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GREEK NATIONAL OPERA 2021—22

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

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HELLENIC REPUBLIC
Ministry of Culture and Sports

7 DEATHS OF MARIA CALLAS



An opera project by **Marina Abramović**

Music by **Marko Nikodijević**

and scenes from operas by Verdi, Puccini, Bizet,
Donizetti and Bellini

WORLD PREMIERE

Bayerische Staatsoper — 1 September 2020

GREEK PREMIERE

MUSIC AND PERFORMING ARTS CYCLE

A co-production of the Greek National Opera, the Bayerische Staatsoper (Munich), the Deutsche Oper Berlin, the Opéra national de Paris and the Teatro di San Carlo (Naples)

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Stavros Niarchos Hall of the Greek National Opera
Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center

OPENING NIGHT

24 September 2021

Performing Death between Life and Myth

— Francesco Marzano

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How should we interpret Marina Abramović's presence on the stage throughout the first seven scenes of the opera project *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*? We do not know in which role she has been lying there (as Maria Callas or as herself, sleeping or already dead), nor do we know the meaning of her alleged awakening in the eighth and last scene, *Maria Callas dies of a broken heart* ("Am I sleeping?" asks the voice-over). Whether it is meant to be a dreamlike evocation of Callas' last day, or a representation of the intermediate condition between life and death, in which the dying person sees herself from outside, we do clearly see elements from two biographies converging. The detailed reconstruction of Callas' apartment and the remembrance of her close acquaintances, evoked by the stream of consciousness of the voice-over (her maid Bruna, her ex-husband Meneghini, Bernstein, Zefirelli, Pasolini...), merge with the references to other people relevant for Abramović: the ex-husband, Paolo Canevari, through the photograph that she chooses and puts on the table, but also Willem Dafoe, as artistic partner, as well as fictional symbol for lover, through the reuse of the gold sequin dress, that we already saw in the seventh death-scene (*Norma goes into fire*). This dialectical process culminates in an identification of Marina and Maria in the very last sequence, the pantomime on the aria *Casta diva* from *Norma*, which was Maria Callas' flagship-role. The celebration and

process of mythologisation of Maria Callas, of which the entire opera project *7 Deaths* consists, reaches its fulfilment in this final apotheosis, which is reinforced by the mystical imagery of resurrection / eternalisation (Abramović walking into the light coming from the window) and of the creative power of the *logos* (Callas' voice resonating in the end).

Interestingly, we see Callas-Abramović dying in the videos on-screen seven times, but the death of Maria Callas in the final scene is not represented, as if it were an irrepresentable and “obscene” event, which has to take place “off-stage” (*obskené*), like in the Greek tragedy. The dramatic destiny of the seven heroines, which Callas interpreted over and over in theatre, is absorbed, as in an oneiric vision, by the body which had been lying in the bed throughout the entire duration of *7 Deaths*, but is redeemed in the end and sublimated in a divine picture of the immortal opera “diva”, Maria Callas, while we hear from her own vocal performance of *Casta diva*, the prayer to the Moon: “Chaste goddess... Temper the daring zeal of the burning hearts... Spread on earth the peace that you make reign in heaven”.

Marina Abramović's work has always been a meditation on death. She often uses her performances as a way of exorcising the fear of death: they are concrete

signs against the disappearance of her physical presence. Even though, or rather, precisely *because* she is terrified by the idea of death, she always tries to overcome her limits and fears. As she writes in her autobiography, she is “thrilled by the unknown, by the idea of taking risks”. As early as the 1970s, she had considered art as “a matter of life and death”, as she affirms, quoting Bruce Nauman. The strength of most of her works is derived, indeed, from her confrontation with those basic human fears of pain, of suffering and of death (which, unlike joy, stimulate creativity) – all themes that shock, disorient, yet, at the same time attract and “train” the audience emotionally, in full accordance with the “aesthetics of risk” of which the theorist of the *Postdramatic Theatre* Hans-Thies Lehmann writes.

Of the many episodes in her life, in which Marina Abramović was confronted with death, the funeral of her dear friend, Susan Sontag, in 2004, triggered further reflections:

I’ve always believed death should be a celebration. Because you’re entering a new place, a new state. You’re making a major passage. The Sufis say, “Life is a dream and death is waking up”.

That’s the moment when Marina Abramović got the idea of planning her funeral as a “going-away party” and a “celebration of all the things I had done, and of my leaving for a new place”. Her funeral is supposed to be her last performance, her “final piece”. The celebration will take place in New York, but there will be three graves, in the three places, in which she lived longest: Belgrade, Amsterdam and New York. Nobody will know in which of these graves her body

will actually rest. But in order to see her own death, at least on a stage, Marina Abramović already acted it under the direction of Robert Wilson in the piece *The Life and Death of Marina Abramović*, premiered in 2011. Again, an exorcism of her fear of death, as she affirms:

I put death in my work very often, and I read a lot about dying. I think it's crucial to include death in your life, to think about death every single day. The idea of being permanent is so wrong. We have to understand that death can appear at any moment, and being ready is essential.

