

In her article, the author analyses an example of a text and its staging brought about by the sudden death of a member of the playwright's creative team. In his solo performance *Inflammation du verbe vivre* (Inflammation of the Verb To Live), created at the Paris Théâtre National de la Colline in 2015, Canadian-Lebanese playwright, director and actor Wajdi Mouawad interwove the ancient Greek literary and mythological heritage with a personal confession about the loss of his friend and professional colleague Robert Davreu, upgrading it with a socially critical depiction of the situation in today's Greece. The performance was made as the penultimate part of a staging cycle of Sophocles's seven preserved tragedies under the common title *Le dernier jour de sa vie* (The Last Day of his Life). Mouawad had intended to direct the cycle in new translations by Davreu. Mouawad thus connected the process of mourning the death, which stopped the project, with the documentation of the writing process of the text that he later also directed and performed in the form of a peculiar theatre elegy. He fused the character of Philoctetes with the character of Odysseus; not the Odysseus from Sophocles's tragedy who plots to steal Philoctetes's bow, but the one from Homer who seeks his way home to Ithaca for ten years after the conquer of Troy and visits Tiresias's shade in the underworld.

Keywords: death, mourning, theatre, tragedy, epic, myth, lament, prophecy, ancient period, body, wound, gender

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Wound and Travel – Sophocles’s *Philoctetes* and Homer’s *Odyssey* in *Inflammation du verbe vivre* (Inflammation of the Verb To Live) by Wajdi Mouawad

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In her article, the author analyses an example of a text and its staging brought about by the sudden death of a member of the playwright’s creative team. In his solo performance *Inflammation du verbe vivre* (Inflammation of the Verb To Live), created at the Paris Théâtre National de la Colline in 2015, Canadian-Lebanese playwright, director and actor Wajdi Mouawad interwove the ancient Greek literary and mythological heritage with a personal confession about the loss of his friend and professional colleague Robert Davreu. He upgraded it with a socially critical depiction of the situation in today’s Greece. The performance was made as the penultimate part of a staging cycle of Sophocles’s seven preserved tragedies under the common title *Le dernier jour de sa vie* (The Last Day of His Life). Mouawad had intended to direct the cycle in new translations by Davreu. He connected the process of mourning the death, which stopped the project, with the documentation of the writing process of the text, which he later also directed and performed in the form of a peculiar theatre elegy. He fused the character of Philoctetes with the character of Odysseus; not the Odysseus from Sophocles’s tragedy who plots to steal Philoctetes’s bow, but the one from Homer who seeks his way home to Ithaca for ten years after the conquer of Troy and visits Tiresias’s shade in the underworld.

Wajdi Mouawad is the sole actor in the performance. The story communicated live from the stage is combined with pre-recorded and edited film scenes recorded between October 2014 and February 2015 at various locations in Paris and Greece. The main stage set element in the show is a canvas of tightened, slightly vibrating elastic strips; projected on it are videos that document the dual process of creating the performance and mourning for Davreu. The canvas functions as a projection screen and a permeable wall through which the performer can cross. Although he sometimes disappears behind it and completely leaves the floor to his projected image, he mostly shares the scene with it, playing with perspectives and dimensions and establishing

an exciting theatrical and filmic dialogue with himself.

Wahid declares himself Philoctetes, comparing the unfinished project with his wound caused by the bite of a poisonous snake. He and his film crew go to Greece. His first destination on Lemnos is Philoctetes's cave, which is closed because of dangerously hindered access. Later, he tosses in his bed during a rainstorm, then gets up and takes from his suitcase the other key reference reading of the drama and the performance, Homer's *Odyssey*. In one of the most astonishing scenes in the show, he climbs in his underwear up a projection screen vertically displaying hexameters from *The Odyssey*. These are from the part where Circe advises Odysseus to go to the underworld and find the shade of Tiresias, who will help him with advice and prophesy his return home. Wahid now knows where to go. He writes a farewell letter to his children and wades into the sea. After his suicide, he is no longer only Philoctetes but also Odysseus, the one who travels home for ten years after the conquest of Troy.

Wahid crosses the Acheron River on the boat of Charon embodied by an elderly Mediterranean fisherman and finds himself at the Hades airport, where he is met by taxi driver Lefteris. The fact that Athens and other parts of modern Greece are established as an analogy to the mythological Hades has a powerful effect on the whole, same as the decision that we, the audience, are understood as shades of the dead in the same way as the shades in the film and Wahid himself; Mouawad repeatedly points this out in his addresses whose humorous and direct nature reminds us of the *Dialogues of the Dead* by Ancient Greek satirist Lucian. The consequences of the financial crisis are painfully evident at every turn: today's Greece is a country of humiliated and desperate people who are confronted with unemployment and unimaginable poverty, its cities and villages are full of abandoned and decaying buildings that have lost their former splendour and content, its flora and fauna have gone wild because desperate people gave up on them. Just like Philoctetes in Mouawad's text and performance/film is broadened to encompass the entire population of Greece, its landscape, too, is turning into Lemnos of gigantic dimensions.

In the end, Wahid's is taken to the shade of Robert Davreu. Davreu's face in close-up has a strong emotional impact on a viewer. But just after viewers are struck by the fact that Wahid finally met Robert, they also get the opposite idea: that Robert's shade, in contrast to all the previous ones, can no longer be a matter of performed fiction. Alienation sets in, and viewers becomes aware of the medium; they are inevitably reminded that they are taking part in a show or film and that the meeting between Wahid and Robert is constructed, subsequently edited, directed – in other words, failed. But the shade's words still bear weight because the drama and performance assign it the role of Tiresias.

The seer Tiresias and the ephebe Philoctetes are associated with the motifs of a

forbidden look and a snake: the latter was bitten by a snake because he looked at the goddess, while the former was punished because he looked at a pair of snakes. Hence, the goddess captured him in a female body and deprived him of sight. The female body is, namely, initiated into the world of the ultimate secrets of human birth and death. It is a woman whose body conceives and grows a new life, extracting it into the world in pain and cramps, and it is a woman who can touch a dead body and prepare it for the funeral.

Mouawad's Wahid meets two women. The first is a dramaturg called Esther in the play but played in the film by Mouawad's actual dramaturgic colleague Charlotte Farcet. The other is her mythological reference, the witch Circe from *The Odyssey*. Both send him on a journey that will relieve him of his unbearable distress identified with Philoctetes's wound and bring to the storyline a triggering moment in which the mourning process actively begins to turn into a recovery process and is identical with the process of the emerging play or performance.