

“The House of Bernarda Alba” by F.G. Lorca: An Online Performance

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The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The central theme of this presentation is the online performance of F. G. Lorca’s “The House of Bernarda Alba”, which was created in Greece by the theatre school of “Periplous Theatre” under the direction of Maria Kantife, during the 2021 quarantine. This performance, of a kind which is now known as digital theatre / performance, came about as a result of a complete method of acting teaching created by the acting teacher to enable the continuation of her work under isolation conditions, via video and video calls. After six months of online rehearsals, the play was performed via a group video call, which was also recorded, with the actors never actually meeting face-to-face but creating an atmosphere shared by all of them, so that the viewer could sense that all the actors were performing in the same world. This performance was the first of its kind in Greece and this work shows us how the arts can benefit from technology and how theatre can be experienced in different ways. It raises issues regarding theatre teaching methods, research and theatre practices, while at the same time it examines how an audience perceives an online performance when they themselves are viewing on online platforms (zoom).

Keywords: Lorca, Theatre, Online Platforms, Digital Theatre, Digital Performance, COVID, Rethymno, Quarantine, Theatre Teaching

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Introduction

Sometimes necessity leads to new paths of creativity. This will be demonstrated by this presentation, which concerns staging a performance during the quarantine period (2020-2021) exclusively through online platforms. The play 'The House of Bernarda Alba' by F.G. Lorca was presented by the graduating actors of the Theatre School of Theatrical Periplous in Greece (the name "Theatrikos Periplous" in Greek means "Theatrical Voyage"), specifically in the city of Rethymno (Crete). The study was based on the recorded performance from the archive of the Theatrical Periplous and on interviews with some of the participants.

The Theatre School was established in 2014 in Rethymno as a school of Theatrical Periplous, a troupe that has been operating continuously in the city since 1988 by Thomas Kantifes and Maria Kantife. The person in charge and acting teacher is the actress and Acting Coach Maria Kantife, who, after a long and recognized career on the theatrical stages of Greece's capital (Athens), chose to return to Rethymno and start training new actors there.

The School consists of four years of study and the trainees in the 3rd year participated in the staging of a theatrical performance. By 2020, they had already presented Aeschylus' Oresteia, Chekhov's The Three Sisters, and Hortatzis' Katsourbos.

How the Story Begins

The year 2020-2021 had already started working on the texts of Lorca's play 'The House of Bernarda Alba' when the announcement for the second lockdown was made in the end of October. From the previous year, when classes had been suspended for a few months, Maria Kantife, not wanting to stop the lessons, continued the meetings online, beginning to create a new method of digital teaching, which we will discuss in detail below. While everyone believed that normalcy would soon return, allowing classes and rehearsals to continue live, things did not turn out that way. The lockdown lasted the entire academic year, resulting in the performance gradually being set up through online platforms, without the trainee actors ever meeting in person, yet talking to each other as if they were side by side. Each act was recorded on video separately in real time (almost without editing) and was presented again via an online platform to the audience.

Maria Kantife's Digital Teaching Method

The year's classes did not stop. Kantife began teaching through video and online calls, leading the group through a new, original process. The students gradually began to integrate to the process. They transformed their rooms into workspaces, moving furniture to create areas for improvisations, acting exercises, etc. The pattern was as follows: The instructor gave instructions for assignments, the students recorded them on video, then sent the videos to the instructor, and she sent them corrections. In lessons with group video calls, everyone watched all the videos and listened to the necessary corrections. The use of videos proved to be very functional as, in this way, the trainees had the opportunity to see themselves and better understand the corrections given to them. They observed their bodies and listened to their intonations under their teacher's guidance, and they began to progress rapidly (Tzanidaki, 2022).

