Real Tragedies Taught Anthoula Katsimatides

NEW YORK – When we sit down in a theater, to see a movie or a play, we take it for granted the actors and actresses will bring to life something disturbing or interesting or funny, but how many of us think about how they do that? Anthoula Katsimatides draws upon a range of personal and professional experiences, including family losses related to the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 when she appears onstage, but says she was not the type of person who grew up wanting to be an actress. It was never her dream, but she was always involved in the arts and somehow was always given the longest poems and the biggest parts in school plays. And she says she always felt that, no matter what she was performing, whether “selling the creative” in her advertising days or teaching fidgety adolescents. She was always “on” for her students: “When you are a high school teacher you are definitely a performer and of course in politics, that is the quintessential stage.” Chance and fate seem to play a role in every actor’s career. After earning a BA in Business Administration and a Masters degree in Secondary Education at Queens College and serving as former Governor George Pataki’s Community Affairs Special Assistant, she found herself at the Greek Cultural Center in Astoria enjoying a performance, when she was saddened to hear the theater was going to be torn down. She had a powerful feeling that, “I needed to perform in one of those plays before the theater was gone. The woman seated next to her was Director Joanna Xanthopoulou, who told her, “Oh my God I have a part for you.” Katsimatides then appeared in the production of A Doctor in Spite of Himself a Greek translation of a play by Moliere. “I had an incredible time and then had this thirst to learn more about this fascinating field of acting. I started taking classes and got engrossed in the craft,” she said.

She said actors must reach down inside themselves and draw out a wide range of thoughts and experiences, many of which are painful and often difficult to grasp, but says she has been told by people who have been actors since childhood that she is lucky to have a wealth of experience to draw upon, referring to her work in several fields and to the family tragedies she has endured. She told The National Herald that life had given her tools and depth for work on the stage, but said acting also gave her an opportunity to express and work on difficult issues and feelings that benefit her personal life. And it’s a wonderful world of fantasy too. “It’s a powerful thing for actors to be able to act and express things they have never done before. To live something you’ve never lived before – there’s nothing more exciting than that. It’s an opportunity to put on another face and gain another outlook and be really rooted in another personality."

It can be fun and it can get complicated: “It’s very difficult to separate the person that you are onstage from the person you are in real life. Sometimes the two mesh. That is most the case in the technique called method acting where you become that character in real life in order to portray it.” Asked if she likes to write, her face brightened: “I do.” She said her writing is connected to her acting because, “They say in New York that if you write your own piece and you get to perform it, that’s the way into the theater community.” She is now writing a one-woman show. “Some of it’s funny and some of it is not,” meaning it also touches on serious and painful themes.

ANOTHER GREEK ANARCHIST?

She said she is fortunate to be currently involved with the Living Theater, a legendary institution in the New York City theater scene. “The artistic director is Judith Molina, who is 84 years old and her theater is an anarchist theater company.” She then says earnestly,
Most of my friends then look at me and ask what I have in common with these folks considering my foray into the political world” – working for Pataki and then for the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, one of the agencies responsible for the re-building of Ground Zero. Most Greeks associate anarchism with hooded Molotov Cocktail throwers, but she explained that Living Theater actors and leaders “are pacifists who try through their art to send a message of community concern and love and the radical equality of all people.”

The group’s current production is Korach, about the followers of the man who rebelled against Moses. The play examines the question of why people were forced to submit to Moses, and asks why couldn’t the people of God just live together as equals? Molina, who wrote it, examines the matter by exploring the complementary but often conflicting need for individual freedom and authority. The play ran just as Egyptians rebelled. Katsimatides delighted in the coincidence and the play’s relevance to current events. “There are performances where people are so moved they are in tears. One night’s performance was dedicated to the people of Egypt.”

The Living Theater tries to make the audience part of the performance, one of those places where sooner or later an audience member is going to get a hug. “Yes that’s the signature of the Living Theater. The audience is actually on stage. They break the so-called fourth wall (the invisible barrier between the actors and the audience.) At the end we ask the audience to stand and participate but everyone decides how much they want to participate.” The ending has to do with the Greek word “apokatastasis ton panton” but if your priest is not an anarchist he might not like that idea.

NEW GREEK ART?

Asked about the state of art and culture in the Greek American community, especially in New York where so much wealth is concentrated and where there are so many other ethnic and social communities which support their most talented and creative members through grants, fellowships and scholarships, she invoked the the great Greek artistic heritage, hesitated when considering the current reality, but then said with excitement: “The community has come a long way.” She mentioned community theater and pointed out that the Consuls General of Greece and Cyprus, Agghi Balta and Koula Sophianou, “are doing an incredible job trying to foster the arts and display the artists as best they can.” Her experience as an actress in the community has been positive: “I myself have always been greeted with incredible support,” she said, which is not usually the way it goes given that in most Greek households children are not encouraged to go into the arts. In her own family, she said, “It was OK for the arts to be a hobby but to actually pursue the arts,” was another story, though she sympathizes with parents’ concerns because, “It’s not feasible to have a career in the arts and live on an artist’s salary in America. She said she’s proud of the two Greek cultural centers in Astoria but felt a Greek presence in Manhattan would be valuable. Greek American director Stephan Morrow said he believes that the Community can make a quantum leap in New York City’s cultural consciousness by establishing a cultural center in Manhattan that would include a theater and exhibition space and noted that a number or struggling venues may become available. He added that by also producing the works of non-Greek artists, such an institution could become an integral part of the local cultural scene, thus benefiting Greeks in the arts and also bringing in revenue that could be used to support Greeks.

