

The Greek Communities in the Balkans and Asia Minor and Their Theatrical Activity 1800-1922

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RÉSUMÉ

Le but de cet article est l'examen analytique de la vie du théâtre au sein des communautés grecques, économiquement robustes, de l'Asie Mineure, durant l'époque de l'Empire Ottoman jusqu'à la catastrophe de 1922, ainsi que dans la Péninsule Balkanique. Un accent spécial est mis sur l'étude du théâtre grec de Constantinople et de Smyrne, d'une part, à cause de la présence des populations grecques dans ces grandes villes importantes qui étaient également des centres d'affaires et des ports majeurs dans la Méditerranée, et, d'autre part, en raison de la richesse de l'information fournie par les sources bibliographiques existantes. En revanche, la référence à la vie du théâtre des Grecs en Bulgarie et Roumanie, est plus limitée à cause de la bibliographie restreinte disponible à ce jour. Parallèlement aux événements historiques de cette époque, sont examinés le développement et le déclin de l'activité théâtrale grecque dans ces régions ainsi que les facteurs, qui y contribuent: les troupes de théâtre amateurs et professionnels, les acteurs, les traducteurs et les intellectuels.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is the comprehensive examination of theatre life in the economically robust Greek *paroikies* of Asia Minor, during the Ottoman Empire until the Asia Minor Catastrophe, as well as of the Balkan Peninsula. Special emphasis is given to the study of Greek theatre in Constantinople and Smyrna, on the one hand, because of the large Greek Orthodox populations in these significant large cities which were also business centres and major ports on the Mediterranean Sea, and, on the other hand, because of the wealth of information provided in the existing bibliographical sources. In contrast, reference to the theatre life of the Greeks in Bulgaria and Romania, because of the limited up-to-date relevant bibliography, is more restricted. In parallel with the historical events of the time, consideration is given to the rising and declining course of Greek theatre activity in these areas, as well as to its contributing factors: professional and amateur companies, actors, playwrights, translators and intellectuals.

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By the seventeenth century, Greeks had already settled in various areas of the Balkans, seeking their fortune and exploiting the various economic opportunities in the developing markets.¹ Apart from the economic motives, there were two main reasons for the relocation of the Greeks in the Balkan Peninsula: it was easier for them to associate with the native Orthodox Christian population, while the administration of these areas seemed moderate regarding the Ottoman Empire, due to Russia's protective intervention.²

Thus, the Greek communities under formation, which were increasing or decreasing in numbers depending on the historical circumstances, became quickly urbanized because of their prosperity. The theatre was cultivated within the scope of their activities, both as a means of amusement, according to the Western way of life of the middle classes, and as a means of cultivating the national conscience and the linguistic and cultural unification of the Greeks everywhere.³

Constantinople

Background

In the multiformity of South Eastern Europe, Constantinople, an international commercial centre with a profound multiethnic character, was throughout the centuries a meeting-place of various cultural currents, apart from the political searching. The indigenous Greek element, sometimes infused with new blood through the relocation of Greek populations coming from continental and insular Greece, and sometimes orphaned, depending on the prevailing political circumstances, either favourable or not, began to come into contact with the theatre as a means of expressing civilization and social communication since the seventeenth century. This contact was achieved through theatrical or theatre-like events organized in private areas, consular mansions or wealthy people's residences. A typical example was the Jesuits' theatrical activity in Constantinople in 1607 and 1623, the stage activity of comedy makers at the Persian embassy in 1650, a series of performances at the French embassy in January-February of 1673, similarly at the Swedish embassy in 1786 and at the Venice mansion in 1815.⁴

After the sporadic theatrical activities of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, of which we are aware thanks to the journals and the texts of travellers of the time, the Greek theatre in Constantinople since the nineteenth century has had a more stable and wide presence.

Its action, always linked with the historical course of the Greek Orthodox

element there, as was only natural, had a fluctuating course. For a much more effective understanding of this theatrical phenomenon, the theatrical activity of the Greeks of Constantinople from the nineteenth century until 1922 is presented here classified into four specific periods.

First Period (1800-1821)

There is an unbreakable tie between the pre-revolutionary period (1800-1821) and the prosperous class of Phanariots, namely the residents of the Phanar quarter, and their intellectual pursuits. The theatre was cultivated as a literary genre within the scope of the enlightening pre-revolutionary movement.⁵ This literary genre as a new way of intellectual expression was encouraged for its educational and moral uplifting influence on the people of the time, but also for its contribution to the national awakening.⁶

Under the influence of the European Enlightenment, the Phanariots, educated in the West and being multilingual, got round to the theatre at first by reading the drama texts of European playwrights in the original language at their evening gatherings (in French, the predominant language at the time); the second phase included the translation of representative works of Western playwrights into Greek (plays by Molière, Goldoni, Metastasio, Alfieri and Voltaire). Then, the Phanariots began writing original plays directly into Greek (Georgios Soutsos, Iakovos Rizos Neroulos, Iakovos Rizos Rangavis) and tested their strength in amateur stage attempts at evening parties in their mansions.⁷

Information on these amateur performances can be found in Alexandros Rizos Rangavis' *Memoirs*⁸, in the *Surviving Literary Writings* of Constantinos Economou of the Economos family⁹, as well as in the writings of the travellers Comte de Marcellus¹⁰ and R. Walsh. Drawing out of this documented evidence, it is worth mentioning the recitation of an extract from Aeschylus' *Persians* in 1820, a few months before the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence. The extract was recited by a student of the Greek School of Kydonia, under the guidance of Constantinos Economou, in the mansion of Dimitrios Manos, the former postelnikos in the administration of Wallachia, situated in the district of Therapeia. Another performance was that organized by Gerasimos Pitsamanos in the house of a pharmacist in Pera in June 1820, when the Greek Revolution had already begun, and which had a bloody upshot due to the violent intervention of the Turks.¹¹ The play being staged was probably *Constantine Palaeologus* by Ioannis Zambelios.

