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Holding Out for a Hero: A Conversation with Ioanna Katsarou

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What makes a hero? Ioanna Katsarou's latest play, *Hercules: In Search of a Hero*, mashes up classical Greek drama (Euripides' plays *Hercules* and *Alcesteis*) with a contemporary perspective to explore the meaning of heroism today. She is a founding member of [Eclipses Group Theater New York](#), which aims to be a bridge between Greece and the American theater and examine classic and modern Greek plays. Culturadar blogger Shoshana Greenberg talked to Katsarou about the concepts of masculine and feminine heroism, modern Greek drama and theater culture, and whether Hercules is really that heroic.



Luke Couzens (Hercules)

Culturadar: What led you to explore the idea of heroism as it is thought of today?

Ioanna Katsarou: Heroes have always fascinated regular people—not only the fictional figures in ancient mythologies and action movies but also heroic figures in real life throughout history. People need to have heroes, they need to believe that someone is capable of the impossible, that in a moment when there is no hope, someone will be able to perform a miracle. Powerful interests in politics, the military, show business, sports and so on have exploited this idea of heroism for their own purposes and interests exactly because they know how much influence it has over people's minds. But 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?

CR: Has exploring this idea illuminated anything new about heroism in the past and today?

IK: It's interesting how many similarities we can find. The heroes of ancient Greece were chiefly men of action, adventure and violence, and today's heroes—in sports, entertainment, business, politics, the police, the military and so on—often feature these same qualities. On the other hand, women were usually presented as victims and recipients of masculine violence. Western society's patriarchal structure promotes aggressive behavior of all kinds, including regular military conflict and an economic and political caste system of patricians and plebeians. Our play questions this masculine model, which promotes aggressive competition and the subjugation of foes, and contrasts it with the feminine values of creation, nature and birth.

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Helena Farhi (Megara)

CR: Is it challenging to work with classical characters and yet make them your own?

IK: My biggest concern from the beginning was to conceive what these classical characters represent in our modern world. I needed to find similarities and connections between these characters and our own reality, otherwise this production would have been merely a romantic fairytale with heroes, gods, and supernatural phenomena. Euripides himself didn't want that for his plays, and he always used the mythical material to challenge his own society and reality. I just tried to follow in his footsteps. It was not easy, and it took a lot of research. I worked for almost a year reading books and scholarly essays about both plays, *Alcestis* and *Hercules*. As I was doing my research, I found more and more of the connections I was looking for. For example, Admetos—who is a king in the original play—for me represents the patriarchal political system. He accepts his wife's death—who dies in his place—as a necessity, because he considers his existence more important than anything else. Metaphorically that's how the political system forces us to act: some "others" always have to be sacrificed for the good of our country, our economy, our prosperity. And the "others" who get sacrificed are always the powerless, the oppressed, exactly as women were in Athenian democracy in the 5th century. Meanwhile, Hercules is a violence-producing machine, he kills the "monsters," the enemies of our "civilization," he is the Savior! He is the great hero who serves the needs of our political system, but when you constantly produce violence, eventually violence will come for you.



Luisa Alarcón (Alcestis) and Demetri Bonaros (Admetos)

CR: What do you think the classic Greek plays have to teach and/or show us about our world today?

IK: I believe that classic Greek plays pose a tremendous intellectual and physical challenge. They are archetypes, first forms of the theater art, strongly connected with the philosophical ideas and the political system of Athenian democracy. They don't show and they don't teach. We just try to interpret them, and through this process we pose questions for our existence and our world today.

CR: What led you to start Eclipses Group Theater New York? What does it mean to be a cultural bridge between Greece and the USA?

IK: In the beginning, we created EGTNY as a platform for our first project, which was *The π-Roject*, based on Aeschylus' play *Persians*. Very soon, we realized that there weren't many Greek-American theater organizations that create work not only for the Greek-American community. From the start, the group's concern has been to develop a vivid artistic dialogue between the two countries. We focus on producing plays that have a Greek theme or subject matter but address the broader American audience, too. Greece has a very rich tradition in theater. Ancient Greek plays, for instance, are being performed all over the world, but unfortunately we don't see them very often on the American stage. We, as a Greek-American company, have experimented quite a lot with producing ancient Greek plays in a new context and with a modern perspective. 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.



Luke Couzens (Hercules), Demetri Bonaros (Admetos) and Luisa Alarcón (Alcestis)

CR: What does modern Greek drama look like?

IK: We are very excited that, in collaboration with Dr. Irene Moundraki of the National Theater of Greece, 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 in the spring. Unfortunately, there are not many platforms that promote modern Greek drama abroad, although we have some very accomplished playwrights whose plays are being performed in many countries outside Greece. Modern Greek drama has a variety of styles and influences. Many plays get their inspiration from ancient Greek drama, while others talk about the important sociopolitical matters of the day—immigration, financial crises, political corruption and so on—or deal with human relationships and family situations. One thing that is characteristic of modern Greek drama is that it has very few plays of pure realism except for some light comedies that usually satirize the current Greek reality and target mainly a Greek audience. Greek playwrights are mostly influenced by the strong poetic tradition of Greece and by modern European theater.

CR: What do you notice as a difference between theater in Greece and theater in the United States, particularly NYC?

IK: Last year in Athens more than 1,200 productions were presented, which, as far as I know, is a world record. That shows the strong interest that Greeks have in theater--making and watching it. On the other hand, although you can find some interesting experimental theater projects, most of these productions are of a very low value. Unfortunately, the actors' union in Greece and other unions in theater have not protected the professional theater artists. There is a chaotic situation in Greece where there are no defined lines between amateur and professional actors, directors, producers and so on. In New York we see exactly the opposite situation—too many legal restrictions and regulations.

Another major difference is that in Greece we don't have musical theater—very rarely do we see productions of musicals—while in NY, musical productions are the heart of the city's theater industry.

In Greece we also have two state theaters that are the biggest theater organizations in the country, and municipal theaters that play a major role in the country's theatrical output. In the United States, there are no state theaters, and theater is controlled exclusively by private organizations. You can find pros and cons in both models.

The common element is that doing theater becomes more and more difficult for artists in both countries. I feel that theater in our days, with globalization and a marketing mentality intruding more and more into the arts, loses its freshness and originality, and this reality is a big challenge for young artists all over the world.

Hercules: In Search of a Hero runs through Sunday, February 10th at the [Abrons Art Center](#).

[Watch the promo trailer here.](#)

Photos by Selim Cayligil.

*Shoshana Greenberg writes musicals, plays, and prose. Her musicals include **Lightning Man** (Ars Nova ANT Fest) and **Days of Rage**, and her play **The Rapture of our Teeth** (a parody of Wilder's **The Skin of Our Teeth**) is published on **Indie Theater Now**. She earned her MFA from NYU's Graduate Musical Theater Writing Program after graduating from Barnard College. She also writes about theater for **Women and Hollywood** and **The Huffington Post**.*

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