

Modern Greek Drama and Theatre in the Crisis Period: Mnemonic Flashback of the past as a Defense Mechanism in the Present

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Abstract:

At the beginning of the 21st Century, Modern Greek Dramaturgy had already entered the Postmodernism phase, closely adhering to the trends of international theatre. The economic and cultural crisis that set in after the first decade brought an end to almost every innovative attempt. Obsolete types and forms, subjects and stories/plots, are recycled and updated. The Past reappears in exactly the same way it used to be depicted in 20th or even 19th century literary texts and successful comedies of the Greek cinema of the 50's-60's are almost completely prevailing. It is not, however, the first time this phenomenon is observed in the Modern Greek Theatre. A similar one appears in the Interwar period (1922-1940), when, for political, social and economic reasons reality becomes very negative for Greek playwrights. The recent and distant Past appears to have a redemptive effect, thus offering an alibi and a way-out deprived by the Present. This is the subject of our announcement, based on the notions and the function of theatrical memory and the multiple roles by which History is joining Theatre.

Keywords: modern Greek theatre, modern Greek dramaturgy, theatrical memory, history in theatre, mnemonic flashback

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, Greece has been caught in the vortex of a great economic, social, cultural and political turbulence, which has upturned its smooth European course and has brought about radical changes in the attitude, ideology and economic situation of the Greek citizens. After the international financial crisis between the years 2007-09 and since 2010, Greece has been involved in an unprecedented vortex of economic asphyxiation, great Depression and fiscal austerity, which was and is still being experienced by the Greeks as a multi-level and polynomial crisis (Helliwell, Layard & Sachs 2013).

A new reality took shape for the Greek society, with the main reference axis being the enforcement of "memorandums" and the conditions set by the creditors for the achievement of certain fiscal goals (Matsaganis 2018).

Under these new circumstances, a new reality is emerging in the theatre as well, which is greatly differentiated from any previous one and creates a new physiognomy, still at birth. Therefore, any conclusions made can be but simply initial observations, in need of further documentation. Theatre, as a sensitive receiver and indicator of this reality, vividly represents all previous and recent social changes (Patsalidis 2014a). Just prior to the period of the intense economic crisis and its consequences, Greek dramaturgy included works with subject matters, aesthetics and morphology totally integrated within the framework of the current European and international post-modern theatre (Freris 2014:108-112). Its ethnographic background has in many cases remained unsurpassed, since the axis of the native constitutes the one timeless constant for the modern Greek theatre since its very beginning in the 19th century (Pefanis 2000-2001:150-159).

Still, though those ethnographic elements can easily be traced, their combination with modern themes and aesthetics has given the ethnographic content a renovated and modernised form. Such plays are: "*California Dreaming*", "*The Milk*" (Vassilis Katsikonouris), "*Shaved chins*" (Giannis Tsiros), "*Rime*" (Brothers Koufali), "*Anna, said I*" (Panagiotis Mentis), "*Melted Butter*" (Sakis Serefas), "*Seven logical answers*" (Leonidas Prousalidis) (Rosi 2014:22-28).

The quest for an identity in the roots of the theatre with the modern theatre looking for its origins in the ancient Greek drama, tragedy or comedy, is an equally strong element of the continuity and cohesion of a so called "Greekness", the emergence of which is attempted by playwrights (Tziovas 1989). However, this time post-modernist tendencies are present and plays currently being written seem to have got free from this influence (Tsatsoulis2004:509-524). Archetypes and patterns are only distantly echoed. Intertextuality, adaptation, work in progress are some of the techniques and forms modern Greek playwrights choose in order to converse with the ancient Greek *mythos*. This category includes excellent examples, such as: "*Laios' murderer and the crows*", "*Cassandra speaks with the dead*" (Marios Pontikas), "*And Juliette*", "*Tonight we're dining at Iokasti's*", "*Andromache or a woman's landscape at the height of night* (Akis Dimou), "*Which 'Helen'?*" (Michalis Repas – Thanasis Papathanasiou), "*Cassandra's Annunciation*", "*The animals' vertigo before the slaughter*" (Dimitris Dimitriadis), "*The couple's bedroom*", "*Announcement*" (George Veltsos), "*Juliette of the Macintosh*" (Stelios Lytras), "*Clytemnestra?*" (Andreas Staikos) (Rosi 2014:28-30).

