

## **BWW Interview: Ioanna Katsarou and HERCULES: IN SEARCH OF A HERO at Abrons Art Center**

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Eclipses Group Theater New York (EGTNY) will be staging the world premiere of *Hercules: In Search of a Hero*. EGTNY is a nonprofit theater company that serves as a cultural bridge between the United States and Greece. Their new show is conceived and directed by Ioanna Katsarou, translated by Demetri Bonaros, with original compositions by Costas Baltazanis. It will be performed at the Abrons Art Center from January 24 to February 10.

*Hercules: In Search of a Hero* combines excerpts from Euripides' plays *Hercules* and *Alcestris*, along with original material, to explore the meaning of heroism in our time. *Hercules* is a man of violence and death: he is heroic by killing. *Alcestris* stands out for an act of self-sacrifice: she is heroic by dying. Using poetic language and images, the play challenges the conventional, masculine notion of heroism and contemplates a feminine alternative.

Broadwayworld.com had the pleasure of interviewing Ioanna Katsarou about her career and the upcoming show.

Katsarou is Eclipses' artistic director and founding member of Aktis Aeliou Theater, awarded Best Regional Theater in Greece by the Greek Critics

Association. She's a member of the [Lincoln Center Theater](#) Directors Lab 2017. Her selected acting credits include Clytemnestra ([Classic Stage Company](#)), Cassandra and Queen Atossa (La MaMa and St. Ambrose Festival Montreal) and Phaedra (European Delphi Festival). Ioanna has performed in more than 25 productions and directed more than 15 plays, including *Farewell*, which was named Best Poetic Monologue at the 2018 United Solo Festival.

### **What was your earliest interest in theatre and performing?**

I come from a working-class family, and theater was a kind of luxury when I was a child. My family had no interest in the arts but a strong interest in politics. For many years, my mother was general secretary in the textile industry workers' union, and her involvement in politics influenced me and formed me as a person and artist. Later, when I was teenager, I was invited by my high school history teacher to watch a show she was performing in. The play was Ionesco's *The Killing Game*, and it was a revelation for me. I was fascinated by the power of this art, and I promised myself that one day I would make theater. Two years later, at the age of eighteen, I joined the theater group of my University (I was studying Computer Studies & Economics at the time), and since then I have never stopped making theater. Theater for me has a strongly political dimension, not in a narrow way but in a broader spectrum: it can influence our way of thinking, it can inspire awareness, it can cast doubt at stereotypes and social norms, it can cultivate our aesthetics and provoke us intellectually in a way that no other art can accomplish.

### **Tell us a little about your education.**

I studied Computer Science & Economics at Macedonia University in Greece, singing at the Municipal Conservatory of Thessaloniki, and I'm graduate of the Drama School of the National Theater of Northern Greece. I had the chance there to have as my teachers some of the greatest actors and directors in Greece. I attended several acting and movement workshops and trained in the Complicite technique with Lilo Baur, the Nogushi Taiso technique with the Japanese dancer Mari Osanai, and the use of the mask in ancient Greek Theater with Niko Sakalidis.

### **How does being both an actor and a director complement your career?**

Very soon after my studies, and after working in two productions with the National Theater of Northern Greece, I realized that working as an actor in the conventional way is not working for me. Going from audition to audition was not my thing. At the age of twenty-six, I created, in collaboration with some actor friends, the ensemble theater group Aktis Aeliou Theater, and we opened our own space, a black box theater. When you work in an ensemble, you are a part of a very collective process. You feel that you are not just an actor following directions, but a co-creator. In our ensemble, we were constantly changing roles. In one production, I could be the lead actor and in the next I could be the director or producer, and so on. That helped me to see the art of theater in a totally different perspective. When I direct, I want the actors to contribute as much as they can in the process. Many directors have a very specific and defined vision from the beginning of the rehearsals. I don't belong in this category of directors. Both as an actor and as a director, I seek collectivity and co-creativity in the highest degree.

