

# Greek Theatre Activities in Germany and Belgium: The Last Fifty Years

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## RÉSUMÉ

D'un point de vue, qui lui est personnel, l'auteur offre un tableau global du théâtre grec en Allemagne depuis 1960 et en Belgique depuis 1985. L'article éclaire la contribution de divers groupes, professionnels et amateurs, dans les deux pays et spécialement le théâtre grec de Wuppertal en Allemagne. De plus, une mention particulière est faite du rôle unique du théâtre grec en Allemagne, qui a attiré beaucoup de réfugiés politiques durant la période de la Junte et le déclin subséquent que ces groupes ont vécu après le changement politique en Grèce quand beaucoup d'artistes s'y sont rapatriés.

## ABSTRACT

From a personal perspective the writer provides an overview of the Greek theatre in Germany since 1960 and in Belgium since 1985. Her account focuses on the contribution of various groups (professional and amateur) in both countries and especially the Greek Theatre of Wuppertal in Germany. Furthermore, there is particular reference to the unique role of the theatre of the Greeks in Germany which attracted many political refugees during the years of the Junta and the subsequent decline which these groups experienced after the political changeover in Greece when many artists repatriated.

## Germany

Greek theatre activities in Germany were started by immigrants in 1960, the year of the general immigration. At times these theatre activities were also strengthened by groups of actors, known mainly from the film industry, who visited Germany and had received an enthusiastic reception from the Greek immigrants.

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While in the countries of the Mediterranean Sea and the Balkans the development of the Greek theatre was mainly the result of the intellectual and economic development of the Greeks, in Germany it functioned originally as a sentimental bridge with the homeland. Living in a country with a different culture gave birth to the need for building a bridge with the native land for their own survival and later for the maintenance of the Greek language, and even as a gathering place of politically persecuted artists from Greece. As a result, in various cities of Germany at times theatre activities came about because of the efforts of amateur artists as well as by professional ones.

The most significant theatre activity of our time was that inaugurated by the actor Yiannis Kyriakidis who unfortunately was killed in a car accident a few years ago. In 1968 Kyriakidis founded the Workers' Stage in Munich. The repertoire of this group included works by Greek playwrights such as Ioannis Kambanellis, Dimitris Kehaidis, and others, but also by non-Greek playwrights, such as Arthur Miller. Unfortunately, this endeavour faded with the return to Greece of many artists after the political changeover.

Later, we encounter in Wuppertal, Germany, some theatre activity by amateurs under the auspices of the Greek Church and the Greek Community, created by the director Dimitris Bialas who managed to stage two ensemble plays based on texts which he authored. After his death even this activity came to an end.

There have been many smaller scale events which have come to our notice, however, organised by Greek schools with the assistance of the teachers as well as by associations and Greek Communities. These Greek Communities, in an effort to share something of their history and culture with the host country, set up small amateur theatre groups with their members and staged a few plays, usually of contemporary Greek playwrights, but without any continuation. At the same time, well known artists from Greece, many financially subsidized by the Greek Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and later by the General Secretariat of the Greeks Abroad, visited Germany with the aim to entertain the Greek immigrants.

In the decade 1980-1990 the theatre Attis, under the leadership of the well-known stage director Theodore Terzopoulos, who in 1972-1976 worked as assistant director of the Berliner Ensemble in Berlin, presented theatre performances in Germany in the Greek language. Terzopoulos was distinguished for the quality of his work, as well as for the outstanding presentation of Ancient classical plays with his special focus on body

movement and voice projection in the ancient tragedy. His work impressed the German public.

At the end of 1990 Grigoris Nikiforidis, a teacher at the Greek High School of Nuremberg, initiated the founding of the Nuremberg Hellenic Club which attracted a large number of amateur actors as well as students of the Greek schools. Their activities, which continue to the present time, include theatre, music, dance, photography, cinema, as well as the publishing of a journal. Until now they have staged works by Costas Mourselas (*He and She, The Lady Is Not for Mourning*), Yiorgos Skourtis (*The Unemployed*) Dimitris Psathas (*A Fool and a Half*), Yiannis Pretenteris (*The Dimwit*), Nikos Zahopoulos (*A Pair of Legs*), Dimitris Potamitis, Alecos Sakellarios, Dimitris Kehaidis, but also Sophocles (*Electra*). They have also staged plays by non-Greek playwrights, such as William Saroyan, (*Hello Out There!*), Anton Chekhov (*The Anniversary*), Tennessee Williams and Fasbinter.