A third generic axis classifying the previous form of modern Greek dramaturgy is the one related to the general trends in world theatre such as feminist and minority theatre, as well as theatre about racism and marginalised groups (Blessios 2011: 647-660). The influx of immigrants and the augmentation of refugee populations, the increasing number of incidences of racial and sexist violence, the appearance of social groups initiate this new reality in Greece, especially in the capital and the major urban centres (Blessios2011:647-660). Indicatively we can mention: "*Thessaloniki in the first person*" (Sakis Serefas), "*Scarlet sky*" (Loula Anagnostaki), "*Got life into her hands*" (Vassilis Katsikonouris), "*Destiny* (Akis Dimou), "*When go-go dancers go-a-dancing* (Helena Pega), "*Invisible Olga*" (Giannis Tsiros), "*Homelands*", "*The Evros River across*" (Michalis Repas – Thanasis Papathanasiou), "*Austras or Wilderness*" (Lia Kitsopoulou).

Places of reception, theatre halls, other spaces used for performances also relate to dramaturgy. The theatre scene, especially in Athens, has moved away from the city center and high capacity theatre buildings, suitable for popular spectacles, and has been taken to the periphery. In run-down peripheral neighbourhoods, small spaces, usually industrial or abandoned warehouses, workshops, factories, get refurbished and converted into theatrical multi-function areas and stages. Small pioneering groups of actors and other theatre people get established there and create their own "locals", gradually attracting relevant audiences, which form fan clubs of supporters. Plays presented there are works of current thinking and aesthetics, with a new attitude towards their relationship with the audience, a different perception of the function of theatre and art, introducing the trends of world avant-garde and experimentation to Greece. ("*Galaxy*", "*Late Night*", "*Guns! Guns! Guns!*" by Blitz theatrical group, "*City-State*" by Kanigouda group, and so on) (Arfara 2014:147—161, Sidiropoulou 2014b:113-118).

And the great crisis occurs. Total economic collapse sweeps away the Greeks and the Greek society, bringing about a completely unprecedented reality, at least for the younger generation, with high rates of unemployment and economic disruption, total insecurity and a phobic attitude towards the future, breaking away from whatever had been considered a stable point of reference thus far (Tziovas 2017).The unquestionable impact of the adverse economic and social circumstances on the cultural creation, is a very serious subject that is up for discussion and concern. The comment that has been phrased in relation with Literature may be extended to theatre, as it consists by its nature a communication system, a social event, a polysemous cultural phenomenon that simultaneously comprises both the content as well as the substance of culture (Grammatas 2015).

How does theatre function? What is its presence in this age of crises and disruption like? Naturally, theatre does not die away. It survives and keeps on developing, finding ways to react, getting its potential together and inflicting radical cuts to its costs. Theatre has probably become the most popular type of entertainment and simultaneously a night out with numerous choices(Sidiropoulou 2014a:121-133). A play by Chekhov in a historical stage in the City Center or in a multi-purpose facility in Eleonas, a Greek comedy in an urban theatre or a bar, even the free experimentations in basements, galleries, old tanneries. However, a new reality is emerging at the same time, gradually gaining ground and multiplying at a fast pace, with the consent or tolerance and possibly (this needs to be proved) the complicity of the ruling class and the

establishment, or whatever has been left of it (Patsalidis 2014b:105-107). This, of course, does not mean that plays focusing-in various ways-on the problems the average Greek faces in the post 2010 period, are not written. On the contrary, there many and notable among which, we can mention Antonis Tsipianitis' monologue "*Redundant*" (2011), in which the heroine, a former social journalist in a lifestyle magazine, is suddenly made redundant and flat-broke, with the only belongings of her previous life being the Famous designers' expensive clothes and shoes lavished by fashion brands. Also, the working conditions and the soul-sucking competition is the topic of Jenny Dagla's play "*The fishbowl*" (2017). In other monologues also, with a male protagonist this time, is Christina Sabanikou's play "*Shut up*" or Manolis Karelis' "*The lost slipper*" (2015), there is the impression of a man that has quit life, has lost his job and his companion and experiences a continuous feeling of failure, boredom and lack of interest, whereas Minas Vidiadis' "*The downtown Parthenon*" (2011), presents the miserable living conditions of people that have experienced absolute poverty and have become homeless, through the conflict between two heroes: a stockbroker and a homeless person. In the plays "*Hard work*" by Giannis Mavritsakis (2015) and "*Exercise for strong knees*" by Andreas Flourakis (2013), the playwrights present the inhuman face of today's labor market that sometimes forces those who wish to find or preserve their posts to suffer major setbacks and sacrifice their personalities and dignity. Another social aspect of the crisis is today's migratory flow of young scientists and professionals (brain drain) away from Greece, abroad, as this is depicted in Vassilis Katsikonouris' play "*The Kangaroo*" (2014). Finally, we should mention Akis Dimou's "*The gap in person. A comedy about defeat*" (2015), which is full of references about modern reality, such as the loans that have fallen due, the ruinous debts, the politicians that are unable to improve the economic situation of the country, the banks and their policies.

