

The Theatre of the Modern Greek Diaspora

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Introduction

The theatre as a cultural element is an integral part of the diachronic physiognomy of Hellenism, in the national centre as well as in the countries of its diaspora.

By the term “diaspora” (etymologically deriving from *speiro* “to sow” and *dia* “over”), eschewing the historians’ emphasis on the geographical criterion and the maintenance of material, cultural and sentimental links with the national centre¹ for the process of socialisation and identity formation, is meant “the geographic dispersion of ethnic groups which, cut off but not necessarily alienated from their group of origin, reference, or national trunk, live as ethnic or minority groups within a culturally different society, move between two reference groups and two cultural systems, and therefore formulate their identity under particular conditions”.² Very few nations have been as migratory, both in numbers and across classes from ancient times until now, as the Greeks. Demographic data for the diaspora Greeks have always constituted a contentious subject, however, resulting in a variety of estimates. Presently, diasporic Hellenism is generally considered to consist of about five million individuals³ in comparison to 11, 171, 740 for Greece itself,⁴ that is the Greeks of the diaspora are equivalent to 45% of the Greeks in the national centre.

The Greeks of the diaspora who are today dispersed throughout the world came originally not only from the mainland and the islands of Greece and Cyprus but also from places historically Greek, such as Constantinople, Smyrna, other areas of Asia Minor, Eastern Thrace and Epirus, or other countries where they had long been settled, such as Egypt, the countries of the Middle East, Romania, Bulgaria, Russia, Ukraine and elsewhere, places where, in the run of the years, the Greeks had developed thriving communities and had created Greek intellectual centres.

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However, no matter in which part of the world the Greeks have originated or put down roots, they have always carried with them not only the deeply rooted elements of their language, culture and religion, but also the long tradition of theatre art, which they have also passed down to their children in the new country. This does not mean that in all the countries where they have settled, the Greeks have developed theatre, either as literary writing in dialogical form or as stage production, but that where there are established Greek *paroikies*, we very frequently encounter individuals of Greek descent who, regardless of the foreign environment and the circumstances in which they find themselves, express their deep interest and their talent in this genre.

The theatre of the Modern Greek diaspora is not a contemporary phenomenon. On the contrary, even if it is not as old as Greek immigration itself, still it is one of the most representative and genuine elements of the character of Hellenism abroad.

The theatre of today's Greek diaspora is a dynamic and energetic phenomenon, characterised by originality and liveliness. Moreover, it must be acknowledged that these qualities are attributable mainly to its Greek roots and its intimate ties with its Greek traditions, and to some extent to the influence exerted by the theatre of the Greek metropolis.

The theatre of Hellenism which has arisen outside Greece not only constitutes part of the Ancient and Modern Greek theatre tradition, but it also complements it while maintaining, at the same time, its own character. It also allows this artistic genre to be examined and studied as a separate entity, on the one hand because of the different and dominant socio-cultural, political, geographical, linguistic and historical conditions of the new environments which have shaped it and, on the other hand, because of the idiosyncratic atmosphere of the immigrant community life in which it was born and developed as a final product of the age-old phenomenon of Greek immigration.

Another important characteristic of the theatre of the Modern Greek diaspora is that this genre, examined separately in the context of each particular country where it developed, clearly exhibits its own distinctive personality, which derives from the particular psychological climate, and which is shaped by the special conditions and environment, apart from the immigrant's native land, also deeply by those of the Greek *paroikia* and the dominant society of the particular country in which the Greek playwrights live and work. Consequently these "theatres" have acquired an expression

and tone not only different from the theatre art of metropolitan Greece, but some even different from that of the other countries of the diaspora, therefore comprising separate entities in themselves, while their creators, according to their talent, acquire a place among the contributors to the intellectual and social life of their adopted homelands. However, although the theatre art in the different countries of the Greek diaspora is autonomous and constitutes distinctive entities which can be appreciated and examined on their own merit, still they share a common link which binds them together: the multidimensional influence deriving from Greece, a fact which characterises not only the Greek diasporic theatre but also the Greek diasporic literature (poetry and prose) in general.

