

The Greeks in Egypt and Their Theatre Activities During the Twentieth Century

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article se penche sur la vie du théâtre des Communautés grecques en Egypte au vingtième siècle. Bien que les débuts du théâtre grec remontent au milieu du dix-neuvième siècle à Alexandrie, son point culminant est observé seulement après la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale, principalement dans cette ville et au Caire avec des groupes de professionnels et semi-professionnels, aussi bien qu'avec des troupes de théâtre bien connues d'Athènes qui ont joué devant un public très réceptif. L'auteur note que l'activité théâtrale s'est réduite après 1950 avec le déclin des Communautés grecques prospères à travers l'Egypte.

ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the theatre life of the Greek paroikies in Egypt during the twentieth century. Although the beginning of the Greek theatre there goes back to the mid-nineteenth century in Alexandria, its highest point is observed in the post World War II years, mainly in Alexandria and Cairo with professional and semi-professional groups, as well as with the invitation of well known theatre companies from Athens which performed in front of a most receptive public. The writer notes that theatre activity decreased after the 1950s following the decline of the prosperous Greek *paroikies* throughout Egypt.

“Of those who immigrated to Alexandria, nine out of ten without exaggeration belonged to the city’s labour class”. This is the picture drawn by Ioannis Ghikas, a doctor of Philosophy from Eptanisa, a teacher and the owner of “Lyceum”, a most prestigious school in its time, in Alexandria. This is written in his book *Fifty Years a Teacher* (Alexandria, 1950). What is also

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quite true is what is written of the theatre activity of the Greeks in Alexandria, published in the community newspaper *Metarrythmisi* (Reform) on 19 November 1886.

“This evening the Panhellenic Drama Company will present at the “Polytheama” (*Multivision*) theatre the patriotic family drama “Kyra Euphrosini”, a play by D. Vernadakis. It is needless to recommend this play to our readers, for everyone knows it is about the ruthless tyrant Ali Pahas of Ioannina, who had become a real plague for the Christians. This drama reflects the life which the Christians suffered at that time”. On the following day the newspaper anonymously praised the direction and the actors’ performances but condemned the play because the heroine betrayed her conjugal fidelity and surrendered herself to the tyrant of her country. It also suggested that the playwright could have chosen another subject of the many great events in our history, which were more appropriate and more educating. That was the perception of that time.

During the 20th century, the situation of the theatre definitely improved in comparison with that of the nineteenth century. Moreover, Ioannis Ghikas’ aforementioned viewpoint verifies that the small numbers of theatre enthusiasts during the first half of the twentieth century were rapidly increasing. Unfortunately, though, the results were still disappointing. This was due to the fact that the Greek upper class in Egypt could follow the artistic activities in Europe and travel to see productions at the Comedie Française, the Old Vic, and La Scala. As well, of course, theatre companies with such actors as Kotopouli, Kyveli, Ch. Nezer, Aim. Veakis, and in more recent years, Pappas, Lambeti, Horn, Fotopoulos, Iliopoulos etc., were being invited to Egypt from Greece.

Today’s research can begin at the archives of the Greeks of Egypt which can be found at the Greek Literary and Historical Archive of Athens (E. L. I. A.), as well as at similar archives that are still situated in Egypt or in private collections in Athens. Finally, the research of this paper is also based on the personal testimonies of people who had first-hand knowledge of the theatrical activity which is presented here.

The city of Alexandria had many theatre halls where companies from Europe staged performances. Moreover, this is where companies from Greece made some of their monumental appearances. One of the oldest theatres belonged to Zizinias, an important Greek businessman and friend of Mohamed Ali, the reformer of modern Egypt. Zizinias was also a

significant figure in the country's economy and one of the pioneers of the Greek community. The "Zizinia" theatre was built in 1870, and later was renamed the "Mohamed Ali". Today it is called "Sayed Darwish". In addition there were other halls such as the "Alcazar", "Polytheama", "Corntahi", "Palais Crystal", "Pausilypo", "Faliro", Momferatou", "Edem", Theatre of the Danube", Theatre of Bakos", "Alhambra" (still functioning as a cinema today), "Luna Park", "Casablanca", and "Moasat".