Naturally, all the associated activities were about to be interrupted during the ten years of the Greek national uprising.

Second Period (1836-1857)

The second period was that between 1836 and 1858, namely the preparation of the flourish that would follow in the second half of the century. Quite a few years after the extensive massacre of Hellenism in Constantinople during the Revolution, in reprisal for every successful action of the revolutionaries in the theatre of war, the remaining Greek element was infused with new blood. This came as a result of a new movement of Greek immigrants to Constantinople, which took place from 1832 onwards, due to the opening of new markets on the Black Sea.

The economic reconstruction also brought about the cultural one. Thus, at that time, new original plays (*Socrates*, *Margaritis*, *The Would-Be Philosopher*, *Misse Kozis*) were written, and plays by Schiller, *Kabale und Liebe* (1843), Molière, *Les Fourberies de Scapin* (1847), *George Dandin, ou Le Mari Confondu* (1854), and Victor Hugo, *Angelo, Tyran de Padoue* (1850) were translated. From the 1850s, French and Italian companies, performing mostly melodramas, were invited to Constantinople by the French and Italian communities, whose members also staged amateur performances.¹²

Third Period (1858-1899)

From 1858, the year in which the first public Greek performance was staged, until the end of the nineteenth century, is the third period during which the Greek theatre flourished. This period is linked with the peak that the Greeks in Constantinople reached in the economic, social, educational and cultural sectors. This was the result of the favourable terms of the Hatt-i Hümayun (Imperial Edict) (1856), which granted religious and civil rights to the minorities of the Ottoman Empire.

Since 1860 the Greek theatre had been present on a daily basis in Constantinople's theatrical life, with public performances in the Greek language staged in various theatrical venues (theatres, meeting halls of societies, schools and cafés).

Touring companies from Greece played a leading part in the flourishing of the Greek theatre in Constantinople. The first Greek companies, disillusioned by the negative posture of Athenian bourgeois society which, imitating European manners frequented the performances of foreign

companies, sought their fortune in the financially prospering Greek communities. Thus, the companies of Pantelis Soutsas, Dionysios Tavoularis, Demosthenes Alexiades, Mihail Arniotakis, Nikolaos Lekatsas, Georgios Petrides and Ekaterini Veroni were performing in Constantinople for a long period of time and at different dates. Smaller companies too, such as those of Ioannis Kyriakou, Demosthenes Neris, Antonios Tassoglou, Xenophontas Isaias, Constantinos Halkiopoulos, Dimitrios Kotopoulos, and others, also staged performances occasionally, mostly in the districts and suburbs of Constantinople that had a Greek population. Bearing names of the ancient Greek playwrights and frequently changing them (the “Aristophanes”, “Aeschylus”, “Euripides”, “Sophocles”, “Menander” company), both the first ones, with their many-member casts and perfect organization, and the second ones with fewer means, contributed to a thriving theatrical life in Constantinople for over 60 years.¹³

As for their repertory, the professional companies at first performed works from the abundance of European play-writing, which could offer them a variety of plays and thus enabled them to satisfy the demands of the public, regarding daily changes in their program. In this way, they were able to perform a drama play and a one-act comedy each day, according to the standard practice of the time. Initially, they chose European neo-classical works, whose themes inspired by the ancient Greek past contributed to bolstering the national consciousness of the enslaved Greeks (playwrights such as Alfieri, Monti, Voltaire and Metastasio), as well as classic comedies by Molière and Goldoni that castigated human weaknesses and faults, and had many to offer towards this direction, namely to mould the people morally.

The Greek companies' repertoire would be enriched later with works of all European literary styles starting with the great Romantics represented by Victor Hugo, Shakespeare, Goethe, Schiller, Byron and Alexander Dumas, continuing with the popular writers of melodrama (A. Dennery, A. Bourgeois, V. Séjour, F. Legouvé, E. Cormon, P. Giacometti, B. Lytton, and others) to lead in the last twenty years of the century to the realistic drama. Greek theatrical plays (dramas and comedies) were only performed if they were considered “harmless” by the Turkish censorship or managed to elude its attention.