An additional characteristic – this time from the linguistic point of view – is that part of this theatre corpus is composed in the Greek language (usually the domain of first generation Greek immigrant playwrights), sometimes blended with loan words and/or loan translations from the language of the foreign dominant society, while the other part, basically created by the second and third generations, is written in the language of the host country. An exception, although rather rare to this pattern, is that a few first generation Greek immigrants, who feel secure expressing themselves in the language of the new country, write in both languages.

Nevertheless, the fact is that today there is Greek diasporic theatre, both as theatre literature and as stage production, which has been cultivated for centuries now by the people of Greek descent in various parts of the world and in many cases it is quite impressive and sizable, as well as diverse in its themes, styles, languages and linguistic forms. Furthermore, this theatre, on the one hand, has played a central role in the formation of Greek culture in each host country of the diaspora and on the other hand, it has contributed to the expansion of the definition of the concept of Greek theatre of modern Greece, as well as of global modern Greek culture.

However, despite its vital contribution to the enrichment of Greek community life and also to the intellectual life of the host country, sadly it is noticed that no matter how laudable some plays are, academic recognition of diasporic theatre is usually lacking, and it is awaiting full research and study, as it deserves, and therefore it is not included in the works of the literary and theatre historians of the Greek communities, the host country and Greece itself. If some of this body of theatre has been studied and researched, it has been mainly as literary writing and even less as stage production.⁵

The aim of this issue of *Études Helléniques / Hellenic Studies* is to provide as comprehensive a picture as possible of the theatre of the Modern Greek diaspora to non-Greek-language readers. An effort has been made to include contributions by experts (producers, theatrologists, academics and other scholars) on the modern, mainly twentieth century, Greek immigrant *paroikies*, as well as the historical *paroikies* in different lands. Some of the contributors investigate their subject from a more theoretical point of view (historical, socio-cultural etc.), others from a more practical one, focusing mainly on stage productions and their repertoires. As a whole, however, the contributions provide a fascinating prism through which the reader, on the one hand, can compare the theatre (both as literature and as stage production) of modern immigrant communities with the historical ones, and on the other hand, can derive a panoramic reflection of modern Greek theatre in its global context. In reality, these two aspects of theatre art expand the definition and the boundaries of the concept of the theatre beyond the traditional one which emphasises mainly performance.

It is obvious that due to the constraints of time and space which a journal publication imposes, it is impossible to cover all the communities or countries of the Greek diaspora (present and past) which have developed Greek theatre art. Yet, based on the number of articles contributed, the expertise of their writers, as well as by the geographical expanse covered, this issue is intended to constitute a satisfactory source of reference on the subject and hopefully to ignite the spark of inspiration for further study regarding more communities in the countries of the global Greek diaspora.

Another aim of this collective issue is to encourage more research and raise more interest in the collection of relevant material (scripts, posters, programs, films, photographs, diaries, journals, newspapers, CDs, etc.) in order to supplement the already existing archives in libraries, research centres, educational institutions, etc., and thus preserve the history of the diasporic theatre and provide a wealth of knowledge to the Greeks of the national centre, as well as to the Greeks of the diaspora regarding what their compatriots have achieved and are continuing to achieve in the global Greek community. The articles of this issue bear witness to the efforts of their contributors to preserve and record the valuable material and information which otherwise would be lost.

In this special tribute of *Études Helléniques / Hellenic Studies* we focus on the theatre of the Modern Greek diaspora with articles on both modern

“immigrant *paroikies*” in Germany, Belgium, Canada, the United States, Venezuela, South Africa and Australia, as well as on the “historical *paroikies*” of Constantinople, Smyrna, Bulgaria, Romania, Egypt, Pontos, Russia and the former Soviet Union. One article also examines the Greek-Cypriot community theatre in England. Two additional articles make an introductory contribution, each from a different and valuable point of view.