The goal of the educational system advocated by Maria Kantife is the truth of the role and the performance of every moment on stage "every time like the first time". A line of acting very

close to the theories of Stanislavsky and the Actor Studio. This was also the goal of the online training process, without any discount. The minds and bodies of students should remain functional and creative within the conditions of confinement. For this reason, she asked the rest of the teachers of the School, Thomas Kantifes, Andromachi Varsami and Anna Tzanidaki, to start lessons again through online classes. So in the middle of the year and while the quarantine continued, the School was operating normally with courses in Acting, Improvisation, Stage Perception, Physical Expression, Movement - Dance, Expressive Song, Theater History, etc.

Research and Study on the Play

Before we delve into further details, let's see the plot of the play. The story is set in Andalusia where sixty-year-old Bernarda Alba, after the death of her second husband, imposes a strict eight-year mourning period in her house, forbidding her five daughters from going outside or having social interactions, especially with the local men. This restrictive condition, combined with the daughters' repressed need for life and love, creates a suffocating atmosphere in the house that in the final act resembles a bomb ready to explode. The presence of a man, Pepe el Romano (who never appears in the play), with whom three of the five girls are in love, will be the reason the bomb will explode, and control will slip from the hands of the strict Bernarda, leading to the death of her youngest daughter.

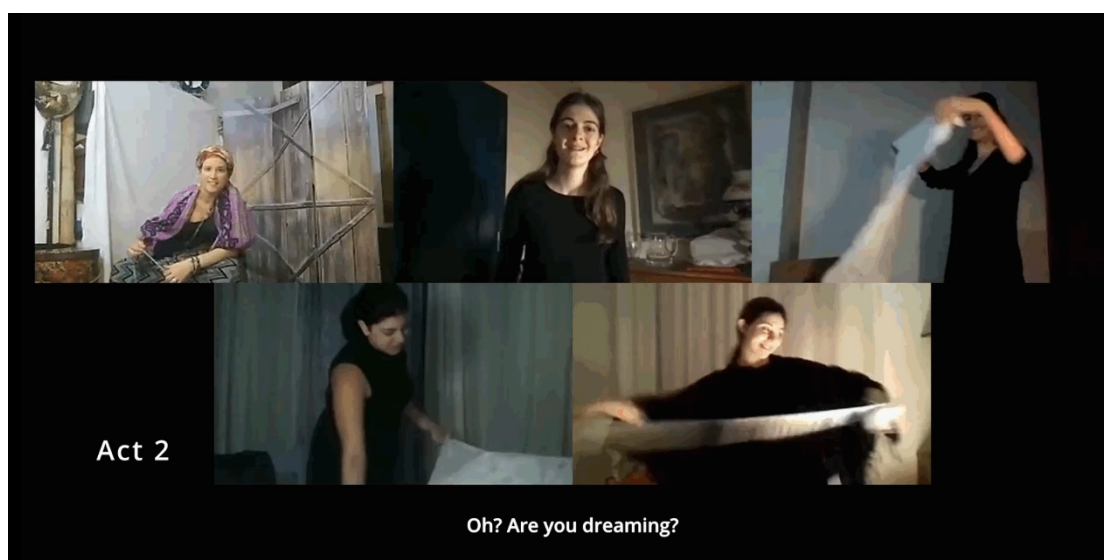


Figure 1: Snapshot from the second act. Each of the participants is at her home.
(Theatrical Periplous Archive)

In the play, the power of society is dominant, with neighbors peering from half-open windows, judging the lives of others. Their influence affects Bernarda herself, who aims to make everything in her house appear as if it is going well.

The central characters, all women, are Bernarda, her five daughters (Angustias, Amelia, Magdalena, Martirio, Adela), the housekeeper, Poncia and Bernarda's mother named Maria Hosefa. Additionally, some neighbors and Bernarda's two maids also appear. In this performance Bernarda was played by Maria's Kantife voice and the rest casting was: Marina Nikaki as Angustias, Foteini Karagadaki as Amelia and maid, Nikoleta Makrigianni as Magdalena, Nikol Mitsopoulou as Martirio, Marianna Photopoulou as Adela, Anna Tzanidaki as Ponthia, Stella Frantzeskaki as Maria Hosefa and Nikolleta Komodromou as neighbor.

