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Greek Dispossession Staged, or When Street Politics Meets the Theater

Olivia Landry
Lehigh University

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Landry, Olivia

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Olivia Landry

The Revolution said to the theatre:

“Theatre, I need you. I need you, but not so that I,
the Revolution, can relax in comfortable seats
in a beautiful hall and enjoy a show after all
the hard work and battles....

I need you as a helper, as a searchlight, as an advisor.

I want to see my friends and my enemies on your stage....

I want to see them with my own eyes. I want also to study
them through your methods.”

– A.V. Lunacharsky, Moscow, 1938¹

Introduction

Staging politics is a process that can be understood in two distinct ways. First, it can refer to the act of bringing politics to the theater in the form of a political play. Second, it can imply the act of creating a spectacle of politics, which can include anything from a highly affective or rhetorical political speech to a theatrical street demonstration.² In the case of bringing politics to the theater, the stage is a fixed location; in the second figuration, the stage is any place where political spectacle might publicly occur. Throughout history the relationship between these two processes of staging politics has been and continues to be marked by an ontological question: at what point does politics become theater and vice versa? Of course this is not simply a question of place, for as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o has asserted, any site of “social, physical, and psychic forces of society” can be a performance space (13). Indeed, such “forces of society” certainly appeared to undergird the recent period of massive, highly visible, and performative demonstrations that occurred on the squares and in the streets across the globe in the early part of this decade: the Syntagma Square protests in Athens (2010), the Arab Spring (2010), Occupy Wall Street and beyond (2011), the Plaza de Catalunya in Barcelona protests (2011), Refugee Tent Action in Berlin (2012), the Gezi Park protests (2013), and the Ferguson protests and beyond (2014). In the wake of these mass demonstrations, we might be inclined to suggest that the stage of politics in this age is first and foremost the

¹ Cited in Rudnitsky, 41. This same epigraph begins a brief article by Mahmoud Shalaby entitled “Protestvorstellungen.” I am grateful to the author for bringing it to my attention.

² One recent compelling example of this would be Erdem Gunduz’s “Standing Man” demonstration on Istanbul’s Taksim Square as part of the Gezi Park protests during the summer of 2013. See Richard Seymour’s article “Turkey’s ‘Standing Man’ Shows How Passive Resistance Can Shake a State,” *The Guardian Online* 18 June 2013. Accessible here: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jun/18/turkey-standing-man>.

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exterior urban public space: the square, the street. Yet in cities like Berlin it would not be an overstatement to say that the space of political and social dialogue and performance is (also) the theater. The regularity with which a spate of Berlin theaters, among them, Maxim Gorki, Ballhaus Naunynstraße, Hebbel am Ufer (HAU), Heimathafen, and the Volksbühne, rigorously bring contemporary local and international politics to the stage commands our attention. Precisely this ostensible exception brings me to the germ of my critique. Engaging recent theories of dispossession, theater, and performance, in the following I will examine the performative relationship of politics in the street and politics in the theater not as displacements of one another, but as complements and extensions of each other. From the pioneering work of Bertolt Brecht (epic) to Erwin Piscator (documentary) and Hans-Thies Lehmann (postdramatic), German theater history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries no doubt has a capacious repertoire of representative political theater and its methods. This genealogical degree of reciprocity of theater and politics emphatically and productively plays out in the recent German-Greek collaborative theatrical production, *Telemachos—Should I Stay or Should I Go?*, which will serve as the focus of this exploration. Here I will chart the way in which the Greek financial crisis has been staged both in the exteriors of Athens and on the theater stage in Berlin and consider how these two types of stagings potentially intersect and diverge.

Historical Context

Following its premiere in January 2013, *Telemachos* ran for nearly two seasons as part of the repertoire of the Ballhaus Naunynstraße Theater in the Berlin district of Kreuzberg. Synonymous with politically-tinged cultural theater and performance, the Ballhaus Naunynstraße provided an intimate yet altogether thematically fitting forum for the play. Co-written and directed by Anestis Azas and Prodromos Tsinikoris, *Telemachos* examines the post-2010 financial crisis³ and Greece's postwar political and economic relationship to Germany through the encounter of Greek migrants to Germany from the span of active labor migration in the 1960s to the period of the financial crisis at the dawn of the last decade. Its theatrical modus operandi is a deployment of a series of shared personal narratives of loss, migration, and displacement articulated through monologues and interspersed with dialogue, collective reminiscing, dancing, citations from Homer's Greek epic poem about travel and return, *The Odyssey*,⁴ and finally didactic inserts. As a documentary-style play that depicts real-life personal histories and employs mostly non-professional actors,⁵ *Telemachos* represents what Carol Martin would refer to as "a struggle to shape and remember the most transitory history – the complex ways in which men and women think about the events that shape the landscapes of their lives" (9). This struggle of shaping and remembering inheres in the theatrical representation of Greece in

³ On a global level, the financial crisis is referred to as the post-2008 crisis, and no doubt this broader crisis precipitated the Greek crisis. However, in the literature about the local financial crisis, most scholars refer to it as the post-2010 crisis. This directly references the Greek government's signing of the "memorandum of agreement" in Athens with its European lenders, which initiated the austerity measures in Greece.

