

Theatre Reviews

***This is not Romeo & Juliet.* Dir. Argyris Pandazaras. Poreia Theatre, Athens, Greece.**

Reviewed by *Xenia Georgopoulou**

Love in the Time of Coronavirus

This is not Romeo & Juliet, a production by Argyris Pandazaras based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, premiered at the Poreia Theatre in Athens on 13 October 2020. Three weeks later, on 3 November, the theatres were closed by the Greek Government in the context of the general lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic. A few days later, on 8 November, the production was live-streamed for the first time (another two live-streamed performances followed on 14 November and 5 December¹), and this online experience is what I am going to talk about in this review.

Before I get to the performance itself, I thought I should first provide some information regarding the Athenian theatres during the coronavirus pandemic, and before the lockdown, using the Poreia Theatre as an example.² Following the protocols, theatres were allowed to fill up to 30% of their auditorium, which for the Poreia Theatre meant up to 70 spectators. The use of masks was compulsory; there were sanitizing spots in the theatre; the seats were organized in a way that social distancing was kept; the theatre was sanitized daily. The production was on for 5 nights before the lockdown, and every single show was a soldout.

I have to confess that the idea of watching a production online didn't seem particularly attractive to me; what is so special about theatre is the close interaction between the actor and the spectator in a space they share. However,

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¹ By the time this review was submitted.

² All information, including the programme and photographs of the show, was kindly provided by Vassilia Taskou.

during the lockdown there is no alternative. And yet I have to admit that the experience of watching the live-streamed *This is not Romeo & Juliet* made me forget about my original reservations. As for the production itself, its live-streamed version gave the opportunity to more spectators to watch it from all over Greece as well as abroad. The online tickets for the first three live-streamed performances amounted to 8,000, and the spectators were most likely many more, considering that more people could watch the show from the same screen with just one ticket. The actors' appearance in a popular television series (*Agries Melisses* [*Wild Bees*]) most probably contributed to the soldout live performances as well as to the large turnout online; as Grigoris Ioannidis observes, both actors have a "strong artistic as well as commercial value", also due to the fact that they are widely recognizable thanks to the serial (Ioannidis).

But let's move to the production itself. This was not the first time that Argyris Pandazaras dealt with Shakespeare. In January 2017 he presented with Stefania Goulioti a production named *AmorS*, consisting of Shakespearean sonnets and excerpts from several of Shakespeare's plays, at the Cycladon Street Theatre—Lefteris Vogiatzis. Once more, in *This is not Romeo & Juliet*, a production of the group Momentum Accelerated Evolution and the Poreia Theatre, Pandazaras approached the issue of love in Shakespeare—or indeed the matter of love in general.

The synopsis of *This is not Romeo & Juliet* on the website of the Poreia Theatre gives a rough idea of what the show is about:

Two eternal teenagers fall in love in a costume party.
 They dream, they escape from life, and they converse with death!
 In ecstasy, under the influence of love.
 They invade the theatre.
 They keep the play "Romeo and Juliet" as a lucky charm
 and they are "heavily armed" with all of Shakespeare's doomed couples.
 Couples who face love, oath, rejection, and death.
 Two children who wanted to build their own world and escape from it!
 Two protagonists without their own words.
 Two protagonists without their own play!
 A "dress rehearsal" for lovers! ("An Ordinary Night")

Together with Theodora Kapralou, Pandazaras created a new text. They kept the two protagonists of Shakespeare's tragedy, as well as a few famous scenes from the original in K. Karthaios's translation, and added their own story. The story of a modern young couple, who explore their own relationship through Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and their own view of the play. For the boy it is a play about love; for the girl it is a play about death. As Olga Sella synthesizes, this new play presents "two youngsters [who] want to play the game of love

through the myth of *Romeo and Juliet*. They try to get in their place, but they are entangled in their own relationship, in their own era” (Sella). For Anastassis Pinakoulakis this confusion seems to work the other way round: “two lovers try to live and create together, but they seem trapped in their archetypes” (Pinakoulakis). As Ioannidis remarks, the love element “on the one hand is based on a romantic archetype, and on the other it is engrafted with abundant modern vocabulary and gestures” (Ioannidis). Vivian Mitsakou observes that “we are transferred to the past and the present, sometimes through verse and sometimes through the vernacular” (Mitsakou).

Ioannidis detects throughout the production “the joy of the game and the magic of the convention/transformation, the theatre boxed within the theatre” (Ioannidis). Pinakoulakis adds that “The way [the actors] add garments on stage, a distancing technique, is in tune with the creation of a play-within-the-play production. The way the actors shift from the relationship between them to the convention of the performance is very attractive” (Pinakoulakis). In Pandazaras’s production the use of the costumes, designed by Lina Stavropoulou and Gina Iliopoulou, follows the text. In the beginning of the show the two youngsters wear mostly modern casual or sports clothes; when they start playing parts of Shakespeare’s play, they change into garments adorned with lace or embroidery (Juliet even wears a Renaissance ruff), which transform them into *Romeo and Juliet*. As Pinakoulakis synopsisizes, “the two actors appear in an almost athletic attire, which reminds of rehearsal clothing, while they gradually add accessories that ‘transform’ them into their archetypes” (Pinakoulakis).