For one to find the origins of the Greek community theatre in Egypt, one must go back, I would say, to 1863. This is when "Bianca and Ferdinando", a drama in five acts, was published in Alexandria, translated from the Italian by Gerasimos Pentakis. Moreover, the first play written in Greek was "Greece Triumphant" by the Thessalian Vasilis Argyropoulos and published in Alexandria in 1865. There is an extensive catalogue of plays which were performed in Egypt in front of Greek audiences, presented by local professional or rather semi-professional companies, as well as by amateurs, members of various cultural societies in both Alexandria and Cairo. There were also many light-hearted revues (epitheorisis) - a genre most popular at the time - written by Greeks in Egypt. Those plays were presented from 1940 onwards.

What follows reflects the theatre activity in the community post 1939-1940. It is now that we can talk of the establishment of permanent local theatre companies. The idea began, according to Manolis Yalourakis, in 1939, when M. Dimitriou decided to engage pupils of his Drama School in Alexandria, which he had founded, to give some performances.

There were no great drama schools in the Greek community in Egypt, for whoever wished to study drama, was more likely to come to Greece. On the contrary, there were many conservatoires. On 22 October 1939, the revue "Sex Appeal" by E. Koletsos and N. Neogenis, both famous writers at the time, was played at the hall of the Greek Society "Aeschylus - Arion", in Alexandria. Of those two, Koletsos was more a novelist, while Neogenis had made a name writing revues. That company became the "Greek Company of Alexandria". Later on, Kimon Sarolidis and Mary Yannouli, with some of its members, formed a new company, which also went through some stages of break offs and reunions.

Mary Yannouli had studied theatre in Athens and London. Along with Kouimtzis and K. Persis, they founded their own company in 1942. We have now reached the war years of the decade of the 1940s, a period when these

companies invited artists from Greece in the likes of Nikos Loris, Sophia and Aliko Vembo, Mimis Traiforos, Zaza Brillanti, Menios Manolitsakis, Mary Carmina, G. Zafiropoulos, the composer Leo Rapitis, Rena Vlachopoulou, the composer Spartakos etc. An indispensable part of every social event at the time were singers such as Kakia Mendri, Nikos Gounaris etc.

It is in this decade and almost until the utter diminution of the Greek community that various playwrights make their first appearance in revue, boulevard and other theatre genres, such as Lambis Paschalidis, F. Paschalidou, T. Paschalidis and St. Stavridis. We should also mention especially the company founded by Adamandios Lemos and Mary Giatra, whose performances throughout the entire Egypt were greatly praised, particularly the shows given in front of the Greek and Allied troops during the Second World War. Also in Alexandria, a company headed by Metaxas gained a reputation in 1912. In Cairo, it was the time for the companies within the Greek community to flourish. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the Marinakis family was the core of a very active company. A company by G. Fotinos was established in 1914 and a company called “The Muses” (Ai Mousai) in 1924. Finally, there were the very popular companies of the Greek Philharmonic of Cairo, the Society of Greek Amateurs and the Alumni of the Abeteios School in Cairo.

A most prominent figure in the Greek community, as far as theatrical activity is concerned, was Giorgos Iordanidis, who later worked at the National Theatre of Northern Greece (K.Th.B.E.). Iordanidis directed many plays during community theatre celebrations, mainly shows presented by the Alumni of the Abeteios School. One of his last productions was, in 1960, the “Alexandrian Amateurs”, a play by Nikos Atherinos, which was housed, among others, at the Greek Schools Alumni Society and the Society of Asia Minor.

All in all, we should also underline the theatrical activity at schools in Alexandria, Cairo, Mansoura, Port Said, Suez, Ismailia, and other major Greek communities, which contributed tremendously to the students’ education.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that amateur theatre really flourished within the Greek community in Egypt. Various cultural and literary societies had established their own amateur theatrical groups, during the 1930’s and until the 1950’s. Professional actors never had a chance for a career in Egypt, perhaps because the country had always been visited by theatrical companies from Athens.

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