





# Dionisis Fotopoulos

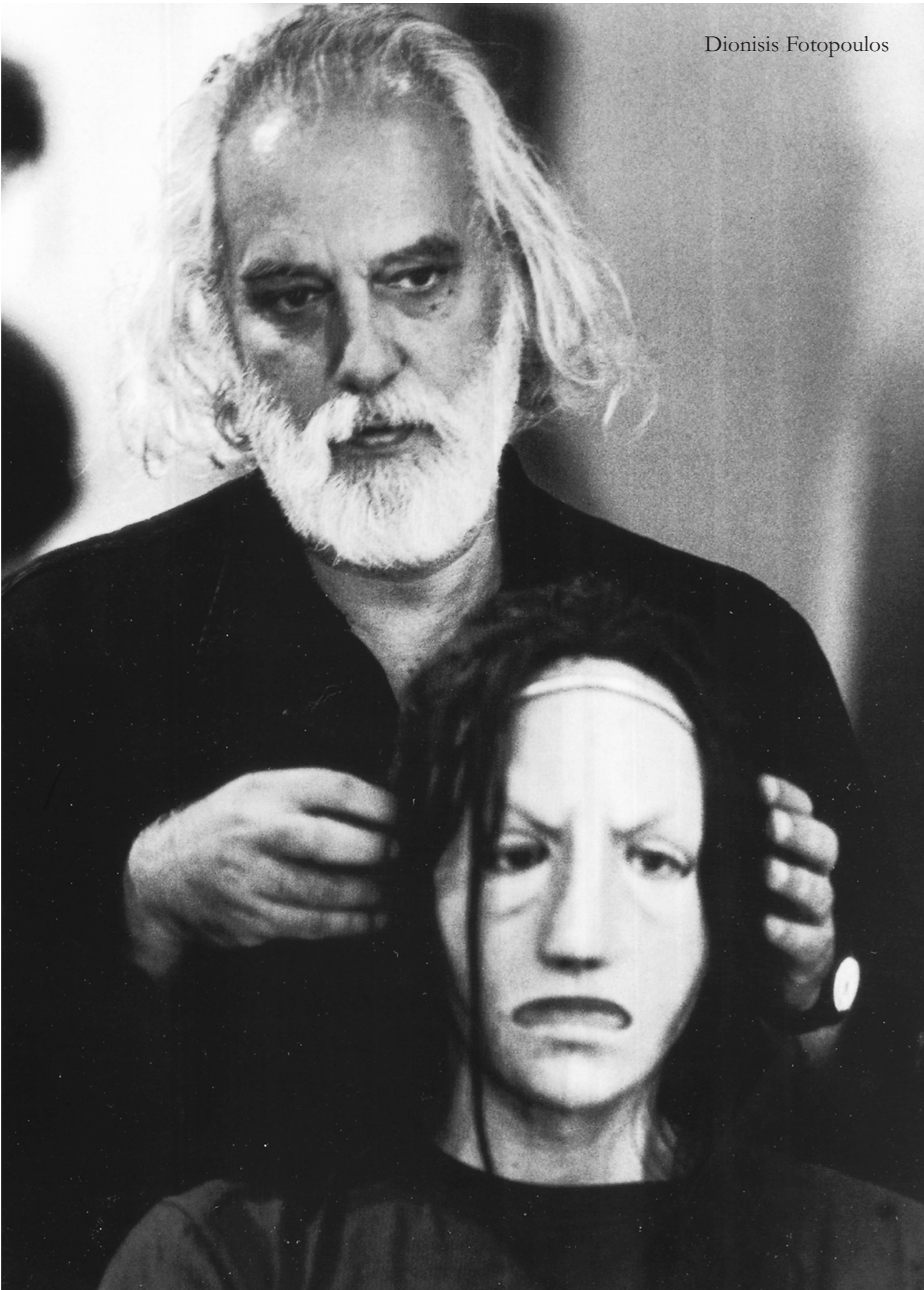
"...Fotopoulos designs sweeping perspectives, projections, sections. He chooses materials with which to represent other materials: paper in order to "build" a Cyclopean wall, chalk will be transformed into marble, iron will simulate a wooden beam. It is as if he possesses the secrets of the wandering masons of old, who traveled in bands throughout Europe and as far as the Balkans and, with their secret formulae for preparing amalgams, built cathedrals, palaces, villas, bridges, theatres, ports, prisons, lighthouses and impenetrable castles in addition to impalpable hunting pavilions. He knows the secrets of naval construction, of silvering, of shoe-making, of forging arms and of encaustic painting. He knows the secrets of embalming, he knows how ebony, agate and basalt are cut, how gold is engraved, how moulds are fashioned. He knows how to prepare copper and zinc alloys for which to create objects in brass. He knows how cloth was cut and sewn for garments in the Egypt of the Pharaohs, in Elizabethan England, in the Baroque and Rococo periods, at the time of the Reformation, in the colonies, in the Imperial style of Mexico. He knows how the shoulders are padded on the cloaks worn by the Pope in Rome and how they differed from those of the Russian Patriarch. He knows what kind of swords Puskin brandished in his fatal duel and which type of pistol Hedda Gabler seized in order to commit suicide. He knows how the legs on a Louis XV table are fashioned as are those of a table by refugees in Smyrna. Do these examples provide sufficient proof that the "vision of action" of theatre is not totally "devoid of art"? They certainly do, and it should be noted that Fotopoulos is neither an art historian nor an historian of taste, nor an historian of fashion. Fotopoulos is a poet and, like all poets, absorbs an enormous amount of knowledge and experience on which he then elaborates, transforms, distorts and often destroys in his work, acting, as happens in the mechanisms of a dream, as creator of a new world borne out of the residue of the world of old..."