A systematic turn toward the past can be observed as well as an intensive effort to promote outdated aesthetic forms, ideological structures and subject matters which used to function in the past (Hobsbawm 1972:3-19, Le Goff 1977, Olick 2007), responding to conditions and circumstances of those times (Grammatas 2014a:37-45).

History, the past, the obsolete come in aid of the present with a view to offering a way out, a solution, an exodus from the crisis (Grammatas 2018:188-193). Re-emerging of the values and models of those times offers an alibi for the present situation, so that the deadlock facing the Greek society can be overcome. Return to yester years is proposed as an alternative for the years to come. The future is described in terms of the past (Grammatas 2014b:94-99).

This is not the first such occurrence in the Greek theatre and this setback is not unknown to dramaturgy. It had reappeared in the past causing a similar phenomenon in the period just after the Asia Minor disaster of 1922, at that time marking mid-war dramaturgy (especially in Nikos Kazantakis', Spyros Melas' and George Theotokas' plays) (Grammatas 2006: 191-214).

The enormous disaster faced by Hellenism and the huge wave of refugee populations from Asia Minor, poverty and social hardships, political instability and intense ideological conflicts, led to the prevalence of fascism and the establishment of a dictatorship under Metaxas in 1936. As a result, dramaturgy was led to a wrapping-up and retreating. Playwrights once more turned to genres and forms of the past and attempted escapism via tragedy and historic drama. The same was attempted with ethnography, which proved to be the dominant genre of mid-war dramaturgy, proposing the return to nature and the original morals and customs of Greek province as the only way out, an alibi to the tragic and unpleasant historical past. History made its appearance as refuge, as a way out of the dead ends of the present and could function as a relief and salvation for both authors and spectators of mid-war plays. "*Honeybee*" (Nikos Kazantzakis), "*Rigas Velestinlis*" (Spyros Melas), "*Engagement parties*", "*Dragoness*" (Dimitris Bogris), "*The seedling*" (Pandelis Chorn) (Grammatas 2004: 143-150).

Nowadays, something similar seems to be appearing, timidly and covertly starting within comedy and the relieving impact of laughter (Smith 2018), being more apparent in types of plays like those addressed at young audiences and finally openly swamping the central and state Athenian stages through dramas and all sorts of other spectacles.

Examples of the first kind, the comedy are: "*Helias of the 16th*", "*The grocer's tomcat*", "*A crazy 40-year old*", "*The card player*". These are representative comedies written by distinguished comedy writers of the 1950-1960s, which precisely respond to the conditions of post-civil war Greece. The heroes in these plays are Greek petit bourgeois, struggling for survival in all sorts of ways, trying to make ends meet, facing their problems, such as oppression, bureaucracy, economic hardships, lack of education in philosophical, optimistic and often crafty ways.

They are extremely successful plays, which, later, at the prime time of Greek cinema, were made into films featuring a cast of renowned Greek comedians of the time: "*The aunt from Chicago*", "*Thief shouting*", "*Mademoiselle's simpleton*" becoming box office successes and entertaining all generations and later still television viewers. Today there is once more such a retreat, with known films coming back on to the theatre stage, featuring current TV comedy stars, who stereotypically imitate their cinematic models, thus becoming artistically objectionable, in an effort to entertain their audience with the airs and graces and the situations experienced by the heroes they impersonate, belonging to a reality so far, but at the same time so close to that of the present.

One more, not less representative category is that of works from the classical repertory and musical theatre, known from their cinematic, theatrical or musical versions in the past, which are also making a powerful comeback, nostalgically taking audiences back to the old times and conditions etc.