⁴ The play's title "Telemachos" is derived from the name of the Greek hero Odysseus's son, who is torn between joining in his father's adventures and staying home and caring for his mother and homeland.

⁵ Only Promodos Tsinikoris, Despina Bibika, and Knut Berger are trained actors. The other ensemble members are non-professional actors.

a period of crisis. Azas and Tsinikoris were invited to Berlin by the celebrated playwright and director, Nurkan Erpulat, whose own work (*Lö bal Almanya* [2010], *Verrücktes Blut* [2010], *Clash* [2011]) has become interchangeable with contemporary political theater and especially the postmigrant theater movement in Berlin. This invitation came precisely in the historical summer of 2011 when Greece's financial crisis had reached its tipping point and the Syntagma Square protests were at their height. Azas and Tsinikoris, who were active in the street protests, seized the opportunity to reflect on what they could bring to theater from the street protests in order to share their experiences with a German audience and to continue their political activism. Instead of simply offering a reconstruction and re-performance of the street protests, Azas and Tsinikoris created a documentary-style dramaturgy that unearths historical discourses and re-politicizes social relations between Germany and Greece. The result is a powerfully layered articulation and performance of the Greek debt crisis and its deeply embedded and troubled relationship with Germany that demands public dialogue.⁶

Telemachos draws on a number of techniques and aesthetics of documentary theater through its treatment of authentic material, audio-visual media, voices, and bodies, as well as its efforts to probe new understandings of history and society. Yet it also contains a playfulness and a performance of identity that distinguish it from some of the more earnest tones of German documentary theater (for example the work of Peter Weiss, Hans-Werner Kroesinger, Milo Rau, and Rimini-Protokoll) and push it in a slightly different direction. Cultural performance and the concern of providing a space for previously silenced individuals and groups to speak and share their stories in unmediated fashion resonate with renewed vigor in *Telemachos*, as all of the performers essentially play themselves. Thus, this production renders a performance of self that performatively has stakes in matters of self-representation and self-determination frequently linked to cultural performance and its tradition in international performance art from the early 1970s and beyond (Carlson 179).

Such a rich overlapping of influence speaks to *Telemachos*' correlation with postmigrant theater. A theater movement about and by first, second, third generation Germans and Germans of color, postmigrant theater has successfully forged a space for new aesthetics, narratives, and a political dialogue of cultural and linguistic openness. Without proposing that *Telemachos* is representative of all postmigrant theater, a probing of the mechanics and motivations of the former will contribute to the broader discourse of the latter—a contemporary theater movement still much discussed and debated.

Let us begin with a turn towards Athens. In a curious replaying of history and politics, *Telemachos* revisits the politics and protests that were originally performed on the Syntagma Square in central Athens, where Greek citizens vociferously challenged the dispossession and precarization they experienced under the pursuits of neoliberal capitalism and the subsequent austerity measures imposed on Greece by its European lenders. In the face of unemployment, no health insurance, and the possibility of no

⁶ Of course the Greek debt crisis has been fodder for a number of artistic and performance projects in Greece, but these rarely explore it in the German-Greek context. One example is the 2015 production of the Greek play *The Intrigue of Z.* by director Effi Teodorou performed in 2015 throughout Europe is more directly concerned with the rise in right-wing politics in Greece in the post-crisis period. Re-investigating the political murder of Grigóris Lambrákis in 1963, this play seeks to draw parallels between this earlier period of political upheaval and corruption to the present, and especially the ramifications of the public murder of the anti-fascist rapper Pavlos Fyssas (Killah P.) by the Golden Dawn member Giorgos Roupakias in 2013.

