What is it that you want?

A Note from the Director

By Nikos Karathanos

HOOPOE

Well then… where would you really like to live?

What is it that you want? —

What d’ya want, eh?

CONVINCER (Peisetairos)

I want…

I want to live in a place where my best buddy will come to my door,
first thing in the morning,

and say to me: “Come by the house tomorrow, you and your wife and
kids,” I want… I want him to come and say,

“You’ll be all scrubbed clean and happy ’cause I’ve invited people over,
my son’s getting engaged, and I’ve invited people over, and I want you
to be there by my side, don’t you dare not be there, or else….”

I want him to say to me,

“…or else, don’t come round to see me when I’m
desperately sad.” —

D’you get it? That’s what I want!

HOOPOE

Oh, dear me, it’s trouble you’re asking for….”

(Aristophanes, The Birds. Translated into modern Greek by Giannis Asteris,
commissioned for this performance, unpublished.)

NIKOS KARATHANOS is a director, actor and writer. Born in Athens, he graduated from the
drama school of the National Theatre of Greece. As an actor he has played the lead role in
many performances from the classical and contemporary repertory and has taken part in
tours in Greece and all over the world. Among other plays, he has directed The Cherry Orchard
by Chekhov, for the Onassis Cultural Centre, and Operetka by W. Gombrowicz, Decameron
by Boccaccio, Golfo by Spyridon Peresiadis, Cyrano de Bergerac by Edmond Rostand, and
Julius Caesar by Shakespeare, for the National Theatre of Greece.

In 1910, my great-grandfather left Greece for
Spokane, Washington, to work on the railways.
He had, deep inside him, this enormous
Promethean vital force to want to change his
life and to build the world afresh, from the
bottom up: “To make it new,” as Ezra Pound
would later say.

Twenty-five-hundred years before that,
two Aristophanic heroes, bloated, tired,
exasperated with life, left Athens and the
world of men, and took a “high turn” toward
the world of birds. They founded a city in
the clouds. People emigrated there, the
gods themselves emigrated there, and it thus
came to be their very own (the original!)
“Cloudcuckooland,” where humans, gods,
beasts and birds lived together—with their
heads, literally, “in the clouds.”

My great-grandfather traveled 6,500 miles
across land and sea. Aristophanes’ heroes
traveled skyward, instead.

In all these years that have gone by, people
have never ceased leaving, running, going
places.

As a theatrical troupe, we are no different;
we have treated this play not as plot but as
action, as a weird and outrageous experience,
as a silent movie desperately trying to become
a “talkie.” It is the experience of people always
“on the run.” It is the experience of people
always migrating. We come to you from the
same city as the heroes of Aristophanes; we,
like them, are also tired and exasperated with
life there. We, like them, are migrants,
always in search of our very own, and perhaps
collective, “cloudcuckooland.”

I mean, really: Why do we insist so much
on living?

What is that force
That makes migrants of us
What is that law
That dominates us

And pushes us to live
Despite all the pain
All the fear
All the tears
And kicks the breath into us
And makes us live
A little bit more
Each time
A little bit more… and longer

In Greek, eleutheria means freedom; but the
root of the word is probably the verb eleutho,
which means “to arrive.” So “freedom” means
to be able to go places, it means “to be free
to roam.” We, like Aristophanes’ citizens and
birds, are a migratory species.

So as a troupe we want to speak to you for all
the people who roam, for all those who do not
“fit in,” who can’t “lean and loafe at their ease,”
singing themselves like your Walt Whitman.

We want to speak to you of the people who
stand on one leg all the time, who feel foreign
and alien in the very midst of their own city,
who fear their difference. We want to speak
for those who’ve been forced, through pain
and ill treatment, to live on borders and who
grow wings, every day that passes grow wings
so that they can cross the borders and jump
the wall, however “beautiful” that wall may be.

We speak to you of all those people, everyday
people, who live and walk among us, not like
people but like heroes in disguise.

Real democracy is an equality of the heart
—the reconciliation with and acceptance of
what we are:

Love bore us—
Life is an act of love—
So…
Let’s all start getting along.