

The Greek Theatre in Pontos, Russia and the Soviet Union

Konstantinos Fotiadis*

RÉSUMÉ

Malgré son immense importance pour l'hellénisme, le théâtre grec du Pont, de la Russie et de l'ancienne Union Soviétique demeure encore aujourd'hui presque totalement inconnu, même à ceux qui y portent un intérêt et qui font la promotion de l'hellénisme oecuménique. Le but de cet article est de combler cette lacune en proposant une réflexion sur la contribution diachronique de l'hellénisme dans ces régions les plus sensibles et d'une importance capitale du point de vue historique, qui comme le Pont et la Russie ont joué un rôle important même lors de la Révolution grecque de 1821. L'auteur examine de façon analytique les difficultés auxquelles ont fait face les activités théâtrales grecques, depuis leur création au Pont après 1860, en Russie après la fondation de la *Filiki Etaireia*, à Odessa et en Union Soviétique (USSR) après la révolte bolchevique du début des années 1900, compte tenu des adversités géo-politiques, culturelles et linguistiques créées par les divers régimes locaux dans ces régions.

ABSTRACT

Despite its outstanding significance for all of Hellenism, the Greek Theatre of Pontos, Russia and the former Soviet Union still remains almost totally unknown, even to those who are interested in and promote ecumenical Hellenism. This article aims at fulfilling this need by reflecting on the diachronic contribution of Hellenism in these most sensitive and historically critical regions which, like Pontos and Russia, played an important role even in the Greek uprising of 1821. The author analytically examines the vicissitudes which Greek theatre activities, since their inception in Pontos after 1860, in Russia after the founding of the *Filiki Etaireia* in Odessa and in the USSR after the Bolshevik rise to dominance in the early 1900s, have faced in these regions under the geo-political, cultural and linguistic adversities created by the various local regimes.

* University of Western Macedonia

The Greek theatre of Asia Minor and the surrounding region of the Euxine Sea and particularly of Russia and the former Soviet Union, which contributed decisively to the intellectual, artistic and ideological *paedeia* of the Greeks beyond the boundaries of Greece is almost totally unknown to the theatre world, the intellectual circles, the university departments of teatrology, and in general to all those centres which research and promote Hellenic ecumenical civilization.

Apart from the excellent trilogy of the theatre man Ermis Mouratidis¹ and the scholarly works of Odysseus Lampsidis² and Christos Samouilidis³, this subject has not been researched holistically by scholars who are experts in the fields of theatre and art.

In Pontos of Asia Minor, Greek theatre functioned from the 4th century BC until the compulsory population exchange of 1922.

The Ottoman reform edict Hatt-i-Humayun of 1856 allowed the revival of the theatre in Pontos, as well as in the other regions of the Ottoman Empire. The first Pontian play was written in Kerasous by Ioannis Valavanis in 1860 in the Pontian dialect and in *katharevousa*, and was printed in Athens because there was not as yet a Greek printery in Pontos.

The Pontian theatre became the articulator of the history of Greek actions and the Greek language.⁴

The second play was written by Constantine Constantinidis, President of the to-be founded democracy of Pontos, Captain Yiorgis' son, and life mayor of Kerasous. It was a comedy entitled *Oi erotoliptoi* (Οι ερωτόληπτοι) in the Pontian dialect, published again in Athens in 1876. This was followed by E. Foinikopoulos' *Oi kodonatoi vrykolakes* (Οι κωδωνάτοι βρυκόλακες) and by another two plays by the same writer: *Hysse, tripse, phyne* (Χύσε, τρίψε, πλύνε) in 1885 and *I Trapezountia kori* (Η Τραπεζούντια κόρη) in 1890. Other known plays written in historic Pontos and performed in many towns and villages were Ph. Philippidis' *Stavros kai Stavroula* (Σταύρος και Σταυρούλα), a drama in six acts, printed in Constantinople in 1904 and Panayiotis Fotiadis' (or Markissios) *I dolofonos* (Η δολοφόνος) in 1910. Later this playwright wrote other plays in Greece as well, such as *I yinaika tou Protomastora* (Η γυναίκα του Πρωτομάστορα). The Pontian language enters into the space of the text as a structural dramaturgic element. Most playwrights in the entire region by the Euxine Sea cultivated their language in order to render through it the feelings, thoughts and conflicts of their heroes.

In Trapezond a special stage for theatre did not exist until 1895. The

performances, mainly of amateur companies, were staged in the Greek community club. Benefactorism, as with Greek education and in the same way with the promotion of culture, played a decisive role. Constantine Theophylactos, the great benefactor of Trapezond, financed the construction of the first theatre according to European specifications in the historic capital city of the Comninos, meeting thus the need of the city and its progressive inhabitants.

After the completion of the theatre, staged performances increased, not only by the amateur groups of the city and the greater area of Pontos, but also by the eponymous professional companies of Athens, Smyrna and Constantinople.