Research to date has recorded nearly one thousand titles of plays (original and translations) that were performed on the theatrical stage of Constantinople in the nineteenth century.¹⁴

The amateur companies, creations of the restless nature of Constantinople's

Hellenism, contributed also to the theatrical life. These native companies depicted the high intellectual and cultural level of Constantinople's Greek community. Competing with the foreign communities, their ambition was to create their own theatrical tradition and leave their mark on artistic creation. In the periods of the absence of professional companies, the amateurs worthily filled the gap in the Greek theatrical stage. Their ideological motive was to prove the superiority of Greek cultural forces over those of the foreign communities, to reaffirm their sense of being a national community in this multinational environment, and through the theatre to cultivate the Greek language and teach indirectly Greek history and tradition.

Societies of all sorts (educational, musical, charitable, benevolent, cultural, etc.), which appeared quite a lot when the political situation permitted, acted as the nursery of amateur theatre in Constantinople¹⁵. In these societies the most committed people acted provenly, being fully aware of the role they had to play for the benefit of the Greeks as a whole.

Beyond the ulterior national motives, this whole theatrical experimentation actually introduced a significant part of the Greek society there to the theatre. This included people with intellectual and artistic leanings, young people in particular, who came into contact with plays of both Greek and non-Greek playwrights and tried to bridge the gap between reading plays and performing them.

Another point worth mentioning is the contribution of societies in supporting and strengthening local theatrical production. A close study of their repertoire shows a clear preference for the plays of Greek writers from Constantinople.

The lectures organised by various societies (for example, the "Mnemosyne" Club in Phanar, the "Omonoia" Club in Diplokionio, the Chryssoupolis Club, etc.), and foremost among them, the Hellenic Literary Society of Constantinople, also contributed significantly to disseminating theatrical education to a wider public.¹⁶

As for their subjects, these lectures emphasized mostly the origins and the development of the theatre, laying particular emphasis on ancient drama (tragedy, comedy, satirical drama). Stress was also laid on the analysis of the works by ancient Greek playwrights, as this conformed to the spirit of the time, i. e. Greek-centred thinking and linking the present with the ancient Greek heritage. The analysis of playwrights and works of the European playwriting had a secondary role.¹⁷

The intelligentsia of Constantinople were the third factor of the Greek theatre's flourishing. It was the scholars, the journalists and the educators who by writing, translating and publishing plays created the theatrical literature of Constantinople.

The playwrights of Constantinople cultivated all the genres of theatrical speech. Their most important contribution was to comedy writing, both one-act and multiple-act. Collecting rich material from the rising middle class of Constantinople's Greeks, they had many issues to castigate and satirize: the newly rich, the imitation of European mores, human faults, social conventions and situations. Under the dominating influence of Molière, *Margaritis*, *Rich Miser and Old Lover* was written by A.M.A. the Byzantine (1839), *The Would-be Philosopher* by Nikolaos Ayvazides (1840), *Misse Kozis* (1848) by an anonymous writer, a moral play, a medley of Greek dialects, like *Babylonia*, *The Old Men's Lesson* (1861) by Christakis Skordos, the *Haviarohanon* (1864) by Odysseus Dimitrakos, *Malakof* (1865) and *Nouveau Riche* (1878) by Michael Hourmouzis, *The Desperate Husband* (1868), *Fiakas* (1867) and *The Duke of Stupidity* (1881) by Demosthenes Misitzis, etc..

In the category of the national dramaturgy, regarding plays with patriotic content, the contribution of Alexandros Zoeros is significant (*The Three Hundred*, *A Descendant of Timoleon*, etc.); the same applies in fictional drama with Alexandros Stamatiades, together with other less important writers, and in vaudeville with Christophoros Misaelides (*Michalios the Naive*, *April Fool's Day*, *The Bridegroom of Tyrine*), Georgios Karouzos (*Nikoltzos in the Sack*), Thomas Constantinides (*Maroula in Constantinople*)¹⁸ and many others.

The Twentieth Century (1900-1922)

The theatrical life of the Greeks of Constantinople continued the same prolific way until 1908, when the Young Turks movement broke out with the known historical consequences. During this time (1900-1907), Constantinople was at its theatrical acme. Companies came one after another to the theatrical stages with everyday changing repertory and the audiences flooding the central theatres.

The Greek travelling companies are indicatively noted: "Menander" of Dionysios Tavoularis, the United Company of Tavoularis–Pantopoulos (1901-1903), the company of Nikolaos and Evangelia Paraskevopoulou, the "New Stage" of Constantinos Christomanos (1902, 1903, 1905, 1906), the Drama Company of Eftyhios Vonasera–Dimitrios Veronis (1902, 1903, 1905), the

