


Nafplion Blues: Prison Stories. *The Prisons of Nafplion as Brutal Scenographies*

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Abstract: The prison sites and their timeless presence in the city of Nafplion were the starting point for two workshops for students of the University of the Peloponnese. The result of these workshops titled *Nafplion Blues: Prison Stories*, was presented in the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space 2023 as part of the Greek student exhibition. Students of the module “Performance and space” created the site-specific performance *Listen-Watch-Be Silent* in which performers and spectators participated in a pilgrimage procession to former prison sites in Nafplion. The module “Social Theatre” was held at the Agricultural Prison of Tiryns. After a series of theatre workshops, the inmates and the students presented the devised performance *The Journeys of the Potato, from Andes to Tiryns: Legends and Truths* to only two spectators and the prison guards. In the present paper, the authors focus on the use of the prison – in the present and in the past – as performance space. Prisons function as the absolute dystopian places that oscillate between private and public space: from the Agricultural Prison of Tiryns’ hermetically sealed, private space to the open, public space of the historic city of Nafplion,

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where the buildings that once housed prisons are scattered throughout the city. In this type of found spaces, the spectators and the performers are *moved* both emotionally and physically. Through the brutality emitted by the real substance of the sites, the “scenographic city” reveals stories and traumas, while inviting spectators and creators to assume social and political responsibility.

Keywords: performance space, found space, public space, private space, site-specific performance, social theatre.

Nafplion, The Prison-City as Brutal Scenography

Nafplion has a long history of hosting numerous prisons within its walls, from the early 19th century until most part of the 20th century. These prisons occupied buildings and sites that have significant historical importance today, such as the Palamidi fortress⁴ (Fig.1), the Vouleftikon⁵ (Fig.2), the Bourtzi islet⁶ (Fig.3), and the fortress of Acronafplia⁷ (Fig.4), where a notorious political prison was housed until the mid-1960s. Nowadays, two prisons continue to operate just outside the city: the Judicial Prison of Nafplion and the Agricultural Prison of Tiryns.

However, despite the fact that Nafplion had been a city of prisons for almost two centuries, its inhabitants chose to ignore their presence, even though the prison buildings held a dominant place in the city. There was a lot of pain, distress, and misery hidden between the high prison walls, echoing the state’s difficult and complex history from the turbulent early days of its formation, following the Greek Revolution of 1821, to the sociopolitical crises of most part of the 20th century. Nowadays, the city has become a tourist destination, with the reputation of being “the most romantic city of Greece”. Yet, the hordes of visitors seem to ignore its troubled past.

⁴ Built on the hill that dominates Nafplion during the 2nd Venetian rule, the heavily fortified Palamidi castle was considered impregnable.

⁵ Originally built as a mosque during the 2nd Turkish occupation, the Vouleftikon (parliament building) is mainly known for housing the first Greek Parliament between 1825 and 1826.

⁶ Bourtzi is a fortress islet, initially built during the 1st Venetian occupation to protect the town’s harbour.

⁷ The rocky peninsula of Acronauplia – the oldest of Nafplion’s three castles – comprises the town’s walled settlement from prehistoric times.



Fig.1: Cross gazes: The prisoners of Palamidi receive the townsmen of Nafplion, who mount up to the fortress of Palamidi to buy little wood handmade objects from the prisoners. © Frédéric Boissonnas, 1910. David Baud-Dovy and Fred Boissonnas, *En Grèce par Monts et par Vaux* (Genève, Athènes : Fred. Boissonnas & Co [et] Const. Eleftheroudakis, 1910).

Exposing the historical, social and political meaning of these buildings and the city itself, on the one hand, and questioning the penitentiary system then and now, on the other hand, provided the starting point for two distinct workshops for undergraduate students in the Department of Performing and Digital Arts of the University of the Peloponnese.