The official inauguration of the theatre took place in 1897 with Nicholas Paraskevopoulos' cast. Many times eponymous Athenian companies performed at the ornately decorated theatre of Trapezond with plays from the ancient and modern Greek repertoires, as well as the European one. In 1906 the management of the theatre was taken over by Joseph Ktenidis who gave a different impetus to the city's theatrical and cultural activity.

Up to 1912 very successful performances were staged by the professional companies of Christophoridis – Kokos (1906), Christophoridis – Kokos with the collaboration of the comedian Papaioannou (1907), Vasileia Stephanou – Stavropoulou – Helmi (1908) with their first play Aristophanes *Nefeles* (Νεφέλες), Aikaterini Veroni (1909), Constantinos Vasiliadis (1910), Helen and Philippos Apergis from Smyrna and many others. The Balkan Wars and World War I had a negative impact on the theatrical and cultural activity of the Greeks in Pontos.

In 1916-1917 with the conquest of Trapezond by the Russians, the progressive Greek youth of Trapezond upgraded that city's theatre group forming two departments: one purely theatrical and one musical-choral.

The theatre group, under the management of the lawyer Demetrios Eliadis, staged many performances which brought relief and gave a boost to their morale, because the news of persecutions and displacements of the Greeks in Eastern Pontos, being under the Neo-Turks' tyranny, were known to them through the Greek press, but also through their relatives and friends.

Beside Trapezond, we encounter a significant amateur theater presence in other cities as well, such as in Kerasous, Amissos and Argyroupolis, but also in large towns of the interior with pure Pontian populations, such as Santa with its seven large villages and Imera.

The earnings from the performances usually covered the immediate needs of the school board, churches, orphanages and other national and social needs. The positive atmosphere of the theatrical and artistic activities was in most cases an essential source for covering the serious economic problems of the community or of the cultural associations. The correspondent of the Trapezond newspaper *Epochi* reported on 29 January 1919 about the theatre performance given in that city for the needs of the Greek orphanage there:

“With the initiative of an amateur group last Sunday an afternoon performance was given to the advantage of our city’s Greek orphanage. The attendance of the Greek society of Kerasous was unprecedented, perhaps unique in our community’s history. At the beginning excellent musical pieces were played on the piano by Mrs Athena M. Mavridou, Miss Rinna Tzenna and Miss Julia Velissaridou. A song followed by Miss Esde Sadoh with the piano accompaniment of Miss Rinna Tzenna, followed by thunderous applause. Then, the well-known comedy *Ziteitai pseftis* (Ζητείται ψεύτης) was performed with great success. Especially Misses Anth. A. Neophytou as Marigo and Our. Sourmeli as Evanthia excelled. Mr Ioannis Aslanidis was also unrivalled as the teacher. After that the monologue *I miga* (Η μύγα) was recited very successfully by Eleftherios Ignatiadis. At the end the hilarious comedy *Tā Vassana tou Vassilaki* (Τα βάσανα του Βασιλάκη) was performed.

The proceeds totalled 900 pounds. In this way our people prove that they fully understand that supporting the orphans is not a kind of ordinary charity but on the contrary it is a sacred duty to the memory of our national heroes, to those from whose bones – as dear *Epochi* has written – our freedom will spring up, to those by their martyr’s death secured the fate and future of our nation here in this corner of Pontos”.

On April 1919 the amateur group of Kerasous gave a performance for a third time, now for the city’s poverty stricken due to the persecutions, robberies, murders and other measures Topal Osman, the mayor of the city, had enacted. The plays staged were *Tō giandes* (Το γιάντες), *Pou kseris oti eho dolmades* (Που ξέρεις ότι έχω ντολμάδες) and *Th’ aftochirastho* (Θ’ αυτοχειριασθώ). On 28 May 1919 the medical doctor Th. Thomaidis describes the performance of *O agapitikos tis voskopoulas* (Ο αγαπητικός της βοσκοπούλας) given several times in Kerasous in his own personal way as follows:

The amateurs of Kerasous like other Argonauts, standard-bearers themselves of the Greek civilizing spirit undertook the task of philanthropy immediately after the end of the war. The recent performance of O agapitikos tis voskopoulas achieved a double aim: an act of charity for which we are grateful to them on behalf of the poor and the orphans, as well as the expression of Greek fairness for which we heartily congratulate them. The art of performance, the diligence of finding what is useful, the inherent talent of Greek men and women for the exaltation of high levels of spiritual enjoyment were commensurate to the philosophically excellent and artistically unequalled play by Koromilas. No one was beneath his talent. On the contrary, everyone did full justice to the expectations of all those who had the honour to get to know and appreciate the elegant male artists and the charming female ones. The expressive and artistic tragic character of the former competed with the graceful and incomparable lyrical expression of the latter. In the midst of the tumult and the labour of everyday life, the artists Ioannis Aslanidis Soumelitis, Kefalidis, Nicholas Kesisoglou, Eleftherios Exarchidis, Georgios Molefs, and the female artists An. Neophytou, Elli Efstathiadou, Ioanna Sourmeli, Polymnia Papadopoulou, Olympia Sourmeli, Ioanna Aslanidou and the charming little Iordanou P. Sourmeli, along with the obliging collaboration of the tireless vice-director of the orphanage Mr G. Kalogeropoulos offered us an admittedly unforgettable intellectual banquet.