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permanent shelter, Greek citizens rallied around their damaged present and most uncertain future. As the original stage, the Syntagma Square is an intensely fraught space that certainly recalls Ngũgĩ's description of a performance space. Flanking the Greek Parliament (also known as the Hellenic Parliament) building in central Athens, the Syntagma Square was named after the Constitution of 1843. Initially mounted as a public space for strolling and sitting, by the mid-1990s it had become the symbolic site of the glorified "Strong Greece," and as a result it was transformed into an increasingly regimented space of control and surveillance where only "carefully orchestrated and controlled events organized by the authorities" were permitted to take place (Dalakoglou 28). Already a stage for national politics in flux, the Syntagma Square thus provided both a geopolitically and symbolically charged site for the 2010-2011 protests. These protests commenced as a direct response to Greece's signing of the conditions for the first bailout package (officially referred to as the First Economic Adjustment Programme for Greece) and quickly metastasized into a broader movement of discontent among Greek citizens, often referred to as the "Indignant Citizens Movement."⁷

Frequently discussed as acts of staging, the protests linked to this movement have been likened to performance spectacles. By Philip Hager's account, these protests are "dramaturgies... syndecdochic spectacles of politics that are indicative of the political and social relations and traditions in and through which performances of citizenship operate" (247). One might argue that the sheer assembling of bodies in a public space performatively asserts their place and rights as citizens. Even beyond the theater space these assembled bodies co-opt what performance studies scholars and artists Bojana Cvejić and Ana Vujanović call the "affective virtuosity" of bodies in performance which injects them with a reckonable force and a political operability (176). But in order to declare Syntagma Square a stage and the Indignant Citizens of Greece (referred to as the "aganaktismenoi" in Greek) its actors, we must first further consider the performative aspects of these protests. If assembled bodies in protest can co-opt the same virtuosity of bodies in the performance or theater space, as Cvejić and Vujanović suggest, then politics on the street (or square, for that matter) in the form of (generally) collective protests is also performative insofar as it effects a politics of bodily action and reaction through a physical assertion of presence that demands attention and engagement. The corollary is not only visibility but also an assertion of identity through plurality. With a turn to the concept of plural performativity, I will begin to theorize the relationship between the performance of street politics and the politics of theater performance.

In their book *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (2013), a text composed of a rich dialogue of shared ideas, Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou carefully discuss the performativity of street politics with a particular focus on Greece and the processes of dispossession. A condition with myriad faces (to which I will return), at its most elemental "dispossession" designates material loss and displacement. Butler and Athanasiou describe street politics as a form of plural performativity that inheres in bodily presence and the community and sociality based on such presence. Just as dispossession takes away, plural performativity gives back—expression, identity, and community. For Butler and Athanasiou this presence "articulat[es] a voice of the people

⁷ A number of news sources from this time can be cited here. For example, the BBC World's news report, entitled "Greeks Stage Huge Athens Rally Against Austerity Cuts" 6 June 2011, is particularly relevant. Accessible here: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-13665140>.

from the singularity of the story and the obduracy of the body, a voice at once individual and social” and “is the reproduction of community or sociality itself as bodies congregate and ‘live together’ on the street” (175). Dispossession is both the object of protest and the motivation by which groups, such as the Indignant Citizens of Greece, take to the streets. With increasingly limited resources at their disposal, the people of Greece have had no recourse of contestation other than their own corporeal presence and affectivity of collective protest on the streets. The physical body is not only in many cases the last means of political protest available to the dispossessed, but also, as David Harvey has concluded, quite often the most powerful means of protest. He writes: “[T]he collective power of bodies in public space is still the most effective instrument of opposition when all other means of access are blocked” (2013, 161-162). When political representation has failed and socioeconomic imbalances weigh so heavily on the dispossessed, often the only mechanism of power and resistance is the force of corporeal presence in its collective form. Precisely this condition of dispossession comes into play and is examined and contested in *Telemachos*.

Politics of Performance

Politics of the street takes on new life when restaged in the theater. Restaging is not only a mode of repetition or simply re-performance; instead, it enacts a performance within a performance that permits a reshaping, a narrativizing, and a historicizing of the event or series of events in question. *Telemachos* restages history, politics, and culture and thereby transports them into a new context of multiple encounters—theater’s standing charge. On one level this encounter occurs within the play between first and second-generation postwar Greek labor migrants to (West) Germany.⁸ In the post-2010 crisis, migration westward seems to repeat itself. As *Telemachos* demonstrates, many young Greeks have similarly left Greece for Germany in search of employment. The play maps out these two generations of labor migration from Greece to Germany—their parallels and distinctions—in this encounter. This meeting of old and young gathers a group from a wide range of representative identities and performances. The ensemble spans across two generations of labor migrants and two nations: Greece and Germany. Among the first generation is the former political prisoner Chryssi Kyriakidou, who fled from Greece to Germany in the late 1960s both to escape the Greek Military Junta (1967-1974) and to look for new opportunities. Also part of this first-generation duo is the labor migrant (historically referred to as “Gastarbeiter”) Christos Sarafianos, who spontaneously found himself in a car bound for Munich in the mid-1960s, where he stayed on and found work. Bridging this first generation of labor migrants to the second is the Greek German Promodos Tsinkaris (son of Greek “Gastarbeiter”), who opens *Telemachos* by means of a personal account of his struggle with belonging and transnational identity. Similar in age to Promodos are the recent migrants from Greece,

⁸ In 1960 West Germany signed a bilateral recruitment agreement with Greece enabling free labor movement between the countries. As a result, roughly 155,000 Greek citizens migrated to West Germany between 1960 and 1973 (the end of the labor agreements); many stayed and settled. There were a number of reasons for Greek emigration during this period, but the driving factors were high unemployment in Greece, bare subsistence incomes, and the quest for political freedom (especially during the military junta’s rule, 1967-1974).