The outcome was two distinct performances: a promenade performance in the old prisons of Nafplion, and a devised play performed by students and prisoners at the Agricultural Prison of Tiryns. Both projects were presented in the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space 2023 as part of the Greek student exhibition, under the title *Nafplion Blues: Prison Stories*. In the present article, the authors share their experience as the workshop instructors and focus on the use of the prison – in the present and in the past – as performance space. More specifically, the authors aim to underpin how prisons oscillate between public and private space, and thus demonstrate how this oscillation shaped the qualities of each performance.



Fig. 2: The prison at Vouleftikon: the prisoners are huddled in front of the open windows, looking at the busy central Syntagma Square. « Nauplie. Ancienne église aujourd’hui prison ». Photographer and donator: Hubert Vaffier, before 1892.

Collection Gallica bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France



Fig. 3: The Bourtzi islet. Nafplio, Bourtzi Castle. Photographic copy from a glass plate of Fred Boissonnas, c. 1903-1923, Museum of Photography in Thessaloniki. Source: National Historical Museum. Nafplio, Bourtzi Castle. Photographic copy from a glass plate of Fred Boissonnas, c. 1903-1923. The glass plate is at the Museum of Photography in Thessaloniki. (nhmuseum.gr)



Fig. 4: The old Venetian building (now demolished) at the top of hill, housed the political prison of Acronafplia. Unknown photographer and date taken. Source: Αργολική Αρχαιακή Βιβλιοθήκη Ιστορίας και Πολιτισμού (The Argolikos Archival Library of History and Culture). Οι φυλακές της Ακροναυπλίας. | ΑΡΓΟΛΙΚΗ ΑΡΧΕΙΑΚΗ ΒΙΒΛΙΟΘΗΚΗ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΣΜΟΥ (argolikivivliothiki.gr)

Prisons Then and Now - Oscillating Between Public and Private Space

The overlapping of an open, accessible public space and an enclosed, secluded private space within the prison site is evident in the old photographs of the prison sites of Palamidi (Fig. 1) and Vouleftikon (Fig. 2). In both photographs prisoners are connected to the outside world through their distant contact with the city's inhabitants. In the first case (Fig. 1), the prisoners of Palamidi receive the townsmen of Nafplion, who mount nearly a thousand steps up to the fortress of Palamidi to buy little wood handmade objects from the prisoners. The photographer Frédéric Boissonnas has captured the moment in which the convicts hold some long wooden sticks with their petty merchandise hanging from them. They direct them to the townsmen who stand on the rampart overlooking the prison's recreation ground. The dynamic of the photograph is shaped by the direction of the prisoners' intent looks, aiming at their visitors that are standing above them at a distance.

In the second instance (Fig. 2), the photograph shows the Vouleftikon building, then serving as a prison for sentences for petty offences. While in the foreground we see locals posing in front of the camera, in the background one can distinguish the prisoners huddled in front of the open windows, looking at the busy central Syntagma Square facing the prison building.

Through the gazes between convicts and free men crossing paths, one can detect this interpenetration of public and private space that is specific to prisons located within the city limits. These two extreme poles of confinement, on the one hand, and free circulation, on the other, collide through the everyday eye contact between convicts and passers-by, thus testifying a harsh encounter between the inaccessibility and accessibility of both space and freedom.

Indeed, a close look at the various testimonies offered by prisoners and visitors at the time when the prisons functioned in Nafplion, testified to this constant cross gaze between the lively city and the enclosed prison spaces. On the creative side, the varying proportions of publicness and privateness of each prison site were utilised in the performances, in terms of dramaturgy and audience participation. The creative teams played with these dosages and with how space may provide a politically and socially charged dramaturgy related to the sites' own histories.

Likewise, the dosages of audience presence (or absence) and their participation were related to the space's publicness or privateness. In this paper we use our empirical approach as the workshop instructors and performance creators to tackle the two distinct student projects: we will first present the project *The Journeys of the Potato, from Andes to Tiryns: Legends and Truths* that was created collaboratively by the students and the prisoners at the Agricultural Prison of Tiryns, outside Nafplion. Second, we will offer an account of the promenade site-specific performance *Listen-Watch-Be Silent* that took place around the historical part of the city of Nafplion. In both projects we will address the different ways in which the specificity of space in the past and present prison sites shaped the final performances.

