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This photograph shows aromatic medicinal chamomile in the agricultural farm 'The Caserma of Herbs' run by the Social Cooperative of the Dodecanese Department of Mental Health on Leros island in Greece. — AFP photos



An employee with a mental illness holds a hive of bees at the agricultural farm 'The Caserma of Herbs'.

'Soul relief': Bees help mentally ill on Greek island

On a hillside overlooking the azure blue waters of Greece's Leros island harbor, a small group of workers in protective gear are busy smoking beehives. But these are not ordinary beekeepers. Some of them are patients from the nearby psychiatric hospital, participating in a two-decade project combining therapy with professional fulfillment. The social cooperative in Leros, housed in a former barracks known as the Caserma estate, is the first of its kind in Greece, explains project manager Andreas Georgiou.

The cooperative "aims to socially and professionally integrate persons with psychosocial problems", he tells AFP. "Through the program... they acquire self-respect and self-esteem," he says. On the fields of the estate, patients care for the bees and cultivate their high-quality diet-lavender, oregano and other aromatic herbs.

"This is a bee's paradise," says Georgiou, an occupational therapist and president of the Dodecanese social



Social workers along with employees with a mental illness (right) work at the agricultural farm 'The Caserma of Herbs'.

cooperative (KOISPE), which runs the estate. In Lepida, to the south of the port, the employees package and label the honey, and dry the herbs in dedicated rooms inside the psychiatric hospital.

The estate produce is then sold in various locations on the island.

"I love what I do here, it's a real relief for the soul," says Artemis, a patient in his 60s as he seals honey jars. "We try

to be as traditional and pure here as possible," he adds, briefly switching into salesman mode. The Leros cooperative employs 13 salaried workers, supervised by specialist beekeepers, in addition to a team of nurses and occupational therapists from the island's psychiatric hospital.

Leros is an island with a rich history going back to antiquity, and the site of a major World War II battle that later inspired war epic "The Guns of Navarone". Among other islands of the Dodecanese group, it was occupied by Italy for more than 30 years, giving rise to fascist-era rationalist architecture that is unique to the area. But the island's modern image is closely associated with the local mental asylum, which was the scene of a major scandal involving the serious neglect of patients in the early 1990s.

'Immense' therapeutic gain

Georgiou says it was precisely the shock of the scandal that prompted the

reforms which gave rise to the cooperative. "The reforms launched more than 20 years ago radically changed the way patients are treated, with a view to de-institutionalizing asylums," adds Giannis Loukas, a former director of the Leros psychiatric centre.

The therapeutic gain for patients is "immense", he notes. They can also enjoy the rights of employees instead of working illegally, as was the case for a long time in Leros and elsewhere in Greece, he adds.

While some patients live in the asylum, a large number are allowed to live in flats on the island for better integration into society, Loukas adds. Georgiou notes that a handful of people have been able to make a full rehabilitation through the cooperative. One is working as an assistant plumber in Leros, while another is working in a hotel in Rhodes, he said. — AFP



Photos show an employee with a mental illness holding a hive of bees at the agricultural farm 'The Caserma of Herbs'.



A social worker uses smoke to calm bees at the agricultural farm 'The Caserma of Herbs'.



Employees with a mental illness work in the Social Cooperative of the Dodecanese Department of Mental Health on Leros Island in Greece.



This aerial photograph shows the agricultural farm 'The Caserma of Herbs'.

Theatre legend Kani turns eye to modern South Africa

When John Kani launched his acting career in the 1960s, the only stage he could find was an empty snake pit at a shuttered South African museum. His latest production, "Kunene and the King", opened with the Royal Shakespeare Company and played on London's West End. It's now resuming a South African tour that was interrupted by the pandemic's theatre closures.

"In 2018, I had the idea that the following year, we are going to celebrate 25 years of South Africa's democracy since the dawn of the new, non-racial, non-sexist rainbow nation," Kani told AFP. The play he wrote tasks Lunga Kunene-an older, black, male nurse-with caring for an older white actor dying of liver cancer but desperate to survive long enough to accept the role of Shakespeare's "King Lear". "I wanted to create something that would force the one not able to live without the other one," Kani said.

He's definitely created a theatre about theatre, with Shakespeare running through its veins. "I suddenly found myself engrossed in the history of these two men, from opposite sides in one country, who see South Africa differently, but the only thing that would bring them together is their love of Shakespeare," he said. "And that's how King Lear got interwoven into the story."

The two characters run lines from Shakespeare's tragedy, accentuating Lear's grappling with death. And they recite lines from "Julius Caesar", both from the original play and a translation into Kani's mother tongue of Xhosa, which he remembers performing in high school in 1959.



South African stage actor and voice artist Michael Richard, poses for a portrait in the backstage of the Johannesburg Theatre in Johannesburg.

On the current tour, Kani performs with the prolific South African actor Michael Richard, who said the story uses King Lear's evolution to show how South Africa is also changing. "Lear learns humanity in the play. And in this play, my character learns humanity, in a way of coming to terms with South Africa," Richard said.

Theatre about theatre

The tragedies in Kani's play unexpectedly started appearing in real life. His co-star in the British productions was South African-born actor Anthony Sher, a knighted Shakespearean performer. Sher died in December of liver cancer, the same disease that kills his character in Kani's play. And his younger brother also died of liver cancer in 2019, as the play was taking shape.

For all the sadness, the play is also very funny, and perhaps a revelation for younger fans who may know Kani best for playing the Black Panther's father in the Marvel films, or voicing the shaman mandrill Rafiki in the 2019 "Lion King" remake. In South Africa, Kani is a legendary figure of protest theatre. His 1960s plays in the snake pit brought him into collaboration with Athol Fugard, widely regarded as one of the nation's greatest playwrights.

They defied the apartheid-era segregation laws by meeting in secret, and staging rehearsals in classrooms and garages, under the constant harassment of the feared police. They adopted the name the Serpent Players, and per-

formed classics like "Antigone" in the snake pit at an under-loved museum.

"It was a museum, an amusement place with the museum," Kani said. "On the other side, you would see the dolphins, and when Port Elizabeth was economically really down, everybody would say, would someone please let the dolphins out before you lock up the place."

By the early 1970s, Kani, Fugard and fellow performer Winston Ntshona were writing new plays that exposed the harsh realities of life under apartheid. Kani and Ntshona won a Tony in 1975 for their New York performance of "Sizwe Banzi is Dead". All three also wrote "The Island", a seminal play about prison conditions on

Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela and other leader activists were jailed.

Today theatre in South Africa is struggling, with audiences still limited to 50 percent occupancy under COVID regulations. After the pandemic inflicted so much illness and death on the world, Kani said the play is now received somewhat differently. Now bringing the play post-COVID, people "understand the process" of illness and dying, he said. "Africans have a great reverence for death and life. And they understand the process and the journey, but they see it as a continuation of life." — AFP



South African stage and movie actor John Kani, 79, who is also an author, director and play-writer, pose for a portrait in the backstage of the Johannesburg Theatre in Johannesburg. — AFP