One contrast which emerges from reading the articles on the historical and immigrant *paroikies* reflects the different patterns of development of the Greek theatre in these lands. In the context of the historical *paroikies*, where the Greek communities existed and thrived in some case from olden times becoming prosperous and powerful, the Greek theatre, like other artistic forms, developed as a natural complement in an established and, therefore, generally supportive and economically sustainable atmosphere. The advantage of geographical proximity to the metropolis and to Europe and their intellectual and cultural movements further contributed to the development and success of the Greek theatre in these *paroikies*. On the other hand, in the modern immigrant *paroikies* of the Greek diaspora, we observe that the Greek theatre developed in a more culturally and economically disadvantaged situation where the Greek immigrants as a new minority group in a multicultural and multiethnic environment were confronted by the realities of hardship and survival as well as the challenges of adjustment, assimilation and the fear of rejection by the host society. As a result, in this context the theatre emerged along different lines, along with the growth of economic wealth and influence of their Greek communities.

Mythological and Linguistic Aspects

Tilemachos Moudatsakis' article focuses on the ecumenical and diasporic character of theatre art, linked to migration, displacement and artistic creation as heralded by Dionysus, the god of μέθη (drunkenness) and έκσταση (ecstasy) and also the god of the main performance space, who keeps moving in the world creating miracles. According to Moudatsakis, Dionysus also became the first scenographer in theatre mythology.

The Historical Diaspora

Chrysothemis Stamatopoulou-Vasilakou explores the rise, bloom and decline, as well as the affecting parameters of the theatre in the prosperous

Greek *paroikies* of Asia Minor up to the Catastrophe, and on the Balkan peninsula from 1800 to 1922. She examines the importance of Greek theatre, with a special emphasis on Constantinople and Smyrna, although she also refers to the theatre activities of the Greeks in Bulgaria and Romania, but in a more restricted manner, because, as she mentions, of the limited relevant bibliography on the subjects. Based on sources of both the historical periods and contemporary studies, the writer analytically reflects on the nature of these historical *paroikies*, not only affected socially by the political events of the time, but also intellectually by the impact of the European theatre trends on middle class audiences. Stamatopoulou-Vasilakou provides a wealth of information on theatre companies (professional and local amateur), touring groups, actors, repertoires, as well as the rise of vaudeville and the revue, pointing out that finally the demise of these prosperous Greek *paroikies* during the twentieth century because of the ensuing political events, also caused an abrupt end to all this thriving Greek theatre activity in those lands.

Konstantinos Fotiadis provides a most informative article on the significance of the Greek theatre in Pontos, Russia and the former USSR, areas which, according to him, still unfortunately remain almost completely unknown. The writer tracks the course of Greek theatre from its beginning in those historically vital *paroikies* presenting eye-witness accounts and critiques of the times regarding the authorship of plays as well as the quality of the performances, referring in detail to the many different local amateur theatre groups, their tours to various cities (Kerasous, Amisos, Argroupolis, etc.), their contribution to the Greek Revolution of 1821, and the essential financial benefit from the performances to the Greek schools, churches, orphanages, cultural associations, the poverty stricken and persecuted Greeks – and all this under the watchful eye and control of the dominant regimes. Fotiadis concludes his discussion by focusing on the plight of the theatre and its struggle for survival after the rise of the Bolsheviks, pointing out that, although in 1922-37 Hellenism of the USSR experienced an excellent intellectual and artistic revitalization, what followed was a period of cultural and physical genocide resulting from the Stalinist policy of the systematic cleansing of ethnic minorities. The last theatre, the so-called Greek Theatre of Sochoum in Abkhazia closed in 1988 as a result of the forced expatriation of the Greeks from that area, due to the increasing political tensions and conflict.

In his article **Euthimios Souloyannis** portrays the Greek theatre activity in Egypt during the twentieth century as a period which was vitalised in

comparison to that of the nineteenth century. The writer points out that the beginning of Greek community theatre in this country can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century in Alexandria (the first theatre, "Zizinia", was built in 1870 in this city) and evolved slowly, flourishing in the post-1940 years with the founding, mainly in Alexandria and Cairo, of professional and semi-professional groups and the invitation of renowned theatre companies from Athens. Souloyannis mentions that during the Second World War several shows were staged both for the Greek and Allied troops. This heyday of the Greek theatre continued vigorously until the 1950s following the decline of the prosperous Greek communities in the various cities of Egypt.