The Journeys of The Potato, From Andes to Tiryns: Legends and Truths.

The Dramaturgy of The Site and the Use of the Agricultural Prison of Tiryns as Performance Space

The Agricultural Prison presents a private space *par excellence*, when the prison door is shut. However, the prisoners' everyday life is constantly under surveillance, and, therefore, the interior of the prison constitutes a public space for prisoners locked inside a private space. Due to the inaccessibility of the prison to outside visitors, the performance was presented to only one guest; the other spectators were the prison's director, and the guards, thus ensuring surveillance and control.

The performance was titled *The Journeys of the Potato, from Andes to Tiryns: Legends and Truths* and was a spiritual journey in time and space through the story of the travels of the potato, from the Andes through Europe and finally, Greece. The reason for placing the potato at the centre of the narrative had to do with the past use of the prison site.

In fact, the Agricultural Prison is standing at the very same spot where, around 1830, the first Governor of modern Greece, Ioannis Kapodistrias, founded the new state's first Agricultural School of Tiryns (Fig. 5). Kapodistrias is known to have introduced potato cultivation in Greece as soon as he

arrived to take office, in order to feed the starving population. Some of the first cultivations of potatoes in Greece took place at the Agricultural School, and continue to be performed by the farmer-prisoners nowadays; therefore, agricultural work has been ongoing at Tiryns for almost two centuries.



Fig. 5: Historical landmarks used in continuity until the present day: the neoclassical building that was initially the governor Ioannis Kapodistrias' summer residency (ca. 1830) and later used as the headquarters of the first Agricultural School of Greece, now houses the Administration office of the Agricultural Prison of Tiryns. Unknown photographer and date taken. Collection of the Προοδευτικός Σύλλογος Ναυπλίου «Ο Παλαμήδης» (The Nauplian *Progressive* Association, "Palamidis")

Source: Αργολική Αρχαιακή Βιβλιοθήκη Ιστορίας και Πολιτισμού (The Argolikos Archival Library of History and Culture). Αγροτικές Φυλακές Τίρυνθας | ΑΡΓΟΛΙΚΗ ΑΡΧΕΙΑΚΗ ΒΙΒΛΙΟΘΗΚΗ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΣΜΟΥ (argolikivivliothiki.gr)

The venue where the workshops and the performance took place was a common event area, which was reminiscent of the assembly halls of schools. The shape of the room was rectangular, with wooden benches placed against the wall and a small theatre stage. We hardly used this stage at all, except during one of our initial meetings to present some improvisations by the different groups.

Abandoning the theatre stage, we created our own theatre space, a “place” that we would all create together at the beginning of every session. By moving the wooden benches from the walls to the centre of the room we formed a – not at all strict – square shape (Fig. 6). Everything that happened – storytelling, singing, movement, games – took place within this space, created by the participants themselves. This collaborative spatial arrangement was crucial in empowering the group, cultivating trust, fostering cooperation for a common purpose and, most importantly, creating a sense of community – one that differed from the prison community, because it included students in its composition. In this direction, it is indicative to say that, at the beginning, inmates and students chose to sit on separate benches, due to an initial mutual reluctance between the two groups; however, this norm was gradually abandoned.



Fig. 6: The Agricultural Prison of Tiryns. Inmates, students, the workshop instructors and the prison’s director at the end of the performance. Photographer: the prison’s guard.

The shape created by the arrangement of the benches was a miniature of the prison building itself. Inside the shape, a “courtyard” had been created, corresponding to the enclosed courtyard of the prison – one of the common

prison areas – which allows the relatively free activity and coexistence of the inmates and their engagement in potential hobbies to take place. This idea followed the “European Compendium of good practices for theatre in prison (PICP – The prison, from penal institute to cultural place)”, which states that “The space has to be communicative and in a dialectic relationship with the identity of the place surrounding it and representing the context in which it is located otherwise it will result as a ‘foreign body’⁸”. In this way, we tried to create a *heterotopia* (the dramatic space) within another *heterotopia*, which is the prison, in the sense that Michel Foucault gives to this notion⁹. We tried, in other words, to create a real space that exists in a real society, and which is inhabited in a different way from the rest of society, while simultaneously being connected and isolated from it.