We thank and congratulate them in the hope that we will enjoy another artistic play in not too long a time.

Kerasous, May 1919, Th. Ch. Thomaidis

Similar information and critiques about the theatre performances in other Pontian cities are recorded in the newspapers *Epochi*, *Argonaftis*, *Pharos tis Anatolis*, and *Eleftheros Pontos*. In the villages the first performances appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century. First, Ioannis Pistophidis, a physical sciences student in Athens, took it upon himself in 1901, to organise a performance with staging of the heroic play *Markos Botsaris* at his village Santa, the Souli of Pontos. Actually the large number of students from Santa at the *Frontistirion* of Trapezond helped the amateur stage producers with the task of selecting talented actors. The students, in

collaboration with the teachers and other notable community members, were founding amateur theatre groups at all head villages, but because of harsh weather conditions, they staged performances only in the summers. Gerostathis Athanasiadis informs us that at Santa the Italian play *Pistis, Elpis kai Eleos* (Πίστις, Ελπίς και Έλεος) and the Greek plays *O agapitikos tis voskopoulas*, *Markos Botsaris*, *Galateia* (Γαλάτεια), *Golfo* (Γκόλφω), *Esmé I Tourkopoula* (Εσμέ, η Τουρκουπούλα), *Athanasios Diakos* (Αθανάσιος Διάκος), *Oi dyo lohiae* (Οι δύο λοχίαι), *Yia to chríma* (Για το χρήμα) were staged. Each drama was followed by a comedy.

The plays which were cherished and were frequently staged were *O fiakas* (Ο φιάκας), *Ziteitai ypiretis* (Ζητείται υπηρέτης), *To kokkalaki tis nyxteridas* (Το κοκκαλάκι της νυχτερίδας) and *Oi Kodonatoi vrykolakes* (Οι Κωδωνάτοι βρυκόλακες). The female roles in the villages were acted by young males of the village because the consorting of the two sexes had not taken place yet.

In the same period, to encourage development of the national and intellectual spirit, public lectures were organised at Santa by teachers, students and other educated compatriots who distinguished themselves in the cities and returned to their villages in the summer time. Ioannis Pasalidis, leader of the EDA political party, the medical doctor Eustathios Spyranthis, the bee-keeper Iraklis Antoniadis, M. Himonidis, M. Masmanidis and Tr. Mavropoulos were a few of the speakers.

Theatre performances with the Greek revolution and its achievements as its themes were staged very carefully so that their heroic content did not reach the Ottomans' ears.

In historic Pontos, and generally in all of Asia Minor, the vigilant eye of the authoritarian regime of the established Ottoman order prevailed and it tried to control and to terrorize both individuals and institutions in case they attempted to change the educational and cultural climate. The example of Ibrahim efenti is indicative of this situation. According to the newspaper *Pharos of Anatolis* (Φάρος της Ανατολής) of 30 April 1911 Captain Ibrahim efentis was expelled from the theatre because he fervently applauded one of the heroes of the play and unjustly suffered the violence of the police authorities.

The Greek state, being hostile from its inception to plays with political, social and censorious content, presented on stage in 1978 for the first time since the arrival of the refugees, G. K. Fotiadis' seditious play *O Lazar - aghas* (Ο Λαζάρ - αγάς) from the Pontian stage of the State Theatre of Northern Greece and in 1979 *Proxenia* (Προξενία) by the same writer.

Another twenty-five years had to pass before Th. Kanonidis' *Oi prosfyges* (Οι πρόσφυγες) and *Tis Tribas to yefiri* (Της τριχας το γεφύρι), plays of socialist content, were approved and staged by the same theatre.

The persistence of certain theatre men, and mainly their intellectual labour, such as the works of Ermis Mouratidis, played a decisive role in the few isolated concessions. The inaction of the state was encountered by the conscientious refugee associations but engaged in the mechanisms of the political parties which used to play, and still play, the game of the occasional political regime. Their educational and financial abilities allowed them to present with their amateur groups plays of folk content, comedies or stories of everyday life. Many of them, because of their weaknesses did not manage to withstand the test of time. There are, however, quite a few plays that if there had been the interest of the state, that is the right stage financial backing, the right stage producer and the necessary professional actors, choreographers and musicians, then we would have along with the Cretan theatre and that of the Seven Islands, also the Pontian theatre.

The Historical Development of the Greek Theatre in Russia and the *Filiki Etaireia*⁵

The Greek theatre in Russia was founded by the *Filiki Etaireia* and until Stalin's persecutions it offered significant cultural work.