### **We'd love to know more about your role as Artistic Director of Eclipses Group Theater New York.**

I co-founded EGTNY in 2011 and have been a leading member of the group since then. EGTNY is a nonprofit organization that serves as a cultural bridge between the United States and Greece, and from the start the group's and my concern has been to develop an artistic dialogue between the two countries. We didn't want to create projects only for the Greek-American community, but rather to produce plays that have a Greek theme or subject matter but address the broader American audience, too. Greece has a very rich tradition in theater. The plays of ancient Greek drama, for instance, are being performed all over the world and challenge the academic world constantly, but unfortunately we don't see them very often on the American stage. We, as a Greek-American company, have experimented quite a lot in producing ancient Greek plays in a new context and with a modern prospective. In all these productions, we have worked with artists from different ethnicities and have collaborated with other American theaters and organizations, such as La MaMa theater and the director Zishan Ugurlu, LaGuardia Performing Arts Center, St Ambroise Festival in Montreal, and so on.

But we don't focus only on ancient Greek plays. We also promote modern Greek dramaturgy in the United States. We are very proud that, in collaboration with Dr. Irene Moundraki, we organized last May the first Greek Play Project NY at NYU, where we presented readings of plays by contemporary Greek playwrights in fresh English translations. Now we are working on the second Greek Play Project NY, which will be presented again at NYU under the Auspices of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture, the Consulate General of Greece in New York, the A.S. Onassis Program in Hellenic Studies at NYU, and The National Theater of Greece.

### **What inspired your concept for the *Hercules: In Search of a Hero* play?**

This project was inspired by and based on Euripides' plays *Alcestis* and *Hercules*. Although 95 percent of the text comes from these plays, this is a new piece, a synthesis of Euripides' poetry and ideas in a new context, translated in an exemplary way and very closely to the directorial approach-by Demetri Bonaros. What I find unique about Euripides is how he reconstructs the traditional myths in his plays in order to challenge and question his own society and reality. This act of challenging and questioning launched my own adventure with this project. Inspired by Euripides' innovative style, I found a strong inner connection between the two plays, parallel movements and ideas that are still topical.

This play aims to question the masculine notion of heroism in our time and contemplate a feminine alternative; to challenge our stereotypes about what is really heroic-typically feats of strength, actions that are often violent. The play poses several questions. Is an act heroic if it involves violence? Are all the great heroes of history really as heroic as they are usually considered, or do their actions have a dark, possibly horrific side, as well? What is the place of women in this mythology of heroism? Do we need to create a different narration of heroism/create new mythologies?

### **What would you like audiences to know about the play?**

This is an experimental work that combines excerpts from Euripides' *Hercules* and *Alcestis* in a unique way and in a modern context to create a fresh and bold theater piece. To our knowledge, these two Euripides tragedies have never been combined in such a way. The play shines a new light on the strong feministic and humanistic aspects of Euripides' plays, something that is particularly relevant in

today's reality. The production is also, well, fun! It uses poetic images, language and has a fair amount of irony and dark humor. The dark, atmospheric lighting design by [Christina Watanabe](#), the minimalistic but impressive set by Christos Alexandridis, the color palette of the costumes by Marina Gkoumla and the original music by acclaimed Greek musician Costas Baltazanis play a key role in the production, underscoring both the play's poetry and its ironic and critical viewpoint.

### **Can you share with us any of your future plans?**

As I've mentioned above, this May, EGTNY will present the second Greek Play Project NY at NYU, for which I will direct the play *Babies Are Delivered by the Stork*, by M. Reppas and T. Papathanasiou. This is a Holocaust-related story that takes place in my home city of Thessaloniki, Greece during the Second World War.

To learn more about EGTNY, visit their website at [www.egtny.com](http://www.egtny.com). Follow them on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/egtny/>.

Visit the *Hercules* show page: <https://www.abronsartscenter.org/program/abrons-series/>.

You can view the *Hercules: In Search of a Hero* promo video trailer at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUKwWL71dVc>

*Hercules: In Search of a Hero* runs from January 24 - February 10 (opens Jan 26) at the Abrons Arts Center (466 Grand St.) in NYC as part of the @Abrons Series program. For more info about the group you can visit <https://www.egtny.com>.

Photo Credit: Courtesy of Ioanna Katsarou

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