Finally, our scenic choices were inevitably affected by the various restrictions that accompany the admission of visitors to detention centres. One of these restrictions concerned entering specific types of objects inside the prison. We thus decided to have only two musical instruments (a percussion instrument and a harmonica) and to use a simple and harmless material that could run through the whole story taking different forms: this was none other than the humble but miraculous material of paper. Hence, we used colourful papers that sometimes served to create a soundscape, sometimes became boats carrying potatoes and bearing whatever name each participant had chosen, sometimes became stones in a skirmish between rival teams and sometimes became the potatoes themselves (Fig. 7). The fabrication of the boats and the modifications of paper shapes were carried out by the participants themselves. The only preparatory work for the fabrication of the paper boats on our part was to cut the A4 pages properly into squares before going to the prison, because the use of scissors was forbidden.

⁸ Associazione Carte Blanche, Fondazione Michelucci, Aufbruch Kunst Gefaengnis Stadt, London Shakespeare Workout, and Théâtre de l’Opprimé. “Compendium of Good Practices for Theatre in Prison. PICP – The Prison, from Penal Institute to Cultural Place.”, n.d., p. 12, accessed May 12, 2024, https://www.gefaengnistheater.de/koooperationsprojekte-details/the-prison-from-penal-institute-to-cultural-place.html?file=files/upload/presse/pdf/compendium_of_good_practices__output_1_%20%281%29.pdf

⁹ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” in *Architecture-Culture 1943-1968: A Document Anthology*, ed. Joan Ockman (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 422-425.



Fig. 7: The boats transferring the potatoes from Latin America to Europe. At the centre: the workshop instructor Ioanna Lioutsia. *The Journeys of the Potato, from Andes to Tiryns: Legends and Truths*. The Agricultural Prison of Tiryns, April-July 2022. Photographer: Dina Kalogeropoulou.

In conclusion, we sought different ways to respond to as well as to draw inspiration from the conditions, the location, the architecture, and the history of the Agricultural Prison of Tiryns, both during the workshops and in the creation of our performance. Moreover, we worked with a dramaturgical material – the potato – that was at the same time an influence of the specificity of the place, and a point that could unite all the participants. Indeed, as was revealed during an ice-breaker game at our first workshop session, the students were mad about potatoes and the inmates were forced to eat them half-heartedly, every day.

Listen-Watch-Be Silent. A Pilgrimage-Procession to the Old Prison Sites

Listen-Watch-Be Silent was an inscription that was written on the walls of the political prison of Acronafplia, as was the case at other political prisons in Greece. This motto gave the title of the performance, thus reminding the total loss of individuality and constant terror experienced by the political

detainees. The performance began as lightly as a tourist visit that soon turned into a nightmarish procession, when the spectators suddenly listened the motto “Listen-Watch-Be Silent” and were forced to form a line of what could be a group of prisoners of the past. From then on, they followed the same steps of the political prisoners who would arrive at the port and would be taken up to the Acronafplia prison to begin their sentence (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8: The pilgrimage procession starting in the port of Nafplion. *Listen-Watch-Be Silent*, 21 January, 2023. Workshop instructors: Athena Stourna and Pablo Berzal Cruz. Photographer: Pablo Berzal Cruz.

