Democracy was under threat when Aristophanes presented his comedy *The Birds* as part of the Dionysia festival in Athens in the 5th century BC. Oligarchy was jeopardizing Athenian democracy, while war and constant legal battles raised havoc among citizens. The festival itself offered a chance for the people of Athens to congregate and revel in equal parts, to address state affairs and be entertained—all together.

In English, one might call it a party: a word that means both a social gathering and the system of taking sides on public or political questions. The word comes from the Latin *partire*, which has given us “part” and “participation.”

*The Birds*, in the original version by Aristophanes, is a play about two individuals tired of the corruption of Athenian politics, seeking a better place for collective living. As they create a new settlement among the birds in Cloudcuckooland, they set out to establish an ideal community blessed with equality, temperance and fairness. But instead they found a new form of empire, full of struggle, restless desire and colonial pursuit.

In the contemporary adaptation of *The Birds* by Nikos Karathanos, we see two men in exile hoping to find a city where, the main protagonist says, “my woman caresses me and the sunlight enters aslant…. No! Where people look you in the eye...” or maybe, where one can hope for love, generosity, community. While the birds have their doubts when the Athenians arrive—men have hunted them down for centuries—they are slowly won over. “We are all the children of Eros,” one says, all born from a bird, all able to grow wings and believe in the impossible. In Karathanos’ play, the beauty of storytelling, song, poetry, dance and radical inclusion can help create a place where all creatures, including humans, birds and gods, can live and thrive together.

Within and beyond the plot and meaning of the plays—the original and its contemporary adaptation—the “birds” are a literary trope with deep resonance. Birds, Karathanos asserts, preceded even gods; birds, starting with Homer, are metaphorically associated with the poet’s song, a creative language of divine reach allowing an extraordinary sense of communion; in the English language, there are more collective nouns for different types of birds than for any other animal species. Birds are singular in their representation of the collective, an apt metaphor for community and flight—birds are known to flock together. Birds can also stand in for a certain democratic ideal.

Yet cages surround birds in their representation. They are also creatures visually and virtually associated with imprisonment. Mass incarceration—a complex and immensely relevant political question in the United States today—disproportionately deprives some groups of their freedom and exiles them from the democratic process.

Democracy is meant to subsume individual motives to the collective good. And democracy requires participation, as does theater. A belief in good faith, and a vision for all people to unite freely, happily, pulses through Karathanos’ reinterpretation of the original *Birds*.

It is a play to reclaim life together in our fraught and divisive political context.

To live together with nature; to live together as neighbors and friends and allies; to live together and party and protest together is what I hope this festival to be about.

Here, in this program guide, are manifestations of this thematic exploration, with a wide array of partners representing some of the best cultural institutions across New York City.

*Birds* is a play to reclaim life together in our fraught and divisive political context.

Violaine Huisman is a writer, translator and curator.