In the beginning of the play there is an argument between the young couple about playing *Romeo and Juliet* or not; the boy (Argyris Pandazaras) wants to play, the girl (Elli Triggou) does not. Her reason is that the two lovers end up dead. The idea of the game is also present here: the two youngsters let a children’s game (“rock- paper-scissors”) decide whether they are going to play or not. The girl is eventually convinced, and they start playing the most famous scenes of the play: first the scene of the first kiss, then the so-called “balcony scene”. At some point the girl feigns death, and seems to convince the boy that she is dead indeed. When she decides to “revive”, the boy does not want to play any more, whereas the girl is now the one who insists that they should play on. Ioannidis argues that these “abrupt changes of mood [. . .] allude to the nature of youth” (Ioannidis), and Pinakoulakis adds that the play “focuses on the love relations with their ups and downs” (Pinakoulakis; on the same matter also see Mitsakou).

In his director’s note (which he calls “notes from the rehearsal”) Pandazaras talks about “couples doomed to endure their fate” and refers to *Othello* and *Desdemona*, *Hamlet* and *Ophelia*, *Antony and Cleopatra*—apart from *Romeo and Juliet*, of course. These references to more Shakespearean plays are also present in the text of the production, as in the excerpt from the

“nunnery scene” from *Hamlet* or the scene where the Moor kills Desdemona from *Othello*. As for Romeo and Juliet’s fate, which makes of them two golden statues at the end of the play, it seems to be referred to even before the show starts, when Triggou adorns both her partner’s face and her own with golden flakes.

The two characters move in a world of their own, underlined by the set, designed by Dimitra Zigaris. It consists of eight hexagonal prisms of different heights that look like a hive. Discussing the space in his note in the programme, Pandazaras talks, among other things, about the geometry of the hive, “a place of transformation, production, reproduction” (Pandazaras 8). In her own note in the programme, the set designer, apart from stating the obvious, that “the total shape of the set is that of a hive”, also remarks that “the hexagonal prisms recall the benzene rings of carbon, the ‘element of life’, the basis of all organic compounds” (Zigaris 18). At the top of the highest prism there is a semi-transparent rotating sphere, on which lies a large ruby. It symbolizes “eternal love, the power and vitality of blood” (Pandazaras 8). “Some called it mineral kiss, some the diamond of death”, the director adds (Pandazaras 8). The ruby is seen rotating on the sphere until the end of the show, when it is shared between the lovers, as it passes from one mouth to the other and back again through their kisses.

Acting on Zigaris’s small construct certainly requires choreographed movements, which were designed by Constantinos Papanikolaou, who also trained the actors, who execute his choreography with precision (Sella). In *This is not Romeo & Juliet* the set becomes “the third protagonist” of the production (Mitsakou). Pinakoulakis argues that the different levels of the set signify, in Pandazaras’s staging, the different levels of a relationship, and that the various forms that this “polymorphic” set takes could represent the various stages of a human relationship (Pinakoulakis).

Apart from its symbolic value, the set also proves very ergonomic. It works as a closet, with the characters opening parts of it to take their costumes from; and also covers needs deriving from the text, as in the scene in Capulet’s orchard (the “balcony scene”), when different parts of the set open to reveal branches with leaves. However, even this last part has its own meaning: “the set that blossoms” represents “life that comes through the burnt earth” (Pandazaras 8).

The lights, designed by Sakis Birbilis, work in harmony with the set. Vivian Mitsakou argues that they create a fairy-tale atmosphere, while stressing the different phases of the protagonists’ relationship (Mitsakou), and Sella adds that they underline “the tensions and the moments” (Sella). So does the music by Giorgos Poullos, but also the pieces selected for the beginning and the ending of the show. Before the show starts, we hear songs like “Bad Kingdom” by Moderat, whereas a last Shakespearean reference (“To be, or not to be”) is heard at the end of the show in “Fuck All the Perfect People” by Chip Taylor.

Of course, a live-streamed performance involves more participants: the cameramen (three of them for this production) and, most importantly, the director of the live-streamed version (Pavlos Kerassidis). This staging included views from above, close-ups etc., which offered to the online spectator a multi-faceted experience: a viewing of the performance from different angles, and occasionally a closer view of the actors, but also of the set and costumes, which would be absent from a live experience at the theatre, where the spectator is nailed to his/her seat. Sella underlines the benefits of this new experience: the views from above, or the close-ups, she says, gave a wholly new impression, which no theatre, not even the first row, could have offered. She also admits in her review that the views of the theatre that preceded the performance itself gave her a taste of the real thing; she somehow felt she was at the theatre (Sella).

The online show also involved references to the live-streaming process itself. At some point the girl asked the boy why they had to play *Romeo and Juliet*, since there was no-one watching; and the boy answered that he knew that there were people watching. There were also views of one of the cameramen, as well as of a person (probably the director of the online show) in front of a screen showing the different angles of the cameras that covered the live streaming of the production.

Despite the fact that the live-streamed performance was a full theatrical experience, the end of the show was still awkward, with no audience to applaud the actors. The two of them bowed, hugged each other, continued playing with each other, with the ruby, with the golden flakes, and left after a while.

This is not Romeo & Juliet was regarded as “a personal investigation on the big issues touched on in [Shakespeare’s] play: love, hate, the fear of death” (Pinakoulakis). Furthermore, Ioannidis observes that the “This is NOT” part of the production’s title “reveals the relation that the new generation of our artists has developed with classical literature. It is a relation without stereotypes and away from coercions, a relation of freedom and real, unpretentious respect” (Ioannidis). As for the live-streaming experience, as Veatricky Psychari remarks, “a life in live-streaming [. . .] is still life” (Psychari), after all.

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