

by Athena Efter



GETTING INTO THE HEART OF THEATER WITH IOANNA KATSAROU

Actor, director, writer, and theater educator Ioanna Katsarou presented her play *Raving Reason* in early December, for one weekend only, as part of the Rough Draft Festival of the LaGuardia Performing Arts Center. The play draws inspiration from Euripides' *The Bacchae* and was an idea that was conceived and developed by Ioanna who collaborated with award-winning Greek playwright, Penny Fylaktaki, who wrote the play. *Raving Reason* is a fascinating exploration into the extreme forces of human nature – the sensual, instinctual world versus the world of reason and rationality. Ioanna brought us a beautifully composed play with subtle projections of multimedia expression, where she, as the director, brings us deep into that world of extremity, where the influence of technology is portrayed as having a profound and invariable affect on our human nature, alienating us from our natural world, suppressing our intuition and feeling, and funneling it into a rigid and rational sphere of existence.

The characters are faced with an inner struggle and conflict. The main cast of characters is centered around a scientific researcher Harmony Hunt, portrayed by

Anthoula Katsimatides, Luna Hunt, Harmony's daughter portrayed by Rebecca Wood, and Evan Hunt, Harmony's rational minded father, played by Demetri Bonaros who can be seen as a metaphor for Pentheus in the story of *The Bacchae*. Along comes the Dionysian element, as projected through Luke Wilcox in the character of Mike, Luna's boyfriend, an almost cult-like figure, drawing her into his irrational world of sensuality and Bacchanalian pleasure to shake up the structure that Harmony and her father Evan work so hard to defy. Additional performances include *Tiresia*, portrayed by Chrysi Sylaidi and *Aisymnetes* by Isaias Badilla.

Ioanna is a graduate of the National Theater of Northern Greece. Though she didn't grow up in a theatrical

family, or a family that had any real interest in the arts, Ioanna's passion for theater began at the age of 16, when her high school history teacher invited her to see the *Killing Game* by Ionesco. This experience was an eye-opener for her. Drawn to the power of theater as an art form, she decided to take on the very challenging entrance exam, with intensive training, and was admitted into the National

Theater of Northern Greece, with only 10 out of 300-400 candidates being accepted annually. She's come a long way since then, as Co-Founder and Co-Artistic Director of Eclipses Group Theater New York (EGTNY), a 501(c)(3) non-profit theater company that explores Greek, world classic and modern plays with the goal of presenting them to American and international audiences through collaborations with universities, schools, and other institutions.

Greta Samsa -
Aktis Aeliou theater, Greece





Greek Play Project NY-New York University

Notable directorial works include *Hercules: In Search of A Hero*, a play that challenges the concept of traditional heroism, *Shelter in Love*, which explores the affects of social isolation on love and creativity, and *Perspectives of War: Ancient Greek Texts in Dialogue with the Modern World*, a performance/worksh

op that was presented as part of the Open Street program in Astoria, Queens. Selections from ancient Greek tragedies, like *The Trojan Women*, and epic historical narratives, like *The Iliad*, were presented in an outdoor space. In 2018, her theater company, *Eclipses Group Theater NY*, collaborated with the Greek Play Project, to bring a series of staged modern Greek play readings in English translation to New York in an effort to promote modern Greek theater and playwrights. With sponsorship from the Hellenic ministry of Culture and Sports, and under the auspices of the Consulate General of Greece in NY, the Alexander S. Onassis Program in Hellenic Studies at NYU, and The National Theater of Greece, The Greek Play Project NY was established for a three-year consecutive run where Ioanna directed *In Chorus*, a play written by Dimitris Dimitraidis, recipient of the Greek National Literature Award in 2003.

Ioanna is more than just a director, merely directing actors. She sets a scene of poetic imagery, imagination, and realism that inspires you to think and question tradition. She is exploratory and often experimental, but not for the sake of being different or experimental. She explores her material with true purpose to bring a message to the forefront, whether its to challenge traditional notions or to reinterpret classical themes in a modern context.

For Ioanna, working with talented actors with whom she has forged relationships over the years, remain at the helm of her artistic vision. For her, theater is where the true core of acting exists. There is an energy and holistic experience that can't be replaced by cinema, where you can do several "takes" to get it right.



International Cairo Festival - Privatopia -LaGuardia Performing Arts Center

No one is yelling out the cues "action or cut", or editing a performance in real time, as would happen in the world of movies and cinema. What you see is what you get right in front of you in seamless fluidity. In theater, you only get one shot for the magic to happen.

For Ioanna, connections with the actors are important-connecting them with the material before them and their experience on stage. She is a big fan of ensemble work, and using the body to express the characters' emotions and feelings. The actors are the main vessel of that expression.

Ioanna and her company *Eclipses Group Theater NY* have received numerous grants awards from the Queens Council on the Arts

and other institutions. She is also a member of the Lincoln Center Directors Lab (2017) and has worked with the American Academy of Dramatic Arts as a theater director in 2020. She was also Co-Founder of the "Aktis Aeliou" Art Theater in Thessaliniki, Greece, which was awarded Best Regional Theater in Greece in 2006 by The Greek Theater Critics Association. She has worked as both a director and actor with several cultural organizations, theater companies and festivals including La MaMa, The Cell Theater, the National Theater of Greece, The Classic Stage Company, the Greek Cultural Center, The National Hellenic Museum in Chicago, and the New Theater of Thessaloniki. Her work has been presented globally in the US, Greece, Canada, and Egypt. In addition to her work as a director, Ioanna has conducted various workshops on Ancient Greek tragedy, acting, and other forms of dramaturgy.



Workshop - the use of mask in Ancient Greek Theater-La Guardia College

We look forward to seeing more of Ioanna's work as she continues to bring us a total eclipse of the art – the art of theater - which remains at the heart of her soul.



Hercules in Search of a Hero