**Kostas Georgousopoulos**

*This passage was taken from the catalogue of the exhibition on Dionisis Fotopoulos organized by the Unione dei Teatri d'Europa and curated by Giorgio Ursini Ursic.*



Dionisis Fotopoulos



# Conversation with Dionisis Fotopoulos

by Giorgio Ursini Ursic

*An exclusive interview with the scenographer Dionisis Fotopoulos, a major Greek artist whose work has a distinct international bias.*

*H*ow would you explain to a foreigner, who is less knowledgeable about your sets, the work you do for a theatrical representation?  
I'd like to answer with Jerzy Grotowski's phrase, from "You Are Someone's Child"  
"...I don't work to write texts, but to enlarge this island of freedom that I carry within."

What authors would you like to accent today?  
Eschilus, Marlow, Shakespeare, Beckett and H. Miller.

And what directors would you accent?  
Koun, for his reading of Aristophanis; Volonakis because he entered within the mysterious folds of the texts; Ronconi for his metaphysical outlook and his transposing of dreams to reality, Stein for his well-organized thought, his wonderful analysis of classical texts, for his capacity of realizing dreams; Hall for his professional know-how and his musical use of English. Then there are new directors that have quite a few of these qualities and they'll surprise us with them in the future.

What does Fotopoulos, the scenographer, do while collaborating with such different types of directors, do you use different systems?

A good scenographer must have different self-expression capacities...The first is finding one's own manner of expression, linked to the text, and the second is to understand the director's thoughts and coordinate oneself along this line, in order to coincide with him as much as possible. The work involves personal research and is not without anxiety in order to find the right wavelength, the right manner of collaborating.



John Bartol in **TANTALUS**  
Direction Sir Peter Hall - Hedward Hall  
Royal Shakespeare Company, Denver 2000

What does a director normally do: give orders, demand results, or ask for further explanations?