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Despina Bibika, Kostis Kallivretakis, and Giannis Tsoukalas, who all made the move to Germany in search of work in the immediate period of the post-2010 crisis and the ensuing spike in unemployment in Greece. Finally, there is the young “German” Knut Berger, who ironically refers to himself as the “Gastgeber” (no doubt alluding to the antiquated and ideologically loaded term “Gastarbeiter”) of this theatrical event. Representing to some extent the embedded audience or perhaps chorus in the play, whose presence frequently results in critical reflection and also conflict, Knut’s role is theatrically instrumental and politically charged. His presence thus signals another kind of encounter inherent in theater and performance: the encounter between performers and spectators. Yet his conceivable role as (German, male) spectator also self-reflexively mobilizes its own interrogation of itself, precisely for its hegemonic cultural positioning and homogeneity. Knut’s figure is discernibly Brechtian in its structure of distancing, provocation, and ethos of critique, a distinction to which I will return throughout.

In *Telemachos* the personal narratives of migration, hardship, and hope performatively articulated and shared by the performers are presented in a threefold way: what Martin has called “the tripartite structure of contemporary documentary theatre: technology, text, and body” (9). These three elements are indeed instrumental to the play. The technology in this play includes video, film, music, photographs and other documents, a projector, and a large screen. With the (visible) use of these technological means, *Telemachos* replicates past events in indexical and archival form. Employing technology to support and supplement the stories that the performers tell lends a direct sense of verisimilitude that is inherent in documentary theater, what Thomas Irmer calls “a theatre of factual reports” that “bear witness to the present and form the basis of the production” (17-18). Each story is supplemented by an old image, or in one case an identification card, and in another case even old bank statements, all of which are individually projected onto the screen mounted on the upper back wall of the stage. Next there is the oral component of this play, the spoken text which encompasses the interaction between performers and more importantly the oral narration of the individual stories, experiences, and opinions of the performers in direct communication with the audience. Finally, the bodies of the performers in *Telemachos* represent themselves as “real people” and living witnesses of the events of history and of the politics of the present. This tripartite approach to documentary theater inspires a compelling reading of the staging of politics and history both as practice and as creation.

The revolutionary idea that theater has the ability to directly intervene and contribute to politics and social change in Germany has its roots in political theater, and especially the experimental work of Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator. The ideas of Piscator, like those of his more well-known Weimar counterpart Brecht, transformed theater into a political institution, not only by bringing the stage into the political arena, but also by intensifying politics through the theater (Innes 6). Theater’s rich formal commitment to politics as a medium of liveness and community also infuses *Telemachos* with political purport. As Joe Kelleher explains in *Theatre & Politics* (2009), theater’s “liveness and sociality, the simple fact that it happens *now* and that it gathers people, who may well be strangers to each other, around issues of disagreement but also of common concern” underpin its political efficacy (10, author’s emphasis). This definition of theater as a live, social space of gathering and engagement directly recalls Butler and Athanasiou’s rendering of street politics as plural performativity, wherein collective bodies transform