Such a case is that of "*The Red Lanterns*" (George Galanos), great box office success of the '50s, which showcases the social aspect of the theatre, in direct relation to the Greek reality of the post-civil war period. There is also "*Our Great Circus*", an equally great theatrical success by Iakovos Kampantellis, which, in the 1970s brought to the stage the first political messages against the then almighty state of the generals established after the cul-de-sac of 1967. Vitsentzos Kornaros's "*Erotokritos*" is another example. This great epic-lyrical poem presented in its dramatized form, offers audiences a spectacular performance and the same can be said about Bob Wilson's "*Odyssey*" and Stathis Livathinos' "*Iliad*" (both adapted by Homeric epic poems).

We should also mention great musical hyper productions such as "*Aman Amen*" put together by composer Stavros Xarhakos, "*I'll take you away with me*" by Aggelos Pyriohos, "*Looking for Attik*" by Lambros Liavas and so on.

The case of dramatized fiction is yet another representative trend in contemporary Greek theatre. It first appeared in the 1980s with works such as "*Scenes from the life of D. Vizyinos*", a compilation of short stories and other pieces of prose by the namesake author, "*Makrigiannis' memoirs*", based on the autobiographical account of the 1821 Revolution with General Makrigiannis as the main hero as well as poems by D. Solomos such as "*Kritikos*" and "*Free Besieged*".

This tradition has been reinforced both by the dead ends facing dramaturgy and the contemporary versions of postmodernity in the theatre. Moreover, the familiarity established in the conscience of the audience through readership gains prominence today, acting as a safe refuge offered by the illustration of past relationships and situations very close to the heart of the majority of contemporary audiences.

Among the works of the same category, some distinguished ones are "*The Killer Woman*" and "*The American*" by Al. Papadiamantis, "*The Pope Joanna*" and "*The Tale of a husband from Syros*" by Em. Roidis, "*My mother's sin*" and "*My life's only journey*" by G. Vizyinos, "*The Woman from Zante*" by D. Solomos, "*Captain Mihalis*" by N. Kazantzakis, "*Hagiography of Andreas Kordopatis*" by Gr. Valtinos, "*The double book*" by D. Chatzis and so on. The same category may include staged versions of great epic and epic-lyrical compositions such as Homer's *Iliad*, the Byzantine epic of "*Digenis Akritas*" (10th c.) and "*Erotokritos*" by V. Kornaros (16th c.).

Another category comprises dramatized biographies which either already existed or were especially written in prose based on the life stories of renowned music figures such as "*Eftychia Papagiannopoulou*" and "*Sotiria Bellou. The wandering life of a rebetissa*", "*Who is after my life?*" based on the life of composer M. Theodorakis, a stage act framed by the great musical hits of past decades. Another distinctive example is that of "*Aggela Papazoglou*", a stage act presenting the life of

an emblematic personality connected to modern History (The Asia Minor Disaster), which has been a box office success for twelve years.

To round up the documentation of all previously mentioned views concerning the relieving effect of the past and the turn of modern Greek theatre to historic subjects and obsolete situations, which can serve as a refuge and an alibi for the current unpleasant reality, we also have to refer to the theatrical space as the place of reception and promotion of theatrical spectacles.

All the previously mentioned performances take place in the Athenian scene and grand theatrical multifunctional facilities, addressed at a mass audience of middle and upper classes, of relatively homogeneous mature age groups sharing the same memories of the past. Theatre stages have increased, but they have also differentiated as far as the repertory, the dimensions and the spatial planning is concerned, as well as the audience they are addressed at (Sidiropoulou2014b:113-118). Simultaneously, a lot of groups have appeared and established in the Athenian theater escape, whose work is based on collective creation, improvisation, interview material, the exploitation of modern technologies and so on, thus attracting a considerable part of the audience. However, the arithmetically impressive picture (about 300 similar stages), is not responding to reality, since the limited number of performances given on them, the limited space for the reception of the spectators, together with the limited duration of the winter theatre season, are impossible to be compared with the fewer but bigger and on a daily basis function of the central stages, which are visited by a large number of spectators, who see plays of the popular theatre we mentioned above (Dimaki-Zora 2015).

Nostalgia, reminiscence, escapism and beautification of the times past, covering and hiding reality, the innocent or not so innocent complicity of the audience to the objectionable intentions and choices of the contributors constitute a new reality for the Greek theatre, a response to the challenges and deadlocks of the Present experienced by the Greek society.

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