This procession of an almost religious character, led performers and spectators to a pilgrimage in the old prison sites. The dramaturgical structure of the performance followed the four different prisons (Bourtzi, Vouleftikon, Acronafplia and Palamidi) that functioned as stations of a piece of medieval street theatre. In this type of expanded scenography¹⁰, freed from the constraints

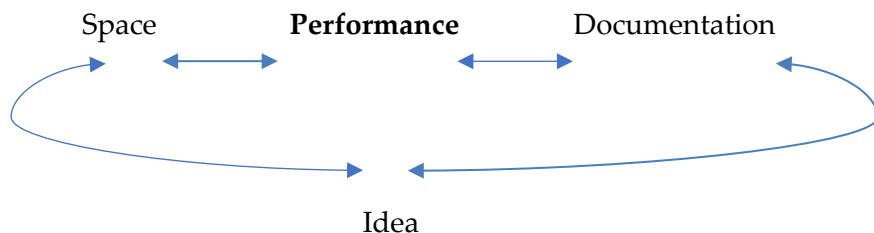
¹⁰ Jocelyn McKinney and Scott Palmer, “Introducing ‘Expanded’ Scenography,” in: *Scenography Expanded: An Introduction to Contemporary Performance Design*, ed. Jocelyn McKinney and Scott Palmer (London: New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 1-20.

of the theatrical stage, the spectators and the performers were *moved* both emotionally and physically by its “intangible affective qualities¹¹” as Rachel Hann points out.

Listen-Watch-Be Silent. Spatial Performativity in Site-Specific Performance

The participants in the *Listen-Watch-Be Silent* workshop had to work on the four buildings that had housed prisons at some point in their history. While the buildings of Palamidi, Bourtzi, and Vouleftikon still remain in the landscape of Nafplion, the old Venetian building housing the political prison at Acronafplia has been demolished and part of its grounds have been taken over by luxury hotel villas.

The work consisted of creating a site-specific performance for each building and designing an action that would guide the performers and the spectators to these buildings and give coherence to the whole set of actions. As an initial working scheme in the creative process, we proposed the following scheme to the participants:



On the one hand, the students had to explore the buildings they were going to work on to find out about their situation in the built environment of Nafplion: to understand their accessibility, their relationship to other spaces, their spatial structure, and to take a phenomenological or sensory approach to embodying the space. On the other hand, they had to study the documents (historical, literary, testimonial, iconographic, etc.) on the use of these buildings as prisons. From these two extremes, and connecting the two, they

¹¹ Rachel Hann, *Beyond scenography* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019), 5.

had to let the ideas and concepts flow, leading them to create a site-specific performance. The approach of this scheme of work is based on well-known methods of devised or documentary theatre and on the study of spatial performativity.

Spatial performativity is the ability of space to influence our behaviour, our actions and our emotional states. In the natural environment, spatial performativity operates at a first level through sensory stimulation and is essential for navigating our way through the territory. In the built environment, performativity operates primarily through architectural mechanisms of ritualisation. The built environment can also be called the ritualised environment and plays an essential role in the process of ritualisation of the individual. In other words, our environment is not a neutral, passive space, but operates on us by imprinting patterns of behaviour; it ritualises us¹². Thus, our actions are, to a large extent, determined by the space in which they take place, they are performances in response to the space we occupy.

As mentioned above, the prison buildings that were the subject of this work were not designed and built for that use, but were fortresses, mosques, madrasas, and after that, used as parliament, hotels, restaurants, or tourist attractions. These buildings were used as prisons only for a period of time.

The existing architectural mechanisms of ritualisation in these buildings dictate a particular behaviour or ritual, and even when new uses are introduced for which the building was not designed, the spatial performativity continues to operate in the same way¹³. There are certain architectural mechanisms of ritualisation that are relatively easy to change or remove, such as those relating to symbolism, but it is more difficult to change directionality or spatial hierarchy. Therefore, new uses will be influenced by spatial performativity, and new site-specific behaviours will be generated.

Historical, literary, testimonial and iconographic sources provide data on the site-specific behaviours associated with the places we work on. Guided by the spatial performativity that has remained intact since the creation of these

¹² Catherine M. Bell, Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory. Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 98-99.

