

# One actor, one bed, and a host of playwrights

May Jeong

Special to The Daily Star

**B**EIRUT: "Poets Have Disappeared From Life on Earth," a theatrical montage by the Greek theater company Dipethe de Agrinion, was mounted at Babel Theater Wednesday. The event was staged as part of the Spring Festival, to honor the life of Samir Kassir – the prominent *Al-Nahar* editorialist who was assassinated outside of his Beirut residence in 2005.

A one-woman play featuring Katia Gerou, "Poets" takes the form of a series of vignettes, their multiple narratives seamlessly woven together by the actor. The troupe has chosen to excerpt eight works of theater and song. Several of the selections were written by Tennessee Williams – "A Streetcar Named Desire," "The Rose Tattoo," "The Glass Menagerie," and "Sweet Bird of Youth" – while few pay tribute to Gerou's Greek roots – "Antigone" and "Orpheus and Eurydice."

The play opens with a scene from Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire," with Gerou playing the hopeless Blanche DuBois, paying an unexpected visit to her sister's home. The narrative largely mirrors that of Williams' original. Blanche is a former Southern Belle pining for lost glories. She is aptly cast as an English teacher, who resorts to

words for its "cocooning effect."

Gerou's Blanche speaks of funerals being pretty compared to deaths. She is insecure and a romantic. All such emotions are distilled into one actor, yet this is easy to forget. Ultimately, the stage is big, but it never looms large. Gerou's presence is enough to fill the room, and the monologues are never dull. "I want magic, not realism!" she exclaims, and for a moment, you want it too.

As in life, the stories bleed into each other. The neurotic and fragile Blanche morphs into a youthful and amorous maven in the "The Rose Tattoo," who sings of "dy[ing] from eating unwashed grapes ... in the blaze of summer." Gerou's brilliance shines again in the "Glass Menagerie," where she is the narrator and the actor. Her hair, her gait, the swagger in her hips, and the way she carries herself all serve to tell the story.

The genius of Gerou shines in a scene where the crippled Laura dances the waltz. At first she declines the offer to dance, referring to her lame leg, and diverting attention to her prime possession and unadulterated obsession, the glass menagerie. But fate tempts, and eventually she stands, and lending her weight to her invisible suitor, she dances. The combination of the solitary act of dancing, the harsh lighting under which she dances and the gradual crescent

do of music all reach a catharsis as Laura trips, falls, and breaks her glass menagerie.

The play was mounted in part to pay tribute to the great poets of centuries past. With this objective in mind, Gerou takes the audience on a tour through the lyrical prose of Federico Garcia Lorca ("Blood Wedding"), and Jean Anouilh ("Orpheus and Eurydice").

The audience then reunites with Williams in "Sweet Bird of Youth" where Gerou plays an older actress past her prime, waiting languidly for her second wind to come swoop her away. The climax of the vignette comes when Gerou's Princess Kosmonopolis, in the throes of love-making – "the only dependable distraction" – learns of her most recent film's box office success. The scene is both comical and sad, endearing, yet rings hollow.

An excerpt from Bertolt Brecht's "The Caucasian Chalk Circle" ends the evening. With references to the Judgment of King Solomon, Gerou oscillates between the character of the peasant girl who steals the baby, and the birth mother of the child, all the while managing to convey the conundrum without confusion.

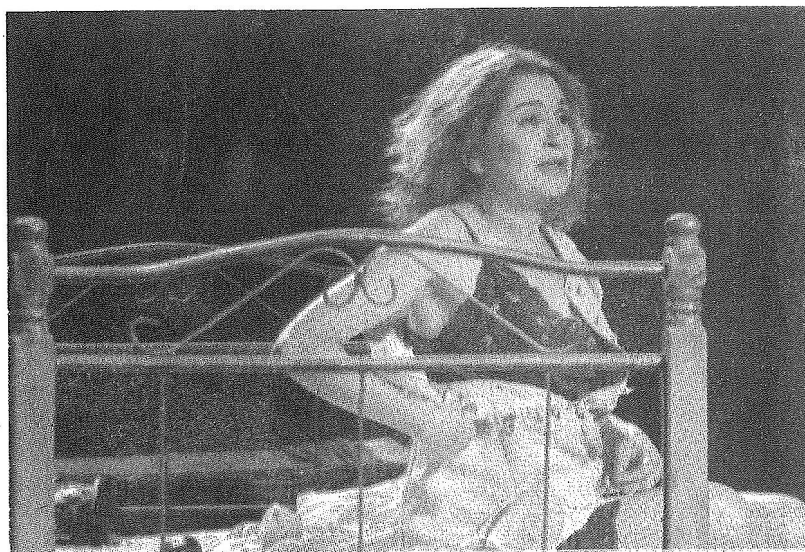
Gerou is a master of oratory and of dramaturgy, and this is where mediocrity goes to die. There is never a moment of respite, as she skillfully flows in

and out of characters with effortless ease. With this, the gap between Williams' Blanche, and Brecht's Grusha disappears. The dramatic overtures are far from strained, and she proves herself a dynamic and versatile actor.

In her caricature of the eight heroines of theater, Gerou speaks to the shared nature of human conditions. That is, a Southern Belle, a Greek princess, and a peasant worker in Georgia are all subject to universal emotions of anger, desire, depression, and euphoria.

She ends with words from Karolos Koun, to whom the play pays homage, and who, some half a century ago, emphatically declared that "we don't do theater to do theater. We do it to enrich and cultivate culture. The only catharsis is knowledge."

As it turns out, the rumors of its death have been greatly exaggerated. Poets have yet to disappear from life on earth.



The 'Poets Have Disappeared' at Babel Theater.

Photo by Fadi Abou Ghalioum