In 1994 in Hamburg Nikos Vousvoukis with the cooperation of amateur actors founded the Hamburg Theatre Company. Their aim has been to assist with the maintenance of Greek culture but also to provide young people with the opportunity to cultivate their talent and keep in contact with the Greek language. This group usually performs works from the Greek repertoire but mainly plays for children. It is also involved with shadow theatre.

During the decade of 1990-2000 some other small amateur groups were formed, such as the Pontian Theatre Group of Dortmund which had some sporadic appearances, a short-lived group in Berlin which consisted of amateur actors and one or two professionals, and the Munich Pensioners' Theatre Group. This latest group's activities are usually aided by German services and the Greek Communities within the program of pastime activities and psychological support for old age pensioners.

At the beginning of 1990 two new theatre companies were established simultaneously. They have been directed by professional actors with the participation of amateur ones, and both of them in the run of the years are developing into purely professional groups. They are the German-Greek Theatre in Cologne founded by Costas Papakostopoulos and the Greek Theatre of Wuppertal, the initiative of the actress and stage director Maria Karavia.

The quality of the performances of both theatre groups is high and the German critics continue to sing their praises. However, their approach to the presentation of their plays is completely different from the viewpoint of stage production.

The German-Greek Theatre of Cologne presents plays in the German language on subjects from the Ancient Greek dramatists based on an advanced staging aspect, and on the other hand Modern Greek plays are rarely done in the Greek language.

This theatre company has staged plays in the German language by: Aristophanes (*Plutus*, *The Acharnians*, *The Birds*, *The Frogs*), Dimitris Kehaides (*The Wedding*, *Tavli* (Backgammon), *Born Yesterday*), Euripides (*Bacchae*, *Medea*), Sophocles (*Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Oedipus at Colonus*), Aeschylus (*The Persians*, *Prometheus Bound*), Vasilis Ziogas (*The Comedy of the Fly*), Dimitris Dimitriadis (*I'm Dying Like a Country*), William Shakespeare (*Timon, the Athenian*), Dea Loher (*Manhattan Medea*), Heiner Müller (*Philoctetes*, *Hercules 5*).

The Greek Theatre of Wuppertal was started at the beginning of 1990 by Maria Karavia. It stages plays in two languages: Greek-German and Greek-English for the English language countries. The directing approach is classical with modern elements while the thematics of the plays reflect contemporary issues. The presentation of this ensemble's plays in Belgium and in many cities of Germany has been the challenge and the stimulus for amateur actors to be inspired to create their own theatre groups.

The purpose and goal of the Greek Theatre of Wuppertal is the production and performance of plays both for adults and students of the Greek schools in Germany, as well as in other European countries where Greeks reside. It also aims to organize further educational activities, theatre seminars, artistic exchanges, concerts, exhibitions and in general any kind of cultural activities which contribute to the intellectual and aesthetic cultivation of the diaspora Greeks, particularly the younger generations and in parallel to promote Greek civilization. An additional objective of this theatre company is to give vitality to the local, regional, national and international life with a European character.