company of Evangelos Pantopoulos (1904), Pericles Christoforides–Nikolaos Kokkos (1904), Ekaterini Veroni (1905, 1907, 1908), Vassilis Argyropoulos (1904, 1905), Dimitrios Kotopoulos–Nikolaos Kokkos (1905), Nikolaos Lekatsas (1906), Kyveli Andrianou–Edmund Fyrst, while the theatrical activity of the local amateur companies remained remarkable. The amateur companies are also indicatively cited: the Reading Club “Hesperus”, the Philanthropic Society “Dorcas”, the Tatavla Charitable Confraternity, the Concord Confraternity, the Pera Amateurs Club, the Constantinople Greek Company, the Erasimolpon Amateur Club,¹⁹ and others. From 1908, the Young Turks movement and the Balkan Wars, as well as the First World War that would follow, had an impact on the movements of the Greek companies. Thus, the Greek theatrical activity of Constantinople seemed to be constantly diminishing until 1922. During this time, the presence of the following companies was significant: Ekaterini Veroni–Georgios Gennadis (1908), Marika Kotopouli (1909, 1910, 1911), Evangelia Paraskevopoulou (1910), Kyveli Andrianou (1912, 1914, 1918-1919, 1920, 1921), Rozalia Nika, Edmund Fyrst–Telemachus Lepeniotis (1912, 1913), Dimitris Veronis (1908, 1909, 1918-1919, 1920), and others. Amateur theatrical life appeared limited, too, during this period: Mega Revma Society (1908), Pera Amateurs Club (1908), Erasimolpon Amateur Club (1909, 1910, 1912), the amateurs’ company of the “Pheidippides” Society (1912), the company of the Galata Cultural Society “Regeneration” (1920), the Constantinople amateur company Friends of the Theatre, the Constantinople Drama School.²⁰

The repertory included a medley of plays from the Greek and European play-writing. As for the Greek play-writing, the plays that stood out were the ones that could be incorporated into the realistic spirit of the time, bourgeois dramas with a social aim by Polyvios Dimitrakopoulos, Georgios Tsokopoulos, Pavlos Nirvanas, Spyros Melas, Grigorios Xenopoulos, Pantelis Horn, Ioannis Polemis, Ioannis Delikaterinis, Angelos Simiriotis, Stefanos Dafnis, etc.

After the restoration of the Constitution in 1908 and the temporary abolition of censorship, there seemed to be a surge in the performances of historical dramas that caused excitement and deep feelings of patriotism. On the contrary, despite the fact they addressed an audience with bourgeois and cosmopolitan social characteristics, vaudeville and the dramatic romances had a particular appeal.²¹

The same applied to the successor of vaudeville, the revue that came into being in Athens in 1894. These modular plays with themes from political and social satire, of contemporary people and current situations, with music

from foreign operettas thrilled the Greek audience of Constantinople. The Asia Minor Disaster, as was only natural, put an end to the revue burst of the period 1907-1921.²²

The Actors

The success of a significant number of actors from Constantinople who stood out through the long theatrical life in Constantinople must be highlighted. These actors marked with their presence the stage of the nineteenth century and after the Asia Minor Disaster of 1922 they continued their careers in Greece. The leading actors among them came from the two great theatrical families of Constantinople: the Veronis and Kotopoulis families. The founder of the former was the leading actress-manager of the theatre company, Ekaterini Veroni, arguably the most significant actress of the nineteenth century; her siblings Sophia, Dimitrios and Themistocles Veronis, all actors, participated in her company. The Kotopoulis Company was founded by the actors Dimitrios and Eleni to continue with their daughter-actresses Antiope, Fotini, Chryssoula, and the incomparable Marika Kotopouli. Evangelia Paraskevopoulou, the other great actress of the nineteenth century, was also from Constantinople, as were Pericles Christoforides and a host of other actors and actresses.²³

The Theatres

The centre of all this theatrical life was the district of Pera or Stavrodromi with the Naoum, Crystal Palace, Byzantine Alcazar, Verdi, Croissant, Variété, Mnimatakion, and Hippodrome theatres, and second, the district of Phanar with the Mnemosyne Club. However, apart from the central districts of Constantinople, there was also the theatrical movement in the suburbs and villages around the capital, where there was a Greek element: Vathyryakas, Vafeochorion, Galata, Diplokionion, Makrohorion, Mega Revma, Mesahoron, Prinkipo, Tatavla, Ypsomatheia, Halki and Halkidona, to mention the most common places.²⁴

Romania

The Danubian Principalities, which were a favourite region for the Greeks of diaspora since antiquity, attracted the interest of the restless Greeks; they started taking action there by dealing in all the sectors of the economy, particularly commerce, shipping and the exploitation of the land.²⁵ The great

acme of Danubian Hellenism took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, during the pre-revolutionary period (1711-1821), which coincided with the period of the enlightened Phanariot princes, who gave great impetus to the letters and arts.²⁶ Both in their courts and the Greek academies there,²⁷ Greek education found a convenient ground, which proliferated through the establishment of printing houses.²⁸ Within the framework of these intellectual pursuits of the Phanariot circles, the modern Greek theatre soon came into being in Romania (Iași and Bucharest) producing writers, translators and actors. All these worked zealously for its success and contributed through their activity to the national issue throughout the pre-revolutionary period.²⁹

In this cultural production, Rallou, the daughter of Wallachia's prince, Ioannis Karatzas, organized the first Greek amateur company and then built the Theatre of the Red Fountain (1817-1818), which was the first proper theatre auditorium in Bucharest. The fortunate coincidence was the fact that she met Theodoros Alkaios³⁰ and Constantinos Kyriakos Aristias³¹, two actors who would leave their mark on the history of Modern Greek theatre. Their repertory, chosen according to the climate of the era, contributed to the propagation of revolutionary ideas and national self-consciousness.