It should be noted that the rendering of the text was done by the whole team, with the assistance of Giannis Kallergis, who was knowledgeable in Spanish.

As mentioned above, the goal was the truth of the roles and therefore the first step of the theatrical process is always the study of the work and the research about the characters and the era. With Kadife's guidance, the trainees try to discover the "why" of their roles, their relationships with other roles, their wants and their ways of expressing themselves. A study was made on life in Lorca's Spain, on the position of women, on the political conditions of the period, and the truth of the central character, Bernarda Alba, a character that is often rendered one-dimensional, representing oppression and fascism, was sought. Yes to that, but Bernarda is more than a symbol, she is also a person, and as a person the team of the Theater School sought her out. She has been driven to this behavior by the society that has so oppressed her, as well as the author himself. It is strange that the daughters are "imprisoned" in the "musts" by their mother, a woman who has gone through the same things and perhaps in her heart understands them too much. She cares for them but tries to protect them in the wrong way. Bernarda's search for womanhood and humanity led the role relationships down very interesting paths.

At the same time, the group's real-life confinement conditions came to unite in a unique way with those of Lorca's work. The original idea for the stage performance was to create box-rooms on the stage for each of the women in the play where from there they would interact with the others. Only at the end, when Adela resists and goes outside the frameworks allowed to her, the action would descend on the central stage. The only one who would come out of her "box" would be Bernarda to supervise the other "boxes" and her assistant and alter-ego Ponthia.

And while the lockdown due to the pandemic continued, the boxes that would be placed on stage were turned into computer "windows", where each of Bernarda's daughters lived. She was chosen to appear only with her voice, pulling the strings, invisible, holding the "box" she thought protected her daughters. And only at the end does the box break and Bernarda appears as normal, more human than ever and more broken than ever. Because she felt evil coming. She knew what the girls were going through and pretended not to see. She didn't have the strength to handle it and this weakness made her strong, cruel and distant.



Figure 2: Symbolic moment from the opening credits of the play. Bernarda keeps her daughters in a box. (Theatrical Periplous Archive)

The Performance

Rehearsals were held in the same way as lessons. The trainees had their own scene meetings, worked on their pieces, wrote the video, sent it to the instructor and got the corrections. In the live online meeting, everyone re-watched all the videos or re-enacted the scenes.

As time went by, the need to create the stage space began to arise. All "windows" had to belong to the same house. Thus everyone's space was taken care of, the lighting began to be made with portables and whatever was available in each house. The costumes began to be made by each person with common elements, etc. (Theatrical Periplous, 2024).

In essence, a theatrical performance began to be created where each "actor" performed while addressing the computer or mobile screen, which was placed in a pre-planned spot to cover the "stage space" that had been decided. Roles exiting the scene disabled their windows while re-enabling them upon entering.