The Greek theatre in Russia began the same year the *Filiki Etaireia* was founded, in the same city of Odessa, and, we can surely argue, by the same people. The leaders of the *Filiki Etaireia*, having the amateur school theatre as a base where various sketches of patriotic content were staged, founded the theatre of the *Etaireia* as a means to transmit their revolutionary ideas and to prepare the uprising of the Greeks and the Philhellenes. The original plays which they staged were quite frequently written by themselves.

In 1817 the theatre group staged the Metastasio's play *Themistocles* (Θεμιστοκλής). On 16 February 1818 they staged *Philoctitis* (Φιλοκτήτης) hellenised in N. Pikkolos' translation and adaptation. Participating actors were G. Avramiotis, G. Lassanis, G. Orphanos, I. Mamounis and I. Bapayiotis. A repeat performance on 28 February indicates the great success it achieved. We read in *Logios Ermis* (Λόγιος Ερμής):

After the first act the most illustrious Count Laggeron, Governor of Odessa,... stepped into the wings, met the leading actor

(Avramiotis), praised him for his excellent performance, and invited him to his palace for the following day.

On 7 September 1918 N. Pikkolos' play *Thanatos tou Dimostheni* (Θάνατος του Δημοσθένη) was staged. The same play was staged again on 15 February 1819, together with the choreodrama *Souliotai* (Σουλιώται). Apart from the Greek actors, the Russia actress Moraskeva and the British philhellene Fr. Vilkinson also took part. The earnings from the performances were offered to the Greek schools for their needs. G. Lassanis play *I Ellas kai o xenos* (Η Ελλάς και ο ξένος), which was performed for the first time in 1819, recorded a great success. In 1820 the group also staged *Mohammed* (Μωάμεθ) and *Thanatos tou Kaisara* (Θάνατος του Καίσαρα) by Voltaire, as well as plays by Sophocles, Ariosto and Modern Greek playwrights.

In 1820 in Moscow G. Lassanis printed the tragedy *Armodios kai Aristogeiton* (Αρμόδιος και Αριστογείτων) under the pseudonym *Gordidas Lissanios*, and dedicated it "To the sacred shadows of R..., the V... and to those who died gloriously with him for the fatherland". That is, he dedicated it to Regas Velestinlis and the first victims for freedom, among whom in a few months would also be his collaborator S. Drakoulis who was killed at Dragatsani in 1821. The same year, in honour of their sacrifice, the theatre group staged *Philoctitis* as an artistic memorial service.

The Pontian Theatre

The participation of the theatre group in the uprising of the Greek nation halted the theatrical movement in Odessa for many years until the Greek theatre reappeared in the manor houses. The liberation of Greece resulted in the creation of new cultural centres with new theatre companies which staged plays mainly of historical content. Odessa and other Russian towns, from being transmitters of light as theatrical centres became receptors of light.

From then on Greek theatre companies toured the densely inhabited Greek areas of the Euxine Sea. The Greek theatre of Russia rediscovered its old good self at the end of the last century when the first large waves from the forced exodus of the Greeks of Pontos took root in their new homelands. They would also bring with them the humble theatrical *paedeia* they had acquired in Ottoman-occupied Pontos.

A decisive role in the renaissance of the Greek theatre in Russia was also played by the new theatre built in Odessa in 1878 by its Greek Mayor

Gregorios Maraslis on the specifications of the famous theatre of Vienna. His example was imitated by other Greeks, such as Ioannis Aloizis, who with his own money built the theatre of Sochoum with a seating capacity of 650 people. In that hall plays in Modern Greek and Pontian were staged, as well as others by foreign playwrights in Greek translation and the masterpieces of Ancient classical playwrights.

Constantinople, the capital of ecumenical Greek civilization until 1923, functioned as a bridge between the Athenian state and Hellenism of the diaspora. The artistic activity of Athens completed its cycle with tours to the large Greek centres of the Black Sea. They presented patriotic plays in order to revitalise the national morale, as well as established classical works which had been staged in all large European cities.

During her tour to Odessa in December 1907, the famous Greek actress Kyveli staged Hermann Sudermann's play *I timi* (Η τιμή). Regarding that performance, Emmanuel Kapsambelis, the Greek Consul in that city, wrote: "I saw this spacious and grandiose theatre so crowded with Greeks of both sexes and I was touched so deeply that I held back my tears with difficulty."

The Golden Period of Greek Theatre in Russia

The 1905 revolution in Russia liberated the Greek intellectuals and artists who were captives of the obscurantist laws of the authoritarian regime. Taking advantage of the reforms, together with the establishment of Greek schools, they also founded everywhere amateur dramatic companies whose "activity for Hellenism there is in many ways worthy of many praises".