This group's repertoire had included classical and contemporary Greek plays. It started with the work of a Spanish writer Federico Garcia Lorca's drama *Sunset*, which was staged within the International Cultural Festival in Wuppertal with the cooperation of actors from three nationalities (the Greeks, Germans and Spaniards). The performance was supplemented with a short German translation. This was followed by Yiorgos Hassapoglou's *The Sugar Biscuits* on the immigrant's dreams, struggle and finally social recognition in the foreign land. Another production was *Singing in the Aegean*, a bilingual musical based on texts by Greek writers on subjects

borrowed from mythology, Greek traditions, customs, music, poetry, literature and the history of the Aegean, and the most recent Makis Antonopoulos' bilingual Greek and German play *Anna Who Is Walking on the Clouds...!*, dealing with the drama of a Cypriot mother who has lived for years by the dividing line waiting for the return of her missing son and who, in the end, decides to search herself for him in Turkey. In addition, this theatre company has staged Ancient Greek tragedies and one comedy (Sophocles' *Electra* and Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, both in Greek, Sophocles' *Antigone* and Euripides' *Medea* in bilingual form, in Greek and German).<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, the repertoire of the Wuppertal Greek Theatre has included literary musical programs dedicated to Greek poets, such as Yiannis Ritsos, Odysseas Elytis, George Seferis and Constantine Cavafy, a professional training program (1995) for repatriating immigrants 18-25 years of age, concerts for children of Italian, German and Turkish origin with the participation of students from the Greek Elementary School in Wuppertal, as well as art workshops for children 9-15 years old.

This theatre company has also staged plays in Germany, Switzerland, Holland, Belgium and Cyprus with the support of the Ministries of Culture and for Foreign Affairs, as well as of the General Secretariat for the Greeks Abroad, while since 2001, with the cooperation of the Anavasis Theatre of Kavala and the support of the Greek Ministry of Culture and of Macedonia-Thrace, as well as the Kavala Prefectural Administration has performed plays in Athens, Thessaloniki, Kavala, Drama, Serres, Xanthe, Alexandroupoli, and elsewhere.

Finally, mention must be made of Toni Mavridis, a painter, poet and especially a distinguished figure with a long presence in the theatre events of Germany. Apart from his fine arts activities (stage design for thirty-seven plays, including Chekov, Gogol, Durenmart, Sartre, Slawomir Mrozek, and others) and the opening of Gallerie A23 in Athens, in 1982, he founded the Art Theatre in Munich which operated until 1995. The plays he staged and directed were Vasilis Ziogas' *Pandora's Seven Boxes*, I. Haggie's *Six Love Stories*, A. Tabugh's *Mr Pirandello, to the Phone*, Roula Kataferi's choreodrama *Mikado*, and his own *Polite People*.

In 1996, at the suggestion of the Greek Orthodox Diocese, Toni Mavridis adjusted the theatre stage of the Parish Cultural Centre of Munich, and during the twelve years of its existence he staged over fifty plays by Greek, but mainly non-Greek playwrights. Mavridis, through the Art Theatre,

made determined efforts to organize and help Greek artists in the region of Munich. For example, he founded the Munich Greek Artists' Association and for many years he initiated a collectively organised activity. In 2006 Toni Mavridis left the direction of the Theatre Centre of the Munich parish. Since then this Cultural Centre has hosted a variety of cultural performances but its theatre activity is now restricted only to occasional amateur endeavours.

## Belgium

Apart from Germany, Greek theatre activities developed in other countries of Europe, such as Belgium. There we encounter two theatre groups with amateur actors but rich activities: the Greek Theatre Workshop and the Greek Theatre of Belgium, which occasionally cooperate staging plays together and even exchanging actors.

The Greek Theatre Workshop was founded in 1985, and it is the oldest Greek theatre group in Brussels. This is the Greek section of Atelier Théâtral des Institutions Européennes, with its members being mainly employees of the European Communities.

Over the years the Theatre Workshop has staged a range of works, mainly Greek, but featuring some plays as well by international playwrights, under the direction of Tassos Nychas, Irine Chalkia, Yiannis Gavras and Vasso Andronidi. With few interruptions the group has staged plays annually, sometimes presenting two or three plays a year. Their productions have included G. Skourtis' *The Trial of Orpheus and Eurydice* (1985), Mario Pontikas' *Domestic News* (1986), Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae* (1987) and *Thesmophoriazusae* (1993), Kostoula Mitropoulou's *The Trailer* (1987), Bost's *Fausta* (1989), Yiannis Kambanellis' *The Four Legs of the Table* (1991) and *The Daddy War* