehearsals in Epidavros. © *Johanna Weber*

Conclusion

Terzopoulos' method constitutes a fertile subsoil of performer's training where the practitioner through time formulates its whole organism so as to acquire a generous being on stage. The method does not want to become a doctrine of ready-made solutions for each and every issue we face during the creative process. On the contrary, from the moment the practitioner goes through the intensive psychophysical training suggested by the method, the window to creative freedom opens up and the performer comes face to face with the unfamiliar, this which did not exist till that moment. New questions are being posed out of this process, new issues arise and the answers can only be given by the bodymind of the performer who is engaged into the process. Nevertheless, these answers are temporary, since the attempt to handle an issue which occurs, the act of answering a question through the performer's flesh-and-bones, permanently opens up new, even more challenging tasks for the bodymind to handle.

We claim that Terzopoulos' method prepares the performer to step into the adventurous field of doing theatre with the boldness and the sensitivity, the activation and the softness, the discipline and the fragility, the openness and the

rigour the theatrical craft demands, without any restriction concerning this or that aesthetic category, this or that way of doing theatre. Ultimately, the artist remains free to reveal and develop its own, deeply personal world, opening unexplored ways of creation, facing unknown territories of the theatrical art.

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Oresteia by Aeschylus, director Theodoros Terzopoulos, 2025.
Photo during the rehearsals in Delphi. © Panos Pragiannis
n.ed.: on the right actor, instructor, and director Savvas Stroumpos.

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Oresteia by Aeschylus, director Theodoros Terzopoulos, 2024
The ghost of Clytemnestra – Sophia Hill. © Jobanna Weber
 Source: https://www.n-t.gr/el/events/oresteia_25

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As an actor of *Attis* Theatre, he participated in the following performances: Boris Pasternak *Hamlet: A Lesson* (2003), Aeschylus *Prometheus Bound* (2003), Aeschylus *Epigone* (2004), Samuel Beckett *Ohio Impromptu* (2004), *Ajax – the madness* (2004), Costas Logaras *The Last Mask* (2006), Aeschylus *The Persians* (2006), Marios Pontikas *Cassandra* (2007), *Ajax – the madness* (2nd version; 2008), Aeschylus *Prometheus Bound* (2010), Euripides *The Trojan Women* (2018), Aeschylus *Oresteia* (2024).

With *Zero Point Theatre* he has directed: Franz Kafka *In the Penal Colony* (2009), W. Shakespeare *As You like It* (2010), Albert Camus *The Justs* (2011), Franz Kafka *Metamorphosis* (2012), Georg Buchner *Woyzeck* (2013), Franz Kafka *In the Penal Colony* (2nd version; 2014), Yevgeny Zamiatin *We* (2015), Heiner Muller *The Mission: A Memory of a Revolution* (2016), Dimitris Dimitriadis *Troas* (2017), Gyorgy Kurtag *Kafka Fragments* (2018), Samuel Beckett *Waiting for Godot* (2018), Sophokles *Antigone* (2019), Samuel Beckett *Happy Days* (2020), Franz Kafka *Report to an Academy* (2021), Aeschylus *The Persians* (2022), Samuel Beckett *Not I* (2023), Anton Chekhov *The Seagull* (2023), Jean Genet *The Maids* (2025).