The *Filekpaideftiki Syllogoi* (Φιλεκπαιδευτικοί Σύλλογοι) frequently constituted dramatic groups to raise funds to cover mainly educational expenses, but also to assist the Russian army or refugees. In almost all of the cities of Russia special money-collection committees were set up for the refugees, and particular performances were presented to assist them with the plays *Stella Violanti* (Στέλλα Βιολάντη), *Golfo*, *Photeini Sandri* (Φωτεινή Σάντρι), Delikaterini's *Hrima* (Χρήμα) performed by Argyropoulos' cast, and others.

At the beginning of the twentieth century a prime mover of the Pontian theatre in Russia was the socialist George K. Fotiadis, whose plays *Proxenia* and *O Lazar-aghos* (Ο Λάζαρο-αγάς) were repeatedly staged even at the smaller Greek villages of Russia and later of the Soviet Union. The capable person who

carried on this work was Yiangos Kanonidis, and a little later the recognised playwright, actor, stage producer and first director of the Greek state theatre of Sohoum, Theodore G. Kanonidis, known by his artistic name *Apollonas*.

The main theatre groups were the following:

The Greek Educational and Cross-cultural Association of Tiflida

On 25 March 1911 the Greek Amateur Dramatic Group of Tiflida staged, in one of the best theatres of the city, the national drama *Athanasios Diakos* (Αθανάσιος Διάκος). On 24 May 1915, the newspaper *Argonaftis* (Αργοναύτης) recorded:

The theatre was filled with spectators, the beautiful Greek fustanela shone.... The work of the amateur group took its beautiful course, its members increased in number, and since that year continues to stage plays regularly, which additionally came to the point to be a national school where many amateur actors learnt the Greek language, and which regularly brings together the local Greeks, gradually awakening in this way their national morale.

On 27 November the amateurs of the Greek theatre cast staged *Aikaterini kai Xanthopoulos* (Αικατερίνη και Ξανθόπουλος), a drama of Trapezond content, and the money collected (130 roubles) was offered to the needy reservists.⁶ On 21 April the amateur actors of the Greek Educational and Cross-cultural Association presented P. Zanos' drama *Yenos kai kardia* (Γένος και καρδιά) and the comedy *I trella* (Η τρέλλα).⁷ The performances continued with Peresiadis' play *Sklava* (Σκλάβο).⁸ The amateur group of Tiflida also presented Persidis' folk drama *Magemenos voskos* (Μαγεμένος βοσκός) and the comedy *Fiakas* (Φιάκας).⁹

In addition, with the initiative of the *Ellinomorfotikos Filekpedeftikos Syllogos Tiflidas* (Ελληνομορφωτικός Φιλεκπαιδευτικός Σύλλογος Τιφλίδας), the plays *Yenos kai kardia* (Γένος και καρδιά) and the comedy *To kokkalaki tis nychteridas* were presented on the stage of the Zoubalov Theatre. The endeavour proved successful, but it would have been better if Greek plays and not translations of foreign ones had been selected...¹⁰.

G. Th. Papadopoulos funded the dramatic group of Tiflida, the female teacher of the theatre group's Greek school, as well as the new educational association of Tiflida.¹¹ Ioannis Pastianidis donated his house for the Greek school of the dramatic school of Tiflida.¹²

The Prometheus Greek Association of Vatum and the Prometheus Dramatic Association

Prometheus was run by a seven-member board which was elected by the members in the general assemblies.¹³

In 1906 in Vatum the local amateur group staged G. H. Fotiadis' play *Skotadia* (Σκοτιάδια) or *O Lazar-aghos*. Stavros Kanonidis, one of the great intellectuals of Pontian Hellenism wrote on 7 December 1913 in his critique of S. Melas' play *O yios tou iskiou* (Ο γιος του ίσκιου), staged at the Zelesniy Theatre of Vatum by the Prometheus Greek Dramatic and Philological Association:

...last Saturday our golden youth presented to the public the most sacred thrill of true dramatic art. A rare enjoyment of the time, pure art which, no matter whether it later made so many foreigners known, it was, and remains and will remain absolutely Greek...

A similar success met the plays *I katarameni* (Η καταραμένη) and *To kokkino poukamiso* (Το κόκκινο πουκάμισο), the earnings of which were not offered for the community's needs (church and school) but for "compatriot refugees of the province of Kars. You may ask: What are these refugees? We answer: They are Greeks like us; they speak the same language and worship the same god. The only difference is that while they were devastated by the Turks, we, thank God, did not suffer any difficulties. They are dying of hunger and the cold, while we are having an easy life...". On behalf of the needy people of Santa an unscheduled performance of the Pontian comedy *Oi kodonatoi vrykolakes* was staged at the Greek village of Tavka.