Danubian Hellenism continued until after the Greek Revolution, despite the sacrifices and the losses it suffered, to dominate the commercial and intellectual sectors. In 1827, Constantinos Kyriakos Aristias, having earned his acting qualification after an apprenticeship in Paris under the famous actor F. J. Talma, was appointed professor at the School of Aghios Savvas. There he taught acting and staged plays with his students, translating his repertory into Greek. In 1833, together with Romanian intellectuals, he established the Philharmonic Company, with its aim to be an acting school which was the first in the Balkans in the nineteenth century.³²

After the Treaty of Paris (1856) and despite the increasing nationalism of the Romanians, the Greeks achieved financial strength, having benefited from the internationalization of the navigation in the River Danube and the Euxine Sea. A few names of eminent personalities of the economic life are referred to below, such as Zappas, Arsakis, Empirikos, Galiatsatos, Chrysovelonis,³³ etc., while the publication of a number of Greek newspapers is a sample of the great intellectual progress of the Greek element.³⁴

The vigorous and well-organized Greek communities³⁵ with their high standard of living and cultural level showed interest in developing theatrical

activity, which was mainly based on the Greek travelling companies. The first who seems to have visited Romania was Dionysios Tavoularis³⁶ in 1859, after his unsuccessful first theatrical attempt in Constantinople. In 1861 a Greek performance of the play *Diakos* in Bucharest's Belvedere garden is mentioned.³⁷ The groups that would visit the city later were the following: Vassilios Andronopoulos in 1868 and 1869,³⁸ "Aristophanes" of Themistocles Veronis in 1875,³⁹ "Menander" in 1877 and 1899, Dimitrios Alexiades company in 1879, 1881 and 1888 and the company "Sophocles" of Emmanuel Lorandos in 1882 and 1898.⁴⁰ In addition, the company of Constantine Pervelis in 1891 with Evangelia Paraskevopoulou as leading lady and the company "Athens" of the same leading actor in 1895 and 1899.⁴¹

Moreover, there was theatrical activity in the cities of Brăila, Galați and Constanța. The presence there of Dimitrios Alexiades' company in 1879 and 1881, the "Menander" company of Dionysios Tavoularis in 1882, Nikolaos Lekatsas' company in 1884 and the company of Ekaterini Veroni in 1896 and 1897 can be mentioned indicatively.⁴² It is also worth noting that plays with Greek themes were staged at the National Theatre of Romania, but also by the company of the Romanian writer Caragiale,⁴³ as a result of Greek-Romanian intellectual interactions.

In Bucharest, the areas reported as theatrical ones are the Union Suisse and Buichard or Belvedere Gardens as well as the Greek Theatre, the Opéra Lyrique and the small theatre Dacia, in Brăila the Ralli theatre, in Galați the Alcazar theatre, while in Constanța the performances were staged in the Auditorium of the Boys' School. In 1898, the Greek Company "Hope" looked after the construction of an auditorium by the French architect Piver.⁴⁴

Despite the fact that the Greek communities in Romania survived until the Second World War, there hasn't been any information with reference to twentieth-century Greek theatrical activity because of the lack of relevant research until now.

Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, the indigenous Greek populations, remnants of the ancient and medieval Greek colonies on the Western coasts of the Euxine Sea and Eastern Rumelia, managed to survive after five centuries of the unbearable yoke of the Turkish administration; at one time they were downsized and at others they were strengthened by young Greek immigrants coming from other parts of the Ottoman empire.⁴⁵ Since the end of the eighteenth century

and the beginning of the nineteenth, through their success in commerce and industry, they had become, under the protection of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, an important economic power that coexisted peacefully with the Bulgarian people and had developed intellectual and cultural relations.⁴⁶ At the same time, through the establishment of Greek schools,⁴⁷ they succeeded in establishing the Greek language as the language of civilization and transactions.

The Treaty of Berlin (1878), through which Bulgaria acquired its independence from the Turkish yoke, securing at the same time political, religious and linguistic freedom for the national minorities there, for many years offered Bulgaria's Hellenism the capability to restructure/reconstitute, live peacefully and be occupied with progressive and cultural projects.⁴⁸ Thus, already since the middle of the nineteenth century, the Greeks of Bulgaria in the urban and semi-urban communities of Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas, Asenovgrad and Pomorie had organized musical and theatrical groups to meet their entertainment demands.⁴⁹

The theatrical life, that appeared after 1870 and became particularly intense after 1880, was dependent on the travelling Greek companies which visited Bulgaria as they left Constantinople or were on their way to the Greek communities of Romania which were also active and numerous; theatrical life also depended on local amateurs, members of the educational community (teachers and students) or free-lance performers and scholars, members of the theatrical groups of the Greek societies there.⁵⁰

Of the first Greek actors, the ceaseless Vassilios Andronopoulos, whose presence in the Balkan Peninsula was testified already since 1861-1862⁵¹, staged performances in the auditorium of the Girls' School of Varna in October 1869.⁵² At the same place, an anonymous travelling Greek company staged performances during December 1871⁵³ – beginning of January 1872.⁵⁴ In Plovdiv, the company of I. Vassiliades staged performances at the auditorium of the Greek Girls' School there in January 1873⁵⁵, as did the Georgios Petridis' company "Orpheus" in the autumn of the same year at the Greek Music Society there.⁵⁶