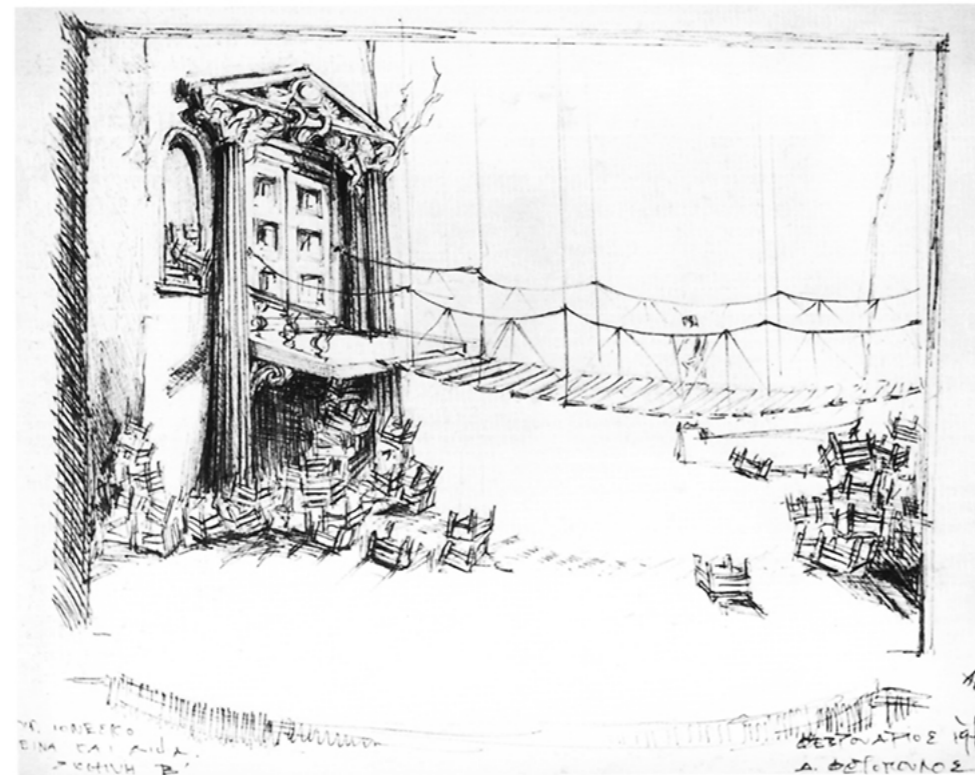
A good director explains his thoughts, his anxiety and if this coincides with your comprehension, you try to find images that express this. The directors I know try to use the scenographer's vision without giving orders. If your dreams and vision vary, it's better not to work together.

Do you recognize yourself in your colleagues or do you feel isolated?