The Prometheus Association also presented at the Zelezny Theatre P. Nirvana's play *O architekton Marthas* (Ο αρχιτέκτων Μάρθας)¹⁴ with M. Michaelidis,¹⁵ as well as *Golfo, Stella Violanti* and the comedy *Υπο εχέμυθεια* (Υπό εχέμυθεια).¹⁶

The Prometheus Greek Association of Tuapse

A great theatrical presence was also enjoyed by Prometheus of the Tuapse community, the members of which sewed the luxurious theatre costumes of the various plays. The critic in charge of the relevant column in the newspaper *Argonafitis* of 12 January 1913 wrote about the performance of Antonis Antoniadis' play *O Panayiotis o Kalamatianos* (Ο Παναγιώτης ο Καλαματιανός):

The hall of the building is quite large; however so many people were assembled that almost no space was left... The performance reflected on a dramatic event of the revolution of 1821... Indeed it was a play of great merit and worth close study and long rehearsal. Nevertheless, it was performed with such unrivalled success that initially I thought that those involved were professional actors and actually first class.

The Prometheus Greek Association of Tuapse organised a performance of the play *O Panayiotis o Kalamatianos*, which was inspired by the revolution of 1821 and was written by the Kalamata High School Principal Antonis Antoniadis. The play appeared in Russia for the first time. The stage producer was Demetrios Amaxopoulos, President of the Association, with Director F. Filippidis as the prompter. The inspiration for the play and the costumes was provided by Filippidis, completed by the Vice-President Panayiotis Avraam Papadopoulos. Some custodians were selling tickets, while others were in charge of the canteen.¹⁷ On 27th December at the City Council building of Tuapse a performance was held for the Serbian brothers by the beneficent community of Tuapse, on the theme *I irois tis Makedonias* (Η ηρωίς της Μακεδονίας).¹⁸

Filekpaideftikos Syllogos Athina of Aikaterinodav

The youth of the community of Aikaterinodav, being urged by the Consul, founded the Athina Association whose aim was decided to be the creation of a library and reading room.¹⁹ This was followed by the approval of the rules of order of the Filekpaideftikos Syllogos Athina. The elected executive board consisted of E. Dallas, I. Exakoustos, S. Partidas, D. Kodonidis, D. Grammatikopoulos, G. Vrassidas, I. Mavroidis, I. Anastasiadou and N. Feideli.²⁰

In the association's hall the comedy *I theia tou Karolou* (Η θεία του Καρόλου) was staged with the takings intended for the needy students of the Greek school.²¹ P. Feidelis referred to the special difficulties of the particular work and pointed out that regarding their choice the amateurs of the Filekpaideftikos Syllogos Athina were carried away by the vanity of one of them with no good results in the end. However, he credited Zarokoilis, Delikaris and Pintoglou, as well as the young ladies Kondyli, Leontidou, Mavropoulou and Thomaidou.

The Greek Dramatic Group of Vladikavkas

This youth dramatic group was founded to stage plays aiming at the increase of the residents' intellectual level.

The progress of the Greek Dramatic Group of Vladikavkas was a reality.²² They staged the drama *Dolofonos* (Δολοφόνος) on 25 March. The stage was reconstructed by the personal work of P. Pastianidis. Several actors stood out, such as S. Faritof, E. Mourantantof, E. Tshatarof, G. Kakoudidou, R. Pastianidis, I. Tamboulidis, K. Mourantanof, G. Olandezof, P. Thoidis, P. Kakoulidis. The play, written in the Pontian dialect, was warmly applauded.

Amateur Dramatic Group of Apinskaya

On 11 April the drama *Kassiani kai Akylas* (Κασσιανή και Ακύλας) was performed by this theatre group, with Angelopoulos and Yfantopoulos having excelled. The sum of 650 roubles was aimed to be allotted for the Greek school to be founded in the following year.²³

The Progressive Association Anayennisi of Apinskaya²⁴

The main concern and basis of this association was the organisation of theatrical performances and gymnastic games with the intention of increasing the intellectual and ethical education of its members. To achieve this idea of improvement and establishment, protection was needed as was fervent support on the part of the presiding board of the community, and of the consular authorities as well. In this way, it would be possible for the Progressive Youth Association, encouraged and assisted by the official quarters, to make its aim reality.²⁵

The Drama Group of Anapa

For a second time in 1917 a play was performed at Anapa, entitled *To matsoukakikon hara* (Το ματσουκακικόν χαρά) in the Trapezond dialect, as well as D. Koromilas' *O thanatos tou Perikleous* (Ο θάνατος του Περικλέους). Despite the negative reception of many people who had not read the excellent work by Fotiadis (*O Lazar-aghbas* or *Proxenio*) and some folk songs, the play performed in the Pontian dialect was successful. The second play was a failure. Some acted well, such as M. Kyriakidou, Delikaris, Psaltis and

Gouzos. The suggestion of the journalist, signing as *Anatolitis*, was to form an association which would perform works in the Pontian dialect.²⁶

The Drama Group of Aloupka

On 22 January at Aloupka, after the initiative of H. Pasiadis and Antonis Tzinivizis, a soirée was organised with its theme the monologue *Ellinis* (Ελληνίς), and *Thanatos tou Markou Botsari* (Ο θάνατος του Μάρκου Μπότσαρη). For three years already there was an established school at Aloupka financed by the voluntary income of the theatre performances.²⁷ The comedy *O Fiakas*, staged on 22 January 1917 by this amateur group which had a life of just three years in the small Greek community of Aloupka, was also very successful.