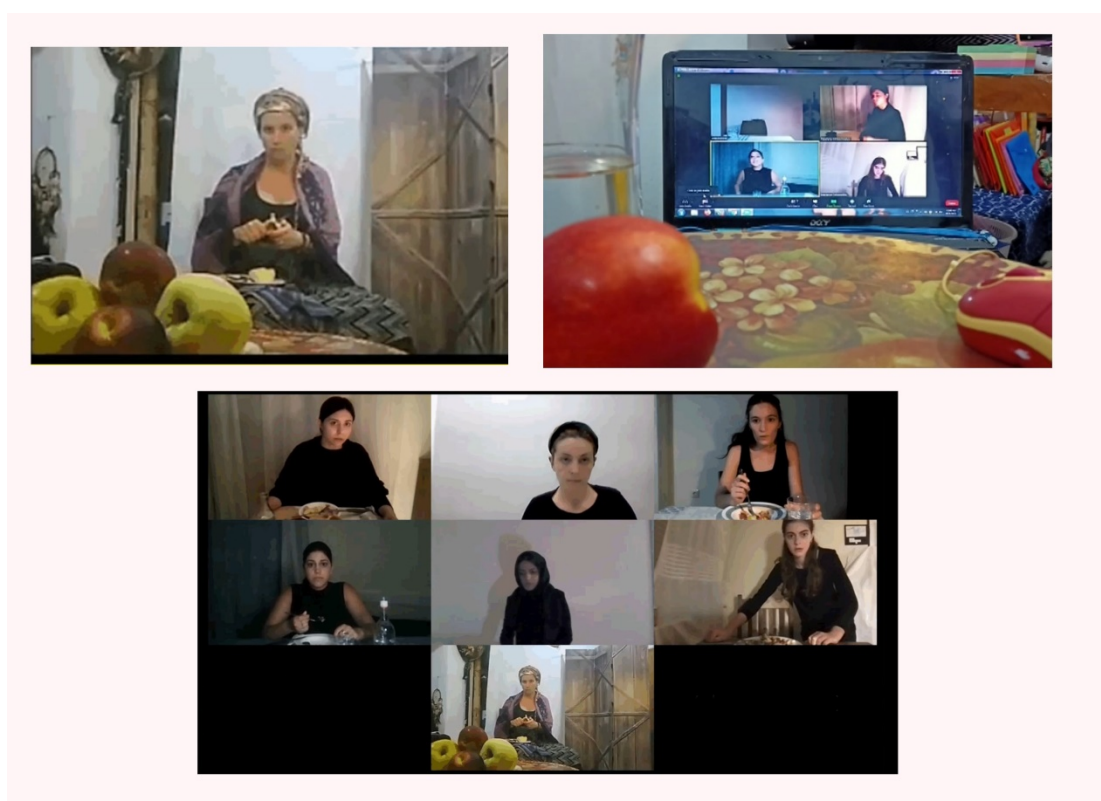


Figure 3: At the second picture you can see the view and the “stage” space of the first picture’s actor. At the third picture you can see the final result of the scene.
(Theatrical Periplous Archive)

Care was taken of where they would look so they could see their partner in the other window, or give items that were 'transported' from one window to another (Figure 3).