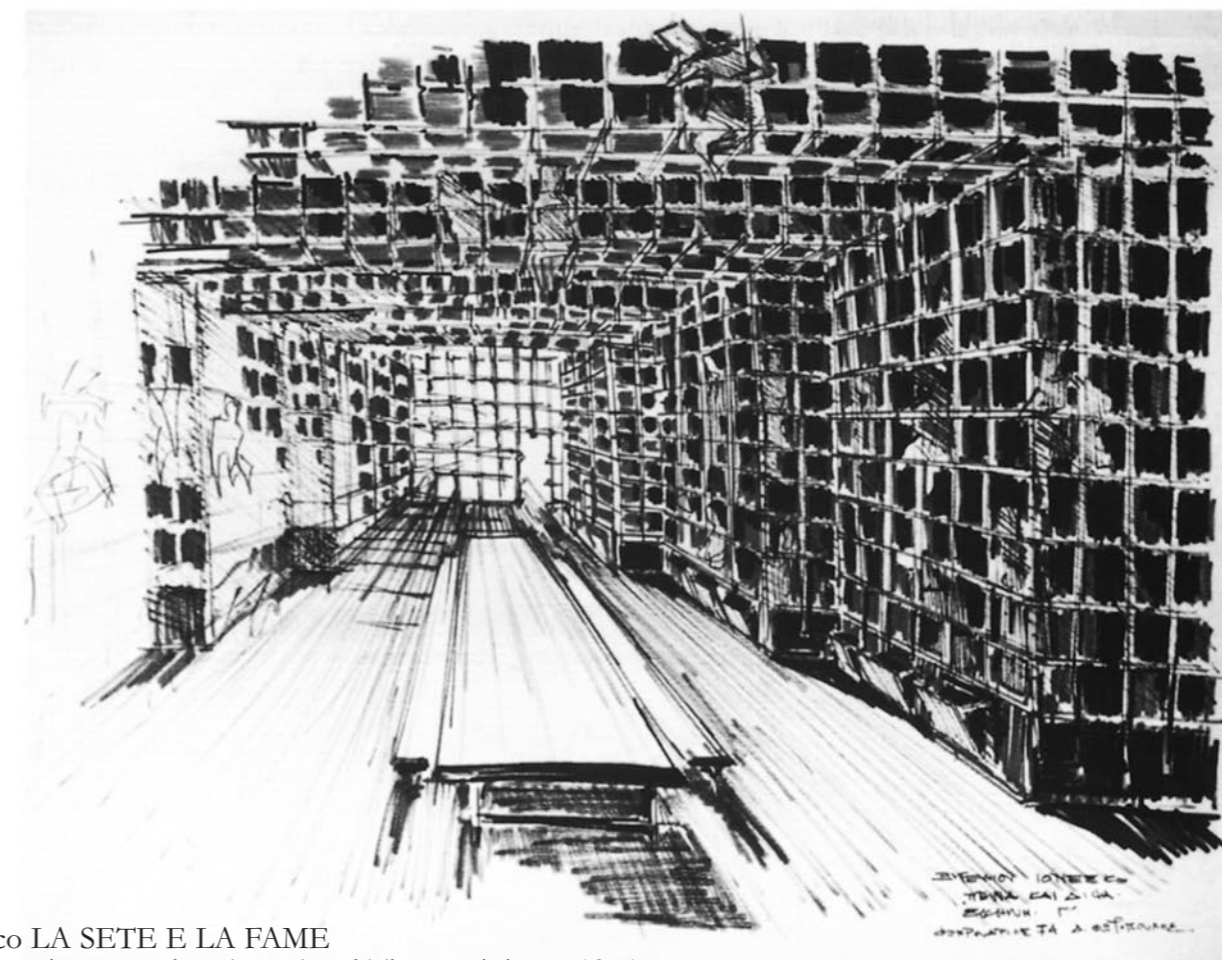
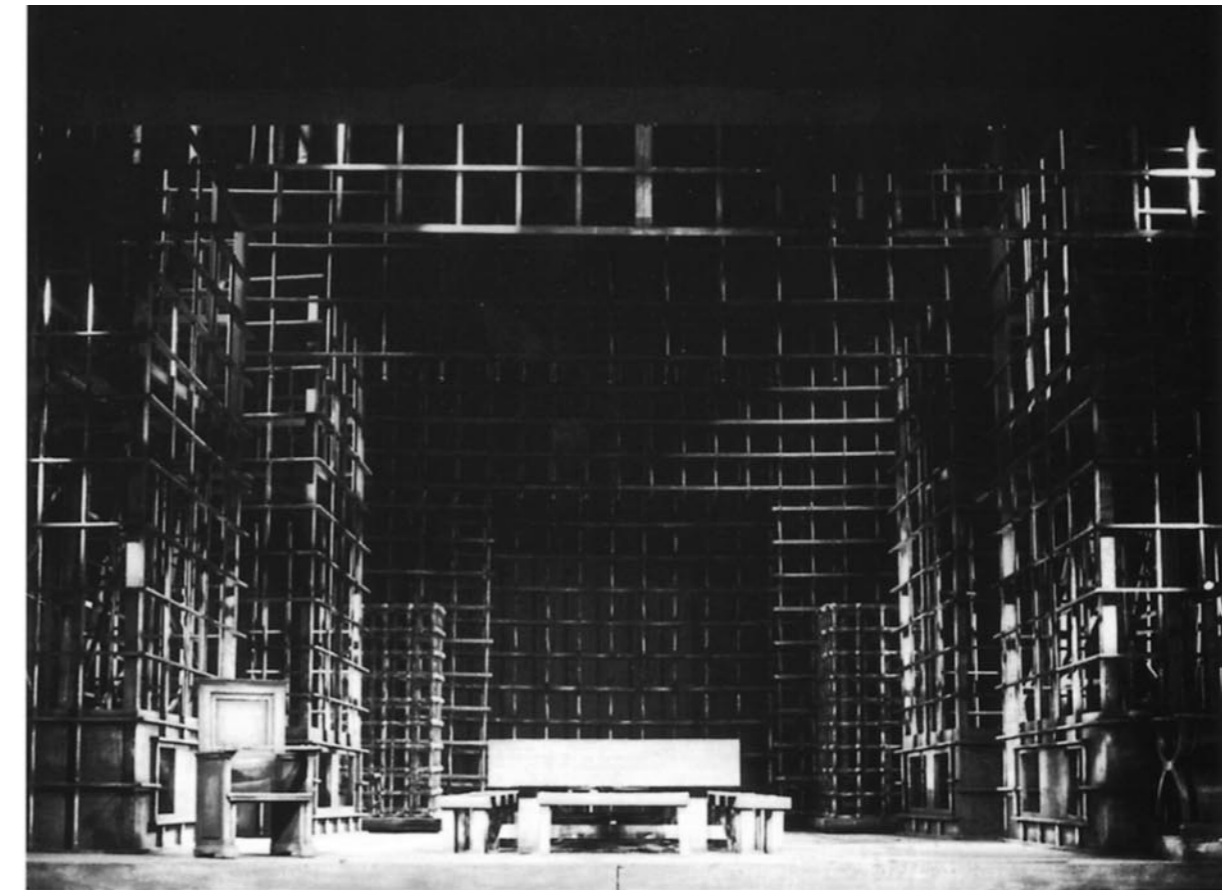
I don't think I belong to a certain group or style of scenographers; I have many scenographer friends whom I admire and I've learned things from them, but we live in different worlds and as the years pass and we get to know each other better, the worlds we are building are ever more distant.