The Immigrant Diaspora

Maria Karavia outlines the variety of theatre activities in Germany since 1960, when a broader wave of modern immigration started moving towards this country, and in Belgium since 1985 when the Greek Theatre Workshop, the oldest Greek theatre group in Brussels, was founded.

Regarding Germany, the writer explains that at that time the theatre served as a gathering place for many politically persecuted artists from Greece, although some of those groups vanished after the political changeover in Greece and the ensuing repatriation of many of their artists. Karavia refers to various theatre groups of the last four decades, with special emphasis and detail regarding her own group, the Greek Theatre of Wuppertal, which she has led as stage director and a leading actress since its founding in 1990.

In her remarks relating to Belgium, she sets out the activities of the aforementioned Greek Theatre Workshop (the Greek section of Atelier Theatral des Institutions Européennes) and the Greek Theatre of Belgium, founded in 1985 and in 1992 correspondingly. Karavia's article gives a relevant first-hand insight into Greek theatre activities in two countries of the Modern Greek diaspora in Europe.

Anastassios Petsalas provides a detailed account of Greek-Cypriot community theatre in Britain since its beginning in the early twentieth century, preceded by a short introduction to the theatre of Cyprus itself. His article makes reference to the various theatre companies and their productions, both amateur and semi-professional, their actors and producers as well as to the internal problems, difficulties and discord which confronted them. Furthermore, he comments on the impact of the visiting theatre companies from Greece and Cyprus. Petsalas argues that the repertory of the

early Greek-Cypriot theatre in Britain had been influenced by the colonial politics of the time, as well as by the long theatrical tradition of the island of Cyprus and of Greece. He further proposes that today many Greek-Cypriot actors and stage producers try to avoid “ghettoisation”, preferring to be stand on an equal level with their British colleagues and become known and recognised as artists through the British stage.

Stephanos Constantinides’ article which he characterises as a first tentative on the Greek theatre in Canada, since it hasn’t been studied up to date and remains terra incognita, draws up a portrait of the situation since the beginning of the Greek communities in this country. Greek businessmen controlled the main theatre halls in the 1920s in Montreal but it seems that they were only the owners of the buildings without any relation to repertory theater. Before the Second World War we know little about Greek theatre activity in Canada. Curiously the roots of this theatre are traced to the small Western Canadian communities. Only after the Second World War we begin to have limited information about theatre activity. The 60s is the period when we can better investigate it. In all cases we are speaking of amateur theatre performed mainly in Montreal. It was established by amateur theatre groups or it was performed in Greek schools. The author proposes a distinction between two kinds of Greek theatre in Canada, the patriotic-folkloric one and the social-political one.

Katerina Diakoumopoulou presents an analytical account of the theatre of the Greeks as new and disadvantaged immigrants of the United States from 1895 until today. Working her way through the decades, she traces the changing pattern of theatre activities, the rise at the end of the nineteenth century, particularly in Chicago and New York, the marked decline in the second decade of the twentieth century as many young Greeks enlisted in the Greek army during the wars of 1912 to 1922, and the rise again from 1920 onwards with the participation bolstered by second generation Greeks as well. Diakoumopoulou then considers how after the Russian revolution a nucleus of playwrights was formed deriving from socialist theatre groups and producing revolutionary plays, whereas from the language viewpoint, after World War II the Greek-Americans wrote their plays mainly in English. She completes her study providing the Greek immigrants’ production of plays as well as the general repertory of the theatre companies.

Constantine Palamidis concentrates mainly on the Greek theatre groups of Venezuela and their repertory since their comparatively new presence in 1973

with the founding of the community Greek theatre of Caracas and a year later of the Greeks of Venezuela, a community organisation which included a theatre group (1974-1984). The Greek presence continued to expand within the National Theatre of Venezuela (1985-1991) with the significant contribution of the brothers Pantelis and Constantine Palamidis, in the staging of work by Aristophanes, Lorca, Ritsos, Racine and others. The writer surveys the years from 1984 to 2002 citing the theatre groups of Greece which have participated in the International Theatre Festival of Caracas, as well as their performances in Greek in the *paroikies* of Caracas and Valencia (2000-2002).