In the winter of 1880, two years after Bulgarian independence, the Thespis Company visited Plovdiv for a series of twenty-five performances in the Apollo Greek theatre.⁵⁷ In the autumn of the next year (1881), the Thespis Company of Vasilios Andronopoulos performed at the International theatre.⁵⁸ In 1884 the New Menander Company of Georgios Petridis visited

the city with Evangelia Paraskevopoulou as leading lady and staged performances for only one month at the Luxembourg theatre. As it encountered a negative atmosphere, it then left for Odessa.⁵⁹

At the beginning of 1889, the company of Constantinos Pervelis arrived to stage performances at the same theatre with Evangelia Paraskevopoulou as leading lady again. During their four-month stay, the famous performer had the opportunity to unfold her acting talent, evoking the admiration of the prince of Bulgaria, Ferdinand, particularly as Galatia in Spyros Vassiliades' play.⁶⁰ The performance of the *Duchess of Athens*, a play of Kleon Rangavis, was also historic; at that time, the writer served as a diplomatic representative of Greece in Sofia and this performance was memorable indeed, as it was the first performance of the play after it had been awarded a prize at the Olympia theatrical contest and in particular in Bulgaria. This festive performance, which apart from being an artistic event was also a political one, was attended by the diplomatic authorities of Greece, Austria-Hungary, Romania and Spain, as well as the elite of the Greek community there. However, due to the fact that the relations between Greeks and Bulgarians had already been tense, the Bulgarian authorities forbade Ferdinand to attend, despite the fact he had rented a set of balconies.⁶¹

In 1894, the Lalaounis group⁶² visited Plovdiv and in 1895 Evangelia Paraskevopoulou staged performances there (April-May), as well as in Burgas, receiving rave critiques from the Bulgarians.⁶³ In December of the same year (1895), the company of Ekaterini Veroni came to Plovdiv and staged performances with great success at the Luxembourg theatre. However, the enthusiasm and the influx of the crowd worried the Bulgarian authorities, who under various pretexts, when the company went to Burgas, forced it to interrupt its performances and leave for Romania.⁶⁴ In 1899, the companies of Nikolaos Paraskevopoulos and of Dionysios Tavoularis visited Bulgaria and in 1901 the company of Nikolaos Kardovillis arrived as well.⁶⁵

The theatrical activity of Greek amateurs in Bulgaria was also important, taking action through relevant societies, such as the "Sophocles" Greek Drama Society of Plovdiv, the Varna Theatrical Company, the Plovdiv Music Society, the Varna Philharmonic Union, the Asenovgrad Greek Philharmonic Society, the Burgas Affable Liaison, the Pomorie Greek Progressive Society,⁶⁶ etc. Their performances, always for the benefit of the public, were staged in schools or in the meeting-halls of the Greek communities. An indicative example was the performance of Pichat's

historical drama *Leonidas at Thermopyles* that was organized by the Greek National Society “Force” in 1883.⁶⁷

The theatre, professional and amateur, apart from being a form of entertainment, was also, for the Greeks there, a manifestation of national-cultural strength and an expression of national self-consciousness, which caused the discontent of the Bulgarians.⁶⁸ In many cases, they tried to prevent its activity, as in 1905 when the company of Christoforides–Kokkos was ousted by the provincial governor and the mayor of Burgas, resulting in the company fleeing to Romania, where the Greek actors were arrested and imprisoned.⁶⁹

During 1878-1914, the establishment and consolidation of the Bulgarian national state gradually started taking place, bringing as natural outcome an intense conflict between the two nationalities, Bulgarians and Greeks, which would result in the first persecution of the Greeks in 1906 and the final abolition of the Greek communities just before the First World War.⁷⁰

Smyrna

Contemporary theatrical life in Smyrna begins with the settlement of the Europeans (mainly French, but also English, Dutch and Italian colonists) in the city in the sixteenth century, due to the bestowal of economic privileges, the noted *sponsions*, by Suleiman I (1494-1566). From that time, Smyrna, one of the most important ports of the East, enjoyed great economic prosperity, which also included cultural activities, including the theatre. Until then Turkish theatrical tradition had only consisted of impersonators-narrators (*meddah* or *mukallit*) and the shadow theatre with the character of Karagöz.

The European middle class that arrived at Smyrna brought along the theatre, which in most of their countries has already appeared in the Renaissance period. The local Greek society enthusiastically accepted European mores, adopted their forms of amusement and actively participated in them. Lunches, parties and concerts took place on a daily basis, together with amateur theatrical performances, staged in private places until 1775, as well as the particularly popular circus shows.