Katsimatides said she the Community could do a better job of approaching affluent Greek Americans about the value of supporting Greeks in the arts, while playwright Maria Micheles echoed those thoughts, declaring that, “The best way for a community to be heard is through the arts.”

Katsimatides continues to do plays in Greek because she wants to be part of the continuation of the Greek language in America, but as valuable as such endeavors are, she says that’s not the way for Greek artists and writers to be catapulted into mainstream American success. She says she’s realized that if she wants to contribute to the community, she has to remove herself from it, achieve mainstream success and come back to help. She has been given that sober advice by many successful people, and not just artists. “That is the formula but it’s hard for me to leave the community,” she said.

She is deeply rooted in the Greek American community and has a wide-ranging perspective. She says her acting and life experiences have put her more in touch with the different elements of human experience, the joys and tragedies, and have given her a stronger voice, and no longer has a problem talking about what her family has been through. “My tragedies are actually the reason I am an actress now and that I’m in the arts. It was a matter of realizing ‘Wow, life is too short’ and I must do something that makes me happy, that makes me want to get out of bed each day.” When Anthoula was 26, her younger brother Michael Katsimatides committed suicide. “He was an incredible young man. Very smart and aggressive, but sweet,” she said. She realized in retrospect that he had a mental illness. She said she’s discussing it “because suicide in the Greek community and the community at large is not talked about. Mental illness is not talked about. People work
hard to raise money and try to find cures for cancer every single day but when you talk about finding cures for mental illness that is not something people are able to speak about.” She told TNH, “Because of my experience, I want people to know that someone commits suicide every eight seconds in America. That is an astounding number and if we were to pour money into mental illness awareness the way they support other legitimate causes, it would help.”

She added: “When Michael passed away it was a very private loss. About one and one half years later my brother John died in the September 11 attacks, and that was a very public loss. All of a sudden you are part of a much greater loss and I became a member of this ‘club’ of families who lost members on 9/11.” She noted that the attention that is paid to the 9/11 losses “is right and just, but she added that if half that attention was paid to mental illness, there would be a little bit of a balance.” She started an organization in memory of her brothers – The Johnny and Mikey Katsimatides Foundation for life - JAM for Life - whose web site is jamfoundation.org. She said she did it to perpetuate her brothers’ memories and to make people more aware of mental illness and also as a tribute to those lost on 9/11.

She produces fundraisers each year that benefit those causes. She noted that The Samaritans of New York works to stop suicide. “They are a wonderful organization that has a 24-hour hotline” and there are walks by the American Society of Suicide Prevention that she supports and was pleased to see their flyers in cafes in Astoria, N.Y. and she encourages Greek Americans to participate through JAM events. “I don’t want it to be only about the people who knew my brother,” she said.

Thoughts of her brothers are never far from her consciousness, but she said she knows she must move forward. “When you suffer a tragedy you can choose to do one of two things: You can choose to just clam up and live a solitary life - and I can understand the people who choose to do that - or you can actually do something for the greater good so that their loved ones will not have died in vain,” and she explained that “people’s initial instinct is to keep it to yourself, but once someone breaks that little barrier and opens up to this sense of community assistance, then you can’t help but accept it.” Does time help? “What time does is allow a person to adjust their life to the new reality. It’s not pleasant and there are people who respond by lying down and not getting out of bed, but doing that will not bring the person back and will not reverse the tragedy. You can only go forward and try your best to make your life a better one and if that means seeking help, whether it means psychotherapy, or going to a priest, or a self help group, I am all for that. When my brother committed suicide I spent a lot of time in a survivors group.” It’s vital, she said, for the Community to be able to reach out to people in need and to guides friends and family members the best way to help those in need. She noted that, “Some people can be a little pushy. Everyone has his or her own timetable. What my family and friends have done is offer their support. I know they are there when I need them. That goes a long way.”

NEVER FORGET

She said she also thinks about New York’s other wounded families. She serves on the board of directors of the official 9/11 memorial and museum (its Web site is memorial.org). She loves the design, feeling that it is peaceful and does justice to the memory of those who lost their lives. “There are two reflecting pools that mark the location of the Twin Towers,” she said, “and there is a wonderful waterfall cascading down into the pools, and on the perimeter of the names of our loved ones are etched on a beautiful bronze panel with light illuminating the water and its surrounded by a grove of trees. It’s going to be absolutely beautiful.” She said she and the other families are grateful for the outpouring of support they received throughout their ordeal, and agrees that the memorial is not the exclusive property of the families of the victims. After the attack, she went to work with LMDC, which is in charge of the rebuilding of the World Trade Center site. She described the complex process that was intended to bring together and solicit the views of the many kinds of stakeholders. She patiently explains to people who ask her about the state of the rebuilding almost 10 years after the attack that it was not an easy process. She said it was difficult “to really listen to all those voices,” and she is happy it’s largely on track, except for the distress she said she feels over the rebuilding of her beloved St. Nicholas Church, which was destroyed in the attacks. That is an ongoing story for her and the rest of us, for which she works and prays for a happy ending.

To learn more about Anthoula’s performances and endeavors, visit www.anthoula.com, sirigos@thenationalherald.com

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