This confrontation with death is, hence, programmatically part of the last two points in Marina Abramović's *An Artist's Life Manifesto*:

Different death scenarios:

- An artist has to be aware of his own mortality.
- For an artist, it is not only important how he lives his life but also how he dies.
- An artist should look at the symbols of his work for the signs of different death scenarios.
- An artist should die consciously without fear.

Different funeral scenarios:

- An artist should give instructions before his funeral so that everything is done the way he wants it.
- The funeral is the artist's last art piece before leaving.

Abramović's opera project *7 Deaths*, with its more than 30 years long gestation since the original idea of the video piece *How to Die*, lies at the peak of the

reflection on the theme of death, a cornerstone of her works. Not only is death the protagonist here in terms of contents, with the aestheticised representation of the deaths of opera heroines and Callas herself, but it also has an impact on the way we perceive both the portrayed and the portraying artists – Callas and Abramović, whose images are fused by virtue of a process of identification that the latter undergoes.

Besides the physical resemblance (compare Callas' portrait by Cecil Beaton, 1957, with the picture of Abramović taken by René Habermacher as an homage to Callas, 2011), the two women share a similar balance between strength and vulnerability: “When I perform, the most important thing is that half of my brain is in complete control and the other part of the brain is totally loose” – so reads a quote by Callas that Abramović often uses to explain the magic of a good performance.

Showing fragility, exposing the body, opening to risk – herein lies the greatest similarity between Maria and Marina:

The closest link for me –the emotional link– is her mix of extreme strength and extreme fragility at the same time. I see this in me and I see it in Callas,

affirmed Abramović. Maria Callas was, to be sure, at her best in those roles that show the most dramatic destinies (agony, suicide, madness...) and that show internal conflicts. Vulnerability also creates a very powerful connection with the audience. By either showing the drama of the heroines as a mirrored image of her private life (Callas), or by painfully exploring the limits of the human condition (Abramović), both

women win empathy and trust from the audience. The spectators are, in both cases, overwhelmed by the aesthetic formalisation of intense emotions, which leads to a process of “transference” –where the artist serves as a “filter” or a “mirror”– and pushes the audience, as well, to its emotional and cognitive borders. Or, more precisely, to quote Erika Fischer-Lichte, both artists manage to transform those borders (*Grenzen*) into thresholds (*Schwellen*), which is ultimately the goal of the aesthetics of the performative – they realise with their works and with their presence an “art of passage” (*Kunst des Übergangs*), and invite the audience to take their performances (*Aufführungen*) “both as life itself and as its model”.

If Abramović programmatically affirms “My work and my life are so connected”, Callas, in turn, then, considered her artistic work as being “endless” – in unison with her life, as she affirmed in an interview:

Our work is timeless. After the rehearsals, back at home, alone in the night, I concentrated and started the real creation. Our destiny is to work endlessly. Art is so huge that the more you know, the more you realise you know nothing.

By virtue of this total dedication to art, to this holistic experience that makes life and art converge, to gradually reducing and eliminating the distinction between private and artistic life, one could venture to include Maria Callas, retrospectively, as well, within the realm of the performance art.

A side effect of this symbiosis between public and private life is, to be sure, the process of mythologising that both Callas and Abramović undergo. A process that transforms the two women into icons – the

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quintessence, respectively, of opera and performance art. On one hand, it is something controlled by the artists, themselves. One can think of Callas, who the poet Eugenio Montale describes as a "character" deliberately living, also, out of the theatre and who could turn her flaws into virtues (which is the key to becoming a "diva"), or one can think of Abramović's often repeated anecdotes and memories from her life which she quotes to explain her works, turning her stories into a manner of exegetical parables in this regard. On the other hand, however, this mythology around the two women fosters an individual and unpredictable life, as the queer reception of Callas or the sudden interest for performance art shown by Lady Gaga's young fans – caused by the fascination of the pop star in Abramović's work, demonstrate, just to name two examples. Callas and Abramović reach an increasingly large and diverse public. One could say that they talk to masses.

This fertile ground for identification, meditation on pain and life, catharsis and spirituality they both offer, together with the aforementioned tendency to let artistic and private life coincide – up until the completion of the (at least worldly) artistic path with the apogee of death – are all elements that contribute to making both Maria and Marina icons, in a partially controlled and partially autonomous process of mythologisation.

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