The Elpis Progressive League (Adzraskaya 4) of Batoum

With the initiative of Messrs A. Domninos, P. Symenoidis, N. Sytmalidis and G. Kosmidis, a new league was created with the aim to financially support all those compatriot students who interrupted their studies in Russian Higher Education Schools, as well as those in the last year of their Greek High School studies, so that they continue with their education at university level.²⁸ The League also had a reading room²⁹ and organised theatrical performances.

The Drama Group of Krimskaya

This amateur group of Krimskaya presented Peresiadis' plays *Golfo*, *Moussiki synavlia* (Μουσική συναυλία), and others.

The Kyriakidis Association of Argyroupolis

The Kyriakidis Association at Argyroupolis organised theatrical performances with works, such as *I lyra tou gero-Nikola* (Η λύρα του γερονιόλα), *O kapnodohokatharistis* (Ο καπνοδοχοκαθαριστής), *O petros kai I Sophia* (Ο Πέτρος και η Σοφία). The theatre group leader of a relevant performance, staged in February 1911, was Panayiotis Kazantzidis.³⁰

The Theatre after the Dominance of the Bolsheviks

For two decades after the dominance of the Bolsheviks, Hellenism of the

Soviet Union experienced its golden intellectual and artistic period. Lenin, respecting the cultural particularities of the different ethnic groups, allowed the establishment of theatre clubs, reading rooms and libraries in every village and town. Quite frequently theatre groups enjoyed even financial support from the local authorities and the state organisations. Certain theatre groups functioned within the state theatres themselves as departments. The Greek Theatre of Dobas in Marioupolis was one of the main state theatres, in which plays by the great Marioupolitan writer Georgios Kostoprav were staged for the first time.

In 1928 the Ftaroy Theatre at Sochoum was named the Greek State Theatre. Its first director, Th. Kanonidis, with the guidance of the Soviet Union, after the original difficulties were overcome, the theatre group had the ability to study theoretically and practically the art of acting. In the golden period 1922-1937 the Greek State theatre of Sochoum staged more than forty plays, original, adapted and translated.

The Greek Theatre of Sochoum served not only the theatre needs of the Greeks of Abhazia but also used to tour other areas of the Black Sea. Just in the town of Kerts in one tour, the play performed was attended by 16, 350 spectators.

This period lasted until 1937 because the productive period of 1917-1937 was followed by the period of the personality cult and of sterile chauvinism. With orders from above and without excuses the authorities started the arrests and executions of Greek intellectuals. They closed all the schools, the theatres and the Greek newspapers. They destroyed the Greek churches and displaced thousands of Greeks in Siberia and Tourmenistan, applying systematic cultural genocide. The Greeks [from Russia] who arrive in Greece even today are the victims of these measures. This is the reason why many of them do not know their mother tongue and their folk culture.

Struggle for the Greek Theatre

In 1958, after the decision of the government of Abhazia, the Greek State Theatre of Sochoum started functioning again. It had closed in 1938 when, as part of the Stalinist cleansings of ethnic minorities, the Soviet authorities closed the Greek school, newspapers and theatres.

Its refunctioning was due to the efforts of the Greeks of the region, under the initiative of the stage producer Dimitris Bourbouridis. This stage

producer of Greek origin had sent a letter to Nikita Khrushchev and played a leading role in the collection of 10, 000 signatures for the reopening of the Greek schools, theatres and newspapers. He was also entrusted with the reorganisation of the State Theatre of Sochoum, which functioned successfully until 1988. The theatre staged plays in Greek and Pontian in Sochoum, and in parallel carried out tours throughout almost the entire former USSR and specifically to towns with a large Greek *paroikia*.

The theatre closed down in 1988 when the conflicts between the Georgians and the Abhazians forced the Greeks into expatriation. It was then when the seventy-year-old Bourbouridis, whose contribution to the theatre had been recognised by the Autonomous Democracy of Abhazia awarding him a prize in 1983, came to Greece. In Greece however, the stage producer, who had struggled in adverse times to maintain the existence of the Greek theatre in the former USSR, faced serious survival problems until the homeland offered him a final resting place and he found eternal peace there. The truth is, however, that, together with so many other noted neo-refugee intellectuals, he found the doors of state services almost closed and encountered scandalous behaviour from civil officials. The example of the internationally recognised eighty-five-year-old music composer Odysseas Dimitriadis, who had to queue up for a long time everyday for the verification of his details so that he could obtain Greek citizenship and a Greek identity card, speaks for itself.

To Hellenism by and around the Euxine Sea, which in recent years has begun to find its good self again, we wish it to play soon again a leading part in all cultural fields.