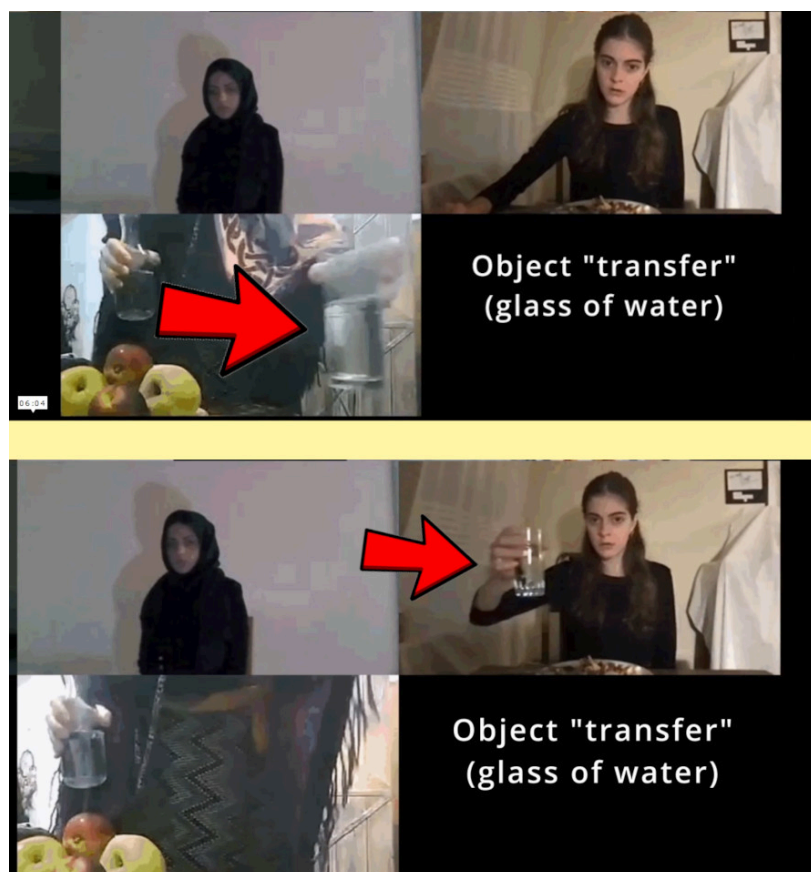


Figure 4: Snapshot of the transfer of a glass of water from one window to another.
(Theatrical Periplous Archive)

The months of work were many and this process had become very natural for both the trainees and the trainer.

In the final scene of the play, Kantife thought of doing something even more complicated. All the heroines unfurled a white cloth which was passed from window to window. This was achieved with 5 identical cloths each of which was procured separately by the heroines which they unfolded under Kantife's instructions (Figures 4 & 5).



Figure 5: Snapshot of the final scene (Theatrical Periplous Archive)



Figure 6: Snapshot of the final scene (Theatrical Periplous Archive)

The music (some of the tracks was specially written for the performance by Vangelis Linosilakis) was one of the tricky technical parts because it had to come in from one source so everyone could hear it at the same time. So one of the students who wasn't acting in the show (Giannis Mathioudakis and Marios Maragoudakis) would join the video call and put in the sounds when needed. Of course, the music did not reach all the laptops uniformly, but the participants reacted as if they were listening to it normally. To help the audience, the sounds were re-introduced on top of the final video and this was one of the very few interventions made to the final result.

As mentioned again the acts of the play were performed in their final form with flow like a normal performance, within three days (each day and an act) and thus recorded by the recording of the platform. Apart from the music that came in after processing (which, as we mentioned, they actually listened to during the performance) the only intervention was the addition of an improvisation that the girls had done with the condition "alone in your room" in the second act.

This performance reached the audience through a live session on an online platform, where approximately 100 viewers watched it. After the lifting of the quarantine in the fall of 2021, the Theatre School held a screening of the performance at the location where the classes are conducted, allowing more viewers to watch it (Unknown, 2021).



Figure 7: Snapshot from the live screening of the performance after the lifting of the quarantine (Theatrical Periplous Archive)

This performance is an important example of the creativity that emerged during the quarantine conditions and opened a new path in digital theater. It was the first and only complete performance created in Greece in this manner and features the following characteristics:

On the technical side:

- The scenes were performed without editing, as a theatrical scene would be played. (An exception, as mentioned, is the scene with the girls' improvisations in the second act and the music that was reinserted at the end to improve the sound. Minor corrections were made in some areas to the colors in an effort to fix any imperfections due to poor connection quality during recording.)
- Use of the online platform and its recording features.
- Creation of a unified stage space fragmented into eight different homes.

On the theatrical side:

- Rehearsals were conducted as usual, like in all theatrical performances.
- Despite the distancing conditions, direct interaction between the actors was achieved.
- Everyone performed in front of a screen where they saw their partner in a very small square, yet a sense of immediacy and unity was created so that even the participants themselves did not feel they were far apart.
- A directorial approach was given that expressed both the play and the conditions to which everyone had to adapt.

Conclusion

This particular performance served the time and the conditions of the period in which it was created. Outside the context of quarantine, there might not be a need to repeat such work in exactly the same way, and this makes it unique. It is the greatest proof that theater cannot disappear; it will survive under the most challenging conditions and in the most unusual ways. This performance had no financial gain. It was created out of the need for creation, the need to resist confinement, initially encouraged by Maria Kandife and subsequently by the dedication of the entire team.

Thus, in a very natural way, an innovative artistic proposal and a new theatrical path were created using modern digital media, which, outside the context of forced isolation, can evolve.

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