into spectacles that demand attention and facilitate community. As a play about the effects of Greece's debt crisis, Greek and German relations, and the Syntagma Square protests, the important ontological overlapping of street politics and theater performance is vividly underscored in *Telemachos*. Theater becomes a space where historical and contemporary events are at once re-performed and collectively shared and investigated. In the case of *Telemachos*, form and content powerfully intertwine to create a transformative theater experience that affects the audience in such a way that its effects reverberate beyond the theater walls. It is representative of what Kelleher refers to (drawing on Fredric Jameson's account of Brecht) as political theater's ability to "stir up conflict in the immediate social body" (12). In the theater, spectators become social beings and precisely this condition determines their thought and action. Confronted with issues of contemporary social and political import, this immediate social body of the theater is impelled to both reflect and respond. These reflections and responses become part of a process of engagement and transformation both within and beyond the theater.⁹ Indeed, throughout the performance of *Telemachos* there was a palpable and detectable reaction among the audience; spectators broke out in laughter, snickers, and some even left the theater. After the performance (and outside the theater space), many spectators could be overheard discussing what they had experienced and debating its messages and nuances. *Telemachos* wittingly confronts the audience with a profound political context, whose contemporaneous nature reinforces the play's capacity for direct intervention. Political theater becomes a means of informing, engaging, and even evoking change. By offering an alternative narrative to the often impersonal and heavily mediated news stories about contemporary Greece, *Telemachos* interrogates the events of the crisis and its historical embeddedness in a version of its own. In the context of documentary theater, Martin has called such a transformative force of theater its capacity to "unsettle the present" (9). Here she refers to the ability of contemporary documentary theater to intervene in the creation of history because it is contemporaneous to the events of its subject matter. The timeliness of *Telemachos*, even now several years after its premiere, is evident. As the effects of the Greek financial crisis continue to unfold (and unfold, and unfold) in the present, the play becomes a performance of history in the making. While these acts of "stirring up conflict" and "unsettling the present" may only seem representational in the play, as the "German" Knut reminds the audience and his fellow performers, "kein Stress, es ist nur Theater" (*Telemachos*),¹⁰ *Telemachos* does persistently threaten to spill over into real life. Even Knut follows up on this first comment with a Brechtian caveat: "Aber vielleicht sollten wir besser nachdenken" (ibid).¹¹ The footing and projection of Knut's body and voice in this instance—turned toward the audience space—appear to also be directed toward the spectators and possibly to a time and space beyond the theater.

⁹ While my reading of *Telemachos* and the role of politics in theater are certainly not strictly Brechtian, I do loosely refer to Brecht's *Schriften zum Theater* throughout this essay, and here especially his chapter "Vergnügungstheater oder Lehrtheater" (60-77).

¹⁰ "Relax, it's just theater." All translations from German to English are mine, unless otherwise indicated. All the quotes from the play cited here are taken from my own performance notes, as there is no published script. I attended three performances during the spring of 2014. For the sake of consistency, I will cite these quotes with the play's title.

¹¹ "But perhaps we should give this better thought."

In its decidedly epic (read: Brechtian) performance, Knut's figure often carries the political charge of the play. His spoken observations have a didactic tendency that interrupts the flow of the play's series of monologues. At the same time, Knut's comments are often paternalistic and overly moralizing. In response to this historical encounter of first- and second-generation Greek labor migrants on stage, he conclusively remarks that it demonstrates nothing more and nothing less than the (unfortunate) repetition of history. "Ihr macht den gleichen Fehler nochmal. Wir zerstören euer Land und ihr kommt hierher und arbeitet für uns" (*Telemachos*).¹² This subtle locutionary inversion of (German) responsibility via a purporting of the (Greek) willful seizure of victimhood is crossed over with an oversimplified and even troubling reading of history. Such an articulation and many others exemplify the underlying layer of criticism mobilized in *Telemachos* by means of Knut's figure. Although he appears to represent the privileged observer in the play and is (rather ironically) positioned as a cultural mediator between the Greek performers and the (mostly) German audience, spectators quickly recognize that he cannot (and should not) be a direct means of identification. Knut thus forcefully invokes the audience's capacity for critical reflection through deflection. The labor of critique is transposed to the audience in the form of self-reflection. For example, when Promodos openly accuses Knut of being culturally patronizing and retorts: "Ja klar, der Deutsche spricht und der Grieche ist still" (*Telemachos*),¹³ he comments on the relationality embedded in theater in general and cultural theater in particular, where issues of self-representation and (inter)subjectivity come to form and must be negotiated.

Through Kelleher's interpretive model, then, I suggest that the potential political value of *Telemachos* is to show, engage, and to encourage an "acting upon" of "power relations" (28-29) that exist within the play and deliberately reflect society. In the context of the Greek debt crisis and more broadly in our present state of neoliberal economics where precarity and precarization condition how we live, these power relations can be characterized, following Butler and Athanasiou, as the politics of dispossession. The incitement for so much street politics of late—Syntagma, Occupy, Arab Spring, Gezi, Ferguson¹⁴—dispossession delineates a far-flung and convoluted set of circumstances. Present theories of dispossession often take their roots from Harvey's concept of "accumulation by dispossession" (2008, 34), which he articulates in explicitly material terms as the "capture of valuable land from low-income populations that may have lived there for many years" (ibid). Butler and Athanasiou expand on this definition to suggest that dispossession is also a matter of loss of a means of livelihood and even citizenship (3). Inevitably, the result of this process is the subjugation of these "dispossessed" populations to military and legal violence (ibid.). Therefore, becoming dispossessed implies what they refer to as "an ensuing, derivative condition of enforced deprivation of land, rights, livelihood, desire, or modes of belonging" (5). Because of this sanctioned destitution, the dispossessed is thrust into a precarious existence where politically induced conditions of unemployment, bankruptcy and even homelessness, such as those provoked by the Greek debt crisis, threaten life.