Until today the performance of Corneille’s *Nikomedes* is considered, based on the research, the first in Smyrna, which was staged in a festive atmosphere at the French Consulate in the carnival of 1657, as Laurent d’Arvieux, the French traveller and diplomat, describes.⁷¹

Another later mention of a theatrical performance in Smyrna is in 1747,

the performance by Jewish amateurs of the play *Aman's Death*, for which it is not clear whether it was staged in public or in private.⁷² The first public performance by European amateurs seems to have been Voltaire's play *Caesar's Death*,⁷³ staged between 1775 and 1785 in a specially formed theatre, while in 1797 we have the information that "at the Venice Consulate a performance was staged" and the entrance fee was one Turkish coin.⁷⁴

One of the biggest slaughters of the city's Greek population is linked to the theatrical life of Smyrna, which remained known in history as "The rebellion of Smyrna" in March 4, 1797.⁷⁵ Constantine Economou estimates the number of the slaughtered people at 6, 000.⁷⁶ According to Solomonides, a victim of the destruction was also the first theatre of Smyrna, which had been built by amateurs in French Street.⁷⁷

This was the second biggest slaughter of the Greek population of Smyrna since 1770, when after the Çesme sea battle, fanatic Muslims massacred 1, 500 Greeks. After that, the third persecution, the most terrible, followed in 1821, right after the proclamation of the Greek Revolution, which would cause a serious blow to the Smyranean Greek community.

During these difficult times, only French and Italian performances of European amateurs can be traced with plays mostly of Molière, Goldoni and Scribe, while in 1825 Metastasio's *Artaxerxes* was staged, translated into Greek.⁷⁸

From the 1840's, when the city acquired "Efterpi" (1841), its first big theatre of 300 seats and two rows of balconies, French and Italian melodrama companies started visiting Smyrna on a regular basis. This gave the theatre-going audience the opportunity to attend performances by professional companies and watch great names of the European lyric theatre. On the stage of the Efterpi theatre, the marvelous Italian tragedian Adelaide Ristori would distinguish herself during her first tour to the East in 1865.⁷⁹

The Smyranean Greek community, from 1828 onwards, distancing itself from the nightmarish events of 1821, found its peace again, as well as its rhythm of growth. As a result of the resettlement of immigrants, who had fled to Greece, to the homeland, a demographic rise of the Greek-Orthodox element is observed that coincides with the general rapid increase of the city's population; the motive was the exploitation of the chances offered by rising economic activity. The Greeks resumed control of commerce and reorganized, as the number of the Greek schools in the area⁸⁰ and the publication of Greek newspapers and magazines prove.⁸¹

The Greek theatre made its appearance then within the intellectual and cultural pursuit of the Smyranean Greek community, as a result of its economic prosperity. The first Greek performance was staged on February 3, 1845, at the Eferpi Theatre by amateurs in the Italian comedy *Maniacal*, translated and published by Ch. Michalopoulos in Smyrna in 1836. In the same month it was followed by the performance of *Babylonia* of Dimitrios Byzantios, which had been published in Smyrna in 1841 and 1843.⁸²

The Hatt-i Hümayun edict (1856) and the National Regulations (1860-1862) which recognized the political and religious rights of Christians, ensured freedom of action of the Greek-Orthodox populations of Asia Minor; thus, apart from the economic field, they offered great opportunities in the social and intellectual fields.

Under these favourable circumstances, from the second half of the nineteenth century until the great disaster, the Smyranean Greek community reached its acme, along with the Greek theatre.

In Smyrna, the Greek element, which until then attended foreign performances, earnestly wanted to acquire a Greek theatre. Therefore, from the beginning it embraced the travelling companies,⁸³ cherished Greek actors and supported fervently the Greek stage as an expression of culture, a means of boosting the national conscience and spreading the Greek language.

The repertory of the theatres in Smyrna was a repetition of Constantinople's, since the same companies usually visited Smyrna next.

However, apart from this "imported" repertory, Smyrna had its own intellectual dynamics, which since the post-revolutionary period had already cultivated theatrical literature, at first with translations and later with original plays and new adaptations.

A general overview of the theatrical publishing production in Smyrna during this century allows us to come to the conclusion that the translations outnumber the original play-writing. This was the natural intellectual fruit of a prosperous society turned westwards for professional and entertainment reasons, but also the result of its communication with members of the foreign communities, mostly French and Italian, within the framework of economic relations and sociality.

Therefore, the contribution of Smyrna's scholars to the instilling of classical play-writing to the Greek-speaking East was of major importance, as regards the plays of Molière *Tartuffe*, *The Misanthrope* and *The Miser* that

were translated by the Smyranean scholar Ioannis Isidorides Skylitsis, and also plays of Racine, such as *Iphigénie*, and Voltaire, such as *Oedipe* and *Zaïre*. In addition, Alfieri's *Orestes* and Metastasio's *Ruggiero* were translated, as well as plays of European romanticism (Hugo, Schiller, Shakespeare), just to mention the most important representatives of the European play-writing.⁸⁴

As for the original dramaturgy, the Smyranean writers made their contribution in all genres of the theatrical speech of the nineteenth century (dramas that referred to the glorious ancient Greek past, tragedies of Byzantine themes covered with the relative romantic cloak, romantic and fiction dramas).⁸⁵

Apart from the effort to form a national play-writing which, following either the legacy of the Enlightenment or the commands of Romanticism, was the leading terminus of the Greek intelligentsia throughout the nineteenth century, the Smyranean dramaturgy was enriched with a series of light plays, both one-act or multiple-act comedies and vaudeville, a result of the playful mood of a bon vivant and cosmopolitan society.⁸⁶