You spoke on several occasions about theatre artisans, of the manual skills of the workshop, an integral part of a stage production. You have often referred to yourself as an artisan. Is this so?

I don't know if I can be considered an artisan, I know that I need to communicate with materials often, it's impossible not to have direct contact with materials, for example when I create masks or objects for theatre, as I believe my definitive perception of the object is influenced by direct contact with the material. The object's final details, those details that can be neither described nor foreseen by the project, grow from the vibrations of the hands and heart upon the material. Another typical factor of your work enters into play here: the choice of materials. Even if I don't work with the computer or other electronic means, I am seduced by the materials, from the most ancient to today's most modern materials, which are capable of creating illusions through distance and the lights; this is another game that theatre gives you the possibility of experimenting with. You can use a material in a totally different manner than its original aspect. Materials contain multiple worlds within themselves. Even if I don't use technology for the project, I like to use technology on the set. Technology offers you enormous possibilities of creating new worlds, you just have to find the means to utilize it.



Eugène Ionesco LA SETE E LA FAME  
Direction Spyros A. Evangelatosi. National Theatre Athens, 1974



Eugène Ionesco LA SETE E LA FAME  
Direction Spyros A. Evangelatosi. National Theatre Athens, 1974

**Your sets are often elements that tell a story on their own. Is this so?**

My sets portray images that I build up from the text. While reading a text, I let my dreams wander next to the images that the text creates within me. If my dreams have a world of their own, this is born from the text itself. The problem is amalgamating the many elements, both physical and imaginary ones. Certain sets of mine tell the story of their own world, also an actor in front of a black curtain, reading a text, recounts his own world. When these worlds meet with the direction and the elements of the scene, they create a stronger, more complete world in the soul of the spectator.