NOTES

1. Mouratidis, Ermis, *To Pontiano teatro* (Το Ποντιακό θέατρο), Vol. 1-3, Thessaloniki.
2. Lampsidis, Odysseas, *Yyro sto pontiako teatro* (Γύρω στο Ποντιακό θέατρο), Athens, 1978.
3. Samouilidis, Christos, *To laiko paradosiako teatro tou Pontou* (Το λαϊκό παραδοσιακό θέατρο του Πόντου), Athens, 1980.
4. Mouratidis, Ermis, *Fakelos: To teatro tou Pontou* (Φάκελος: Το θέατρο του Πόντου), *Foyer*, No. 18 (2007), p. 51.

5. Fotiadis, Konstantinos, "To elliniko teatro" («Το ελληνικό θέατρο»), *Foyer*, No. 18 (2007), p. 51.
6. *Argonafitis* (Αργοναύτης), 8 December 1912.
7. *Argonafitis* (Αργοναύτης), 168/1 May 1916 Tiflis.
8. *Argonafitis* (Αργοναύτης), 186/18 September 1916.
9. *Argonafitis* (Αργοναύτης), 169/8 May 1916.
10. *Argonafitis* (Αργοναύτης), 211/26 February 1917. I. Pastidis.
11. *Argonafitis* (Αργοναύτης), 166/10 April 1916.
12. *Argonafitis* (Αργοναύτης), 166/10 April 1916. Pastidis was born in Tiflida in 1876 originating from Santa. He served as a teacher at Sochoum, secretary of the regional courthouse and censor of the Greek publications and assistant to the legal advisor of the Tiflida Town Council. Prime mover for the convergence of a conference of the Greeks of the towns and villages of the Caucasus for the submission of a petition to the Ministry regarding the needs of the Greek population. In 1901 he collected subscriptions for the *Frontistirio Trapezoundas* (Φροντιστήριο Τραπεζούντας).
13. According to *Argonafitis* (Αργοναύτης) (158/14 February 1916), the Prometheus Association rendered accounting for and held elections. In the general assembly just six members were present, resulting in postponement since it was not considered a quorum. A new board was elected for Prometheus: President Hrouvliia Sytmalidis, Vice-President I. Persidis, Treasurer I. Phokas, Secretary Th. Gregoriadis, Librarian S. Kanonidis, Counsellors M. Athanasiadis and Z. Terzopoulou.
14. *Argonafitis* (Αργοναύτης), 167/24 April 1916. Batoum.
15. *Argonafitis* (Αργοναύτης), 168/1 May 1916. Theatrical works.
16. *Argonafitis* (Αργοναύτης), 221/14 May 1917.
17. *Argonafitis* (Αργοναύτης), 19 January 1913.
18. The performance was staged in a hurry, and although it was impossible to be successful from the artistic point of view, it succeeded financially. Congratulations to all the participants, and mainly to the organizers, Euthymios Siamnidis and Amoiridis. (D. Papadopoulos). On 6 February a performance was held for the community with Mageiropoulos in charge and with the cooperation of I. Amoiridis. The plays staged were the four-act drama *Aikaterini kai Xanthopoulos* (Αικατερίνη και Ξανθόπουλος) and the comedy *O dropalos erotevmenos* (Ο ντροπαλός ερωτευμένος) with Mageiropoulos, Katsikidis, Hatsikidis, Mavrokefalidis and Mageiropoulou distinguished. In the comedy I. Mavrokefalidis excelled. However, financially the performance was not profitable because of the lack of a suitable building and the sale of only three-

fourths of the tickets. Of the 250 roubles collected, 225 roubles went towards expenses, and the rest were shared by the war-stricken people and the needs of the community. (D. Papadopoulos). A performance of the four-act tragedy *O horos tou Zalongou* (Ο χορός του Ζαλόγγου) staged for the community and the war victims, as well as the comedy *Gamos kata ta pontiaka ethima* (Γάμος κατά τα ποντιακά έθιμα) composed by the writer of the article was acted by M. Mouratof (Krinio), E. Antoniadou (teacher) as Frosso and N. Alexandridis as Piliou Goussis.

19. *Argonafis* (Αργοναύτης), 165/3 April 1916.
20. *Argonafis* (Αργοναύτης), 195/6 November 1916.
21. *Argonafis* (Αργοναύτης), 203/1 January 1917.
22. *Argonafis* (Αργοναύτης), 168/ 1 May 1916, Vladikavkas (I. Konstantinidis).
23. *Argonafis* (Αργοναύτης), 168/ 1 May 1916, Apinskaya.
24. *Argonafis* (Αργοναύτης), 230/16 July 1917.
25. *Argonafis* (Αργοναύτης), 16 July 1917.
26. *Argonafis* (Αργοναύτης), 211/26 February 1917.
27. *Argonafis* (Αργοναύτης), 212/5 March 1917.
28. *Epochi* (Εποχή), 1 July 1920.
29. *Epochi* (Εποχή), 8 August 1920.
30. *Pharos tis Anatolis* (Φάρος της Ανατολής), 16 February 1911.