In Smyrna, apart from the prose theatre, the Greek lyric theatre experienced glorious days⁸⁷. The Greek middle class through the constant visits of foreign lyric companies was familiar with this theatrical genre, which was culminating at that time in Europe, and was craving to create Greek melodrama. At the same time, a new music theatre appeared, the revue, which based on the wide public, enjoyed great success in Smyrna. During the First World War after Smyrna's seclusion by the Allies and the lack of any kind of communication with Greece and Europe, the pure Smyranean theatre thrived with dozens of revues by Smyranean writers (Sylvio, Lailios Karakassis, Stavros Koukoutsakis, Yiannis Anastassiades, Nestoras Laskaris, Sokratis Ronas, etc.) that were staged by local companies. Revues that made history included *Dolls from Kordelio* (1915), *Cinema* (1916), *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Smyrna* (1917), *Café Chantant* (1917), and *Smyranean Laughter* (1920).⁸⁸

At this point, it must be stressed that in parallel with the professional companies, travelling and local ones, either prose or musical, the theatrical life in Smyrna was enriched by amateur theatrical activity. Usually these consisted of young, dynamic people, who later would distinguish themselves in the sciences, arts, letters and commerce, but also eminent members of the Smyranean society, who were already prominent on a professional and social level. This social sector would breed theatrical writers and actors who would develop later into professionals.⁸⁹

The intense theatrical life also made imperative the creation of theatrical spaces that would be fitting to receive Greek and foreign companies. Thus, one after the other, the Eferpi (1841) and Kamerano (1862) theatres, the Alhambra and Eldorado summer theatres, the Sporting Club (1894), the Basin Theatre (1900), the Gay (1909), and finally the Splendid and Kremer theatres were built, while smaller theatres operated in the districts and suburbs of Smyrna. With the luxurious Theatre of Smyrna (1911), the city acquired one of the most beautiful and stylish theatres of the Balkans and the East.⁹⁰

The long presence of both the foreign and the Greek theatre was only natural to create a widely cultivated audience that formed the seedbed, through which new servants of the theatrical art emerged. Thus, Smyrna grafted the Greek stage with new actors that honoured the name of the artist firstly in their homeland and later in Greece. The following great actors are indicative representatives: Mitsos Myrat (1878-1964), Kyveli Andrianou (1887-1978), Giorgos Glinos (1895-1966), and also Nikolaos Pezodromos, Vassilis Argyropoulos, Alexandra Kallinea, Marios Palaiologos, Antonis Tziniolis, Vassiliki Dendrinou, Stassa Amira, Ioannis Stylianopoulos, Zaza Brillanti, Christos Ghimaras, etc.⁹¹

From 1919 until 1922, Smyranean actors participated also in the so-called military companies that followed the Greek troops to the front, bolstering the spirit of the soldiers. On the Asia Minor front the actors that fought and staged performances were Giorgos Glinos, Ioannis Avlonitis, Ilias Vergopoulos, Mavropoulos, Moussouris, Georgios Sarantides, Simiriotis, Mavreas, Nikos Perdikis, Dimitris Simopoulos, Stefanos Kaloutas, and others, but also actresses, such as Athina Lorandou, Katina Kalouta, Athina Simirioutou, Angeliki Zervidou and Aleka Nikolaou.⁹² In the fatal year (1922), the operetta company of Elli Afentaki, the company of siblings Constantinos and Marika Nezer and the company of Zacharias Mertikas visited Smyrna and staged operettas, revues and musical comedies with great popularity among the audiences, both political and military, despite the belligerent situation.

In the summer, the Italian melodrama company Sernela visited the city, which was bound with its performances to close the theatrical life in Smyrna. In August 21, the group staged Verdi's *Aida*, a symbolic opera for the march of events in Smyrna and in August 22, a month before the disaster, it staged its last performance with Puccini's *Bohème*.⁹³

The military events and the great disaster that followed would end an artistic tradition of more than a century. Smyrna, after the disaster, would

graft with the blood of its children the cultural life of continental Greece and particularly Athenian cultural life with many intellectuals who would continue their careers in the Greek capital.

NOTES

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84. Chrysothemis Stamatopoulou-Vasilakou, «Σμυρναϊκή δραματουργία» (“Smyranean Dramaturgy”), in Stamatopoulou-Vasilakou, *op. cit.*, 2006, pp. 224-226.
85. *Op. cit.*, pp. 234-265.
86. *Op. cit.*, pp. 265-279.
87. Solomonides, *op. cit.*, pp. 194-202.
88. Stamatopoulou-Vasilakou, *op. cit.*, p. 296.
89. *Op. cit.*, pp. 188-189.
90. *Op. cit.*, pp. 190-192.

91. Solomonides, *op. cit.*, pp. 265-296.
92. Christos Aggelomatis, «Οι στρατιωτικοί θίασοι: Αναδρομή στο παρελθόν» (“The Military Theatre Companies: Retrospect”), *Kallitechniki*, No. 3, 3 March 1962. See also, M. Simopoulos, *Οι ηθοποιοί στον πόλεμο* (Actors in the War), Athens: Kaminaris, 1935 and Chrysothemis Stamatopoulou-Vasilakou, ed., *80 χρόνια ΣΕΗ: 1917-1997* (80 Years of the Greek Actors Union: 1917-1997), Athens: K. and P. Sbilias, 1999, pp. 280-282.
93. Solomonides, *op. cit.*, pp. 263-264.