**Tell me how an image is created. Is there a technique?**

The image is born from a dream, one needs to learn how to dream and not be afraid of nightmares.

**Let's jump to another area. You worked on many sets for classical texts: you yourself,**

**in these circumstances, have underlined that you had much freedom of movement and imagination. Then you have also designed sets for authors such as Ionesco, Kroetz, or Pinter: or rather, authors that almost obsessively define the space where the action occurs. What is the difference between these different experiences?**

That is, if such a difference exists. Possibly, even if in classical texts the spaces are freer, while modern authors describe the scene more precisely; I think that the initial freedom is there for both. Through the direction, the rhythms and the text's music, you have to discover the labyrinth that you'd like to shine light upon. You have to find a way of translating the meaning of the text into an image.

**What relationship do you have with Epidaurus?**

Come here one day, at sunset, to my terrace facing the sea, or come in the morning, at sunrise, to have a swim, on the shoals in front of the

house and you'll understand immediately why I live at Epidaurus. If you come to the theatre to follow the rehearsals and you listen to the ancient texts and let yourself be transported by them, you'll feel the hidden lines of the theatre that encounter nature....after 2000 years of life, you'll understand the dimension that the notion of theatre can take outside of schools, outside of trends, beyond any expressive means. Beyond directing, even. Theatre's sense presents itself without a mask. A theatre that can accept even the most modern sets, like the most classical ones, it's really important to be sincere, and look each other in the eyes.

**Why do you use masks so often (in almost every work)?**

I think that people don't see masks just in ancient theatre, there are roles in theatre where I think the actor has to free themselves from their own nature and let their body flow freely, free from facial expressions and on the other hand, the spectator, too, can let his eyes travel over a

sculpture, they can dream more freely. I think that a mask helps the actor find the means of expression to come closer to sacredness and feel like a small god. Don't you think this is its aim?

**Why is it so important for you to create both the costumes and the sets?**

And who wouldn't want to create a total visual world when working on a drama?

**What is your relationship with the plastic arts and painting?**

My first studies were painting and sculpture, I frequented the Athens Fine Arts Academy and this is just one more reason to work with masks. As you can understand, this formation showed me a way to see and explain life. On the other hand, wasn't the beginning of the world an image?

**Why did you choose to work full-time in theatre and not, for example, in cinema?**

I worked on about 45 films, some with thousands of costumes, which is more than a few.

Maybe cinema leaves a trace of your work in time, but you don't have that live breath of the actor and the magic of that moment in theatre.

**What is the difference between production design for a work of prose and one for lyric opera?**

I think that in lyric opera, there is already a direction: that of the music. You have to compare the two directions, that of the music and that of the director.

**How did Fotopoulos, the scenographer, start his career?**

With a love story.