¹³ David Leatherbarrow, "Architecture's Unscripted Performance," in *Performative Architecture: Beyond Instrumentality*, ed. Branko Kolarevic and Ali Malkawi (New York: Spon Press, 2005), 8.

places, by the orders that space gives to our bodies, the meaning of the movements and the emotions that arise make sense when we know a moment in their history, a moment in the history of the people who inhabited them. From here we can reinterpret these spaces, create site-specific performances that reveal their histories to the current inhabitants of the built environment.

The result of all this work was four site-specific performances that revealed a hidden character of the places and the specific experiences that the prisoners had in each of them. As a link between these performances, a procession took place through the fabric of the city that followed the steps of the prisoners from the harbour to each prison, completing the experience of being a prisoner in what is now considered Greece's most "romantic city" (Fig. 8-12).



Fig. 9: Anastasia Ladopoulou performing in front of the Bourtzi islet. Surrounded by the sea, the fortress used to be the residence of the executioner of the convicts of the prison of Palamidi. *Listen-Watch-Be Silent*, 21 January, 2023. Workshop instructors: Athena Stourna and Pablo Berzal Cruz. Photographer: Pablo Berzal Cruz.



Fig. 10: Percy Koritsidou performing at Vouleftikon. *Listen-Watch-Be Silent*, 21 January, 2023. Workshop instructors: Athena Stourna and Pablo Berzal Cruz. Photographer: Pablo Berzal Cruz.



Fig. 11: Danae Christoudi performing at Akronafplia. *Listen-Watch-Be Silent*, 21 January, 2023. Workshop instructors: Athena Stourna and Pablo Berzal Cruz. Photographer: Pablo Berzal Cruz.



Fig. 12: Anastasia Ladopoulou and Mary Zagkla performing in front of prison of Palamidi. *Listen-Watch-Be Silent*, 21 January, 2023. Workshop instructors: Athena Stourna and Pablo Berzal Cruz. Photographer: Pablo Berzal Cruz.

Prison Sites as Spectral and Real Places of Remembrance

Through the brutality emitted by the real substance of the prison sites, Nafplion was used in both projects as a “scenographic” city. It thus revealed its own stories and traumas, by removing the fake touristic scenery that is now covering it. The city’s touristic expansion of the last thirty years has failed to maintain an interest in its rich but controversial history. Nafplion’s historical sites of memory respond poorly to the urban remembrance of its agitated past, but also to the continuity of the sites that are still in use today. Past prisons were used as an urban topography of remembrance of human wretchedness and pointed out how the country’s penitentiary system echoes diachronically its troubled political and social history.

At the same time, the Agricultural Prison of Tiryns is one of the few prison farms that remains in operation in Greece, nowadays. Unfortunately, it is threatened to close, so that the surrounding farms may be taken over by

the State. The few inmates that remained (no newcomers were admitted anymore, when the workshops took place in 2022) participated wholeheartedly in the workshops and the final performance. As a result, the prison, as a site of social isolation, as a place of the margins forgotten by society and reclaimed for appropriation by the State itself, gained life and reclaimed its presence, through the creative collaboration between the students, the inmates and the workshop leaders.

In conclusion, we would like to refer to Dorita Hannah's notion of the "urban scenographies of the 'Real'¹⁴", with which she claims that "theatre seeks reality but also something beyond it [Lacan's Real] which can be revealed when performance collides with the familiar city, thereby defamiliarising it¹⁵". What both projects wished to explore were the brutal urban realities of the present and of the past, that are both real and spectral, tangible and intangible at the same time, and were spiritually and physically revived through performance, while inviting spectators and creators to assume social and political responsibility¹⁶.

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¹⁴ Dorita Hannah, "Navigating urban scenographies of the 'Real'," Online presentation in the Online International Event *Scenographic City: using scenography to understanding urban experience*, School of Performance and Cultural Industries, University of Leeds, January 14, 2022.

¹⁵ Dorita Hannah, e-mail message to Athena Stourna, April 8, 2024.

¹⁶ Sodja Lotker & Richard Gough, "On Scenography: Editorial", *Performance Research* 18, no. 3 (2013): 3-6.

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Dorita Hannah, e-mail message to Athena Stourna, April 8, 2024.

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