Nicos Spanoudes focuses on the way the identity of the Greek theatre in South Africa has developed from its beginnings in the early twentieth century through Apartheid and Post-Apartheid times, when the Modern Greek Diaspora Theatre and Local Protest Theatre moved from expressing disparity to reflecting shared angst, to the present state with its comedic flair appealing to Greek and non-Greek youth alike in South Africa's equally young democracy. Spanoudes also discusses the influence of Classical Greek theatre in the striving of South Africa's Hellenism to maintain its identity in a foreign land, as well as its impact and inspiration on South African intellectuals (Nelson Mandela, Athol Fugard, J. M. Coetzee and others) to write and stage plays of their own.

In his article **George Kanarakis**, following a historical developmental approach, provides a cohesive account of the theatre of Australian Hellenism (development, achievements and contribution) from its beginning in the early twentieth century until today under the multifaceted conditions of Australian society. To present a more comprehensive picture, the writer examines the course of both Greek and English-language theatre. He also argues that the theatre of the Greeks in Australia in both its aspects (as literary writing in dialogical form and as stage production), despite its importance in the more complete projection of Hellenism's profile in Australian society, its essential role and contribution to Greek community life and to the maintenance of Greek language as well as the better understanding of Greek culture, is still awaiting full research and study, resulting in its rare (if any) inclusion in the works of Greek Australian scholars, and even much more in the works of the literary or theatre historians of Greece.

Obviously the theatre of the Modern Greek diaspora cannot be exhausted in one journal issue, irrespective of the quality and value of the contributions regarding both the theoretical and practical aspects they address, in addition

to the many countries of the historical and immigrant diaspora which they encompass. Many aspects and topics remain to be researched and discussed and more countries remain to be explored. However, I am confident that many of the ideas flowing from the articles of this issue of *Études Helléniques/Hellenic Studies* reflect the importance of the entire subject and consequently they will generate more research and vigorous discussion and analysis for the benefit of our Hellenic Letters, both in the national centre and throughout the diaphora alike.

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NOTES

1. I. K. Hassiotis, *Review of the History of the Modern Greek Diaspora*, Thessaloniki: Vaniat, 1993, p. 19 [In Greek].
2. Michael Damanakis, "Neohellenic State and Neohellenic Diaspora: Institutional and Educational-Political Dimensions in Their Interrelation", in Michael Damanakis, et al, eds, *History of the Modern Greek Diaspora. Research and Teaching*, Vol. A', Rethymno: E. DIA. M. M. E., University of Crete, 2004, pp. 25-44 [Conference Proceedings, 4-6 July 2003, p. 26 [In Greek].
3. For example, among others, John Hassiotis (1993, p. 168), based on Greek consular figures, community calculations and censuses where existing, estimates the Greeks of the diaspora to be at a maximum of 4, 5000, 000, whereas George Prevelakis of the Sorbonne University (1998, p. 4) places the total just below five million, but according to the Council of Hellenes Abroad (SAE) the figure provided is 6, 020, 000 (Gregory Niotis, n. d., p. 29).
4. The figure 11, 171, 740 is the April 2008 estimate of the population of Greece for January 1, 2007 provided by the General Secretariat of the National Statistical Service of Greece.
5. A remarkable exception is the University of Crete's *Paedeia Omogenon* program, which since its inception in 1997/98 has made its aim, together with the maintenance and promotion of the Greek language and civilisation overseas,

especially in the Greek diaspora, the study and promotion of school theatre as a decisive means of cultivating Greek language and civilization as part of diasporic Greek language education. In this context in 2006 a symposium entitled “Theatre, Diaspora and Education” took place at the University of Crete with its proceedings circulated on CD in 2007.

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Prevelakis, George, “Finis Graeciae or the Return of the Greeks? State and Diaspora in the Context of Globalisation”, *Transcomm Working Papers*, Transnational Communities Programme, School of Geography, University of Oxford, 12 November 1998, pp. 1-10.