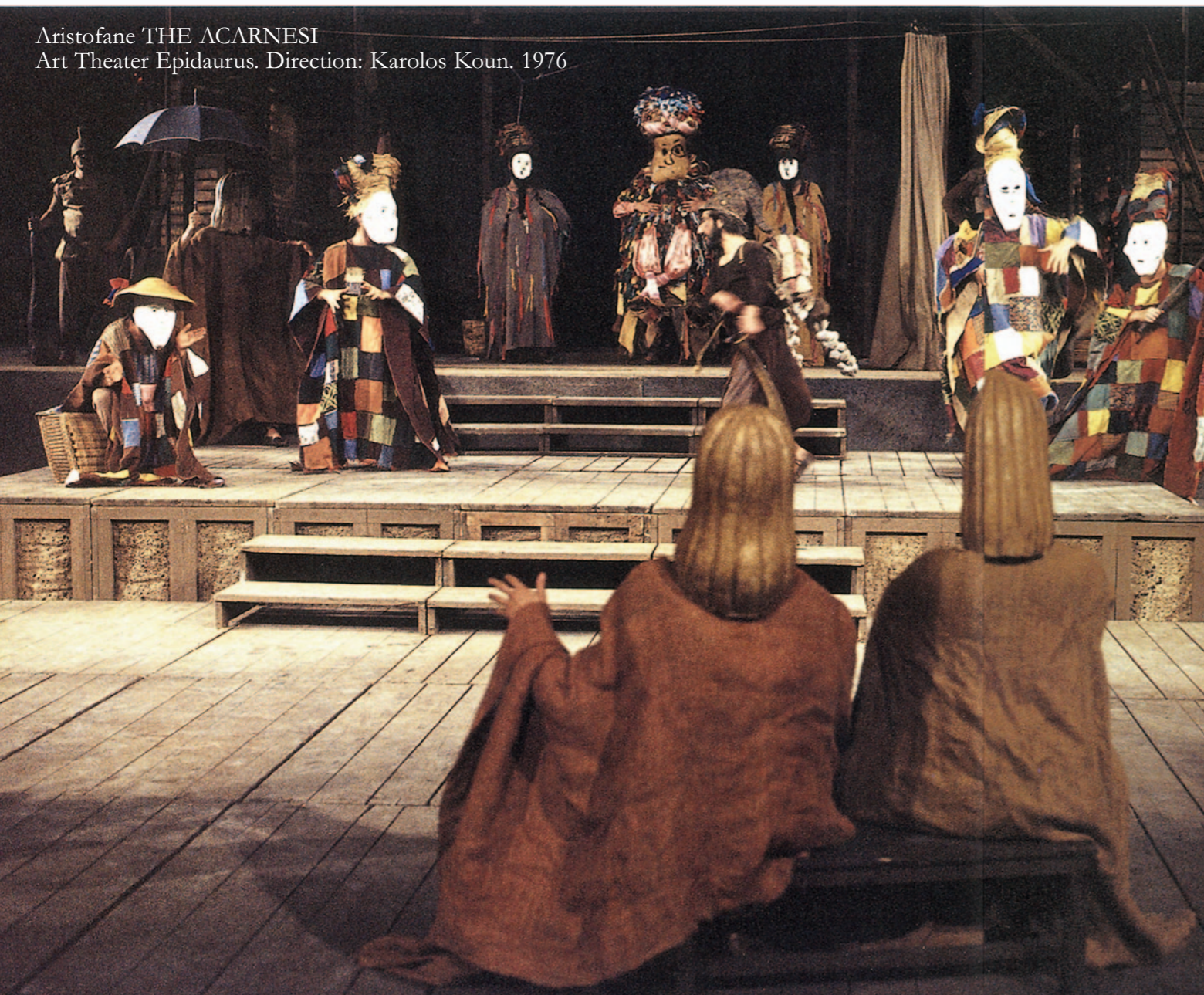
**What significance does color have in your sets, it certainly isn't a secondary element. Isn't it natural for someone that has studied color to have both color and non-color in their vocabulary, as an important element of the design?**

In productions where there doesn't seem to be

any color, you have to expect that the color will arrive sooner or later or else search for the hidden color.

**Why don't you work much in other countries?**

I think that a person's esthetics form with time, between the forms and the sunsets that their ancestors enjoyed, between the variations in landscape, through the search for art, through anxieties and revolutions, through the poems and perfumes of the air. Well, I'd say that if the "being" we call God decides to have you live in a place where you can walk under a light sprinkling of rain within the cavea of the theatre at Dyonissus, where theatre was born, or you can drink your coffee in front of the Acropolis, well, then...not because all this erases all the world's problems that press on you everyday, but because it gives you a certain expansive breath and it makes you sweetly melancholy. I would be a fool if I decided to ignore it.



Aristofane THE ACARNESI  
Art Theater Epidaurus. Direction: Karolos Koun. 1976



Sofocle. THE OEDIPUS PLAYS: OEDIPUS REX-OEDIPUS AT COLONUS  
Royal National Theatre, London. Direction: Sir Peter Hall. 1996



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