¹² "You're making the same mistake again. We destroy your country and you come and work for us."

¹³ "Of course, the German speaks and the Greek is quiet."

¹⁴ Beginning in the late spring of 2010, the Syntagma Square protests certainly chronologically preceded other major financial crisis outgrowth and direct democracy movements, such as Occupy, Arab Spring, and Gezi Park.

Dispossession Staged

Yet power relations of dispossession, like all power relations, should not be read exclusively as one of possession and its lack, of the haves and the have nots, nor should we assume that these relations are fixed and essentially negative. Taking a Foucauldian course we can understand power as productive and power relations as situational, and therefore as fluid. Butler and Athanasiou likewise consider the flipside and the potentially affirmative implications of dispossession. Characterized by *aporia*—that irresolvable contradiction in logic—dispossession designates loss, but it is also tethered to our relationship to others and to the potential pleasure and suffering that this sociality brings. While Butler and Athanasiou focus specifically on street politics, I suggest that theater as a space and condition for encounter and dispossession offers a fitting point of comparison. Just as the power relations of dispossession infer a shared or at least a dialectical presence where no one has absolute power and no one is completely without power, theater also opens up a shared space of encounter, where the power dynamic between the performers and the audience is constantly shifting. As Butler and Athanasiou argue, “Being dispossessed by the other’s presence and by our own presence to the other is the only way to be present to one another” (17). Considered this way, dispossession as a concept bears the intrinsic relationality of the non-sovereign politics of collective and even affective encounter. It forges a place where displacement can actually lead to what Lauren Berlant refers to as a kind of flourishing by way of which social change becomes not only desired but also viable.¹⁵ Yet like any encounter or opening of dialogue, there are no guarantees and our intentions must often be suspended; we are thrust into a position of unknowing and vulnerability.¹⁶

Such a dialectical structure of relations is compellingly similar to that found in theater performance. Erika Fischer-Lichte has explored this structure in her more recent phenomenological meditations on theater. Most famously in her monograph *Ästhetik des Performativen* (2004), she conceptualizes what she refers to as the autopoietic feedback loop of performance as a self-referential system that generates the possibility for an ever-emergent process of intersubjective shifting between performers and spectators. It follows that the performance of the moment oscillates and operates on the threshold between stage and audience space. In Fischer-Lichte’s account, theatrical performance must reckon with the bodily co-presence of performers and spectators in a given space whose encounter impels both confrontation and interaction. She writes: “Die Aufführung entsteht aus ihrer Begegnung – aus ihrer Konfrontation, aus ihrer Interaktion” (58).¹⁷ Without directly suggesting that the encounter in theater is a form of dispossession, the relational and experiential qualities of these processes certainly interweave in provocative ways and provide a discerning theoretical frame for our examination of *Telemachos*, where the (mostly) German audience meets the (mostly) Greek group of performers in a

¹⁵ Lauren Berlant employs the complexly utopian concept of “flourishing” throughout her work. In her published dialogue with Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (2014), she offers a most recent formulation. See pages 11-12.

¹⁶ Recent political and social theories draw heavily on the idea of non-sovereign politics and relationality. Substantial literature exists on the topic. For further reading, see Hardt and Negri *Commonwealth* (2009), Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (2011), and Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (2014).

¹⁷ “Performance emerges through their encounter—through their confrontation, through their interaction.”

potentially confrontational showdown of sorts. Destabilizing moments litter the play's dramaturgy. While spectators are not directly invited to physically "join the performance," the transformative community of co-subjects of actors and spectators which emerges as a result of this performance event and its interactive feedback loop attenuates all semblance of the removed characteristic of classical theater. As boundaries fray, disruptions ensue. Performance heightens precisely at moments in the play when outbursts of anger and joy ostensibly appear to threaten intention and flow. At one point, for example, Promodos in a fit of anger over Knut's unrelenting arrogance and meddling even stomps off the stage, offering a direct blow to the already shaky fourth wall.

Telemachos thus does not merely foster a space for a monolithic dramatic relaying and resituating of Greek precarity; instead, it ambivalently delivers a heterogeneous assemblage of narratives and experiences that unfold over a complexly layered series of encounters by way of which the audience becomes critically and phenomenologically implicated in the performance. Frequently these encounters occur through the figure of Knut, but they also occur through the semi-confrontational monologues directed at the audience. The play is structured around personal narration; each performer tells his or her story in monologue, positioned in the center front area of the stage. These individual verbal acts are performative in their assertion of identity and history, but also precarious in their performance of self-exposure and vulnerability. Echoing Fischer-Lichte's account of the body of the actor on stage, in *Precarious Life* (2004) Butler signals the precarity inherent in the act of displaying one's body:

The body implies mutability, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very rights are not quite ever our own. The body has its invariably public dimension (26).

In its direct display of bodies as a spectacle, theater (and especially the act of self-narration on stage) enters this phenomenological sphere of the social. In *Telemachos*, Despina, a young college graduate, tells of her degrading work as a maid for a wealthy German family. Kostis speaks of his father's inconceivable gambling debts, which have left him and his family completely bankrupt. Giannis tells of how the dispossession of his beloved record store and then unemployment led him to thoughts of suicide. Often transpiring into phenomenologically affective encounters, Despina's quaking body of despair, Kostis's aggressively flailing body of anger, and Giannis's quietly slouched body of shame all proffer an immensely forceful social charge that impresses itself upon the audience. Through these acts, crisis becomes affectively palpable. The powerfully phenomenological bodily co-presence of performers and spectators in the theater space becomes distilled in these moments when the physicality of the performer not only demands the audience's attention but also potentially evokes physical reaction in kind.

In its restaging of street politics, *Telemachos* offers stories of the politically induced condition of dispossession and the bodies onto which these stories are mapped. This presence of bodies and the anxiety and desire they stir afford the possibility of relationality. Bodies in performance open up and expand fields of force. *Telemachos* becomes a transformative space where new relations and community are formed—a community of performers and a community of performers and spectators. The

dramaturgy of *Telemachos*—its uninhibited display of exposure and contingency that open up relationality—mirrors and extends from the Syntagma Square protests. In the course of these protests the Indignant Citizens of Greece likewise performed their dispossession and not least their discontent against their political representatives. These “dramaturgies” of the street, as Hager has referred to them (247), are similarly the corporeal and spatial spectacles of resistance and collectivity, where a vast physical presence of bodies and voices were assembled to perform their stories and affectively occupy public space. As a community, the Indignant Citizens of Greece resisted the dominant neoliberal narratives of crisis which attempted to obscure and even silence their stories (ibid). With their theater production Azas and Tsiniokoris bring these individuals of different generations and distinct (at times dissenting) voices together through performance. Each has his or her own story to tell, but here these stories form a network of voices. In their individual telling and retelling of their stories of hardship and migration—of leaving Greece and going to Germany—a collective narration asserts itself and thus consolidates an inter-generational and even inter-cultural identity and community in *Telemachos*. This is the plural performativity of *Telemachos* that so effervescently echoes the politics of the street.

But with its explicit focus on Greek-German relations, *Telemachos* does not account for the presence and experience of migrants within Greece, whose quality of life has been significantly attenuated by the current economic situation. These “other” migrant voices and their performances are curiously left out of *Telemachos*.¹⁸ Ultimately, the plural performativity of the play is bound by the exclusive narrative of inter-European migration and exchange. Expanding the directionality of this dialogue by opening it up to other perspectives would have certainly rounded out this performance. However, the play’s bilateral focus, that is, the connection between Greece and Germany, is still significant and informative. Presented in theatrical form, the frayed relationship of dispossession between Greece and Germany is not only re-localized and re-politicized, it also opens up the neglected layers and complexities of this conflict seldom raised on the stage of contemporary political discourse or by the press in either nation. Further, through its performative aesthetics *Telemachos* beckons its performers and spectators into a relationship of co-presence and even co-subjectivity in which we are all politically implicated and held responsible for our actions.

During the final half hour of *Telemachos*, Christos, an older and mostly reticent figure throughout the play, prepares a meal of fresh vegetables and herbs. This real-life preparation and cooking on the stage lends yet another tangible sense of realism and contingency. The real olfactory experience piques the spectators’ senses and pleasantly detracts (to some degree) both performers and spectators from the harrowing stories and

¹⁸ The play does not account for the precarious existence of migrants and minority groups *within* Greece, whose living conditions have been further exacerbated by the debt crisis and the austerity politics that followed. On the heels of the initial wave of protests on Syntagma Square in 2010, three hundred migrants also went on a collective hunger strike in Athens. As Dalakoglou indicates, they simply demanded “more sensible regularization policy for migrants in Greece” (25). One could also expand on this with an eye to the on-going refugee situation in Europe and the fact that over 44,000 refugees are stranded in Greece, which has neither infrastructural nor financial means to assist them. Many have observed that the miserable situation for migrants and asylum seekers in Greece has developed into a full-blown humanitarian crisis. See, for example, Jim Yardley, “A ‘High Degree of Miserable’ in a Refugee-Swollen Greece.” *The New York Times Online* 17, March 2016. Accessible here: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/18/world/europe/greece-idomeni-refugees.html? r=0>.

disputes on stage. With his vegetable stew, Christos lures his other fellow performers into a sit-down meal and a pause from their contestations. Eating together is a community matter. But there is a limitation to this signaling of reconciliation through the ritual of cooking and eating. This meal is accompanied by Christos's brief, concluding monologue: "Wenn wir nach Griechenland fahren, dann sagen sie, 'Der Germanos ist da. Der Deutsche ist da.' Also bitte. Also in Deutschland sind wir fremd, in Griechenland sind wir fremd. Wo sind wir nicht fremd? In der Türkei vielleicht?" (*Telemachos*).¹⁹ Articulated in an equanimous and even indifferent manner, Christos actually illustrates the entangled dynamic and diasporic identity fostered through experiences of migration where one is not simply between two cultures, a cliché that Leslie Adelson has famously unpacked in her essay "Against Between: A Manifesto" (2001), but, as it seems, entirely outside of these cultures. Indeed, the sense of displacement "by choice" iterated in the play's subtitle, borrowed from its musical motif by the Clash, "Should I Stay or Should I Go?," clearly expands to new dimensions of displacement by force and dispossession in the play because migration is often not a matter of choice.

Christos's invocation of an altogether different history of Greek displacement and dispossession with Turkey is provocative. Relations between Greece and Turkey have long been rocky, to say the very least. However, while Turkey is by no means a neutral space in Greek history, in the context of Germany (and German theater) it appears to attain the status of a kind of third space, a space where the hegemonic vestiges of cultural belonging and identity may gradually be shed. Turkey represents a potentially heterotopic space of freedom and reinvention. At the same time, Christos also seems to gesture to the theater space, Ballhaus Naunynstraße, which has cultural and geopolitical grounding in the Turkish community in Berlin. Further, in this Greek-German narrative of migration, dispossession, and negotiation, Turkey, whose own relationship and history with Germany is similarly complexly layered and fraught, extends a potentially rich and sympathetic point of comparison and community. It is in this verbal finale that *Telemachos* therefore also seems to directly ally itself with the postmigrant theater movement which promotes a culture and identity that are "beyond belonging"²⁰ and instead part of an ongoing identity practice that happens through political theater and performance.

Through the insightful work of Butler and Athansiou who rigorously explore the performative and even theatrical in the political, and the work of Kelleher and especially Fischer-Lichte (of course following a rich legacy of predecessors) who devise new dramaturgical strategies for thinking about the political in theater as a matter of live encounter, I argue that *Telemachos* is a powerful performance of social and political

¹⁹ "When we go to Greece, then they say, 'The *Germanos* (Greek for German) is here. The German is here.' So please. So in Germany we're strangers, in Greece we're strangers. Where are we not strangers? In Turkey perhaps?"

²⁰ Most date the inception of the postmigrant theater movement to the theater festival at the Hebbel am Ufer (HAU) in 2006 called *Beyond Belonging – Migration* curated by Shermin Langhoff. This event precipitated Langhoff's move to and reopening of the Ballhaus Naunynstraße in 2008, which became a full-fledged postmigrant theater dedicated to staging productions that explore identity in the interstices of culture and politics. For further reading, see Kömürçü Nobrega, "'We bark from the third row': The Position of the *Ballhaus Naunynstraße* in Berlin's Cultural Landscape and the Funding of Cultural Diversity Work" (2011). Also, Claudia Breger, *An Aesthetics of Narrative Performance: Transnational Theater, Literature, and Film in Contemporary Germany* (2012).

critique of the contemporary situation of Greece. Employing documentary categories including real people, archival material, and oral culture, this play directly interrogates a history and present of dispossession experienced by Greek citizens. *Telemachos* transplants the dynamics of the debt crisis protests staged on the squares and streets of Athens to the theater stage. In so doing it not only broadens the performance potential of these spectacles through the aesthetics and techniques of the theater event, but also extends its audience from Greece to Germany in an affectively unmediated form. With its repertoire of real stories, documentary-style forms of narration, and dynamism of embodied politics and history, it affords an alternative collective narrative of the current conditions of existence in Greece that enriches the politics of the Indignant Citizens Movement. Although the debt crisis protests have come to a grinding halt, Greece's future remains uncertain. As it continues to be negotiated on the international stage of politics and in ever alienated and mediated forms, theater takes us back to the voices, to the stories, and to the bodies that composed the politically engaged collectives on the street in a way that brings them in proximity to new audiences and groups where unprecedented social relations open up and take shape. These relations forge engagement, reflection, and discussion—all criteria for change. *Telemachos* thus provides a rich example of how the live encounter, the stirring, and the unsettling of theater performance can reignite politics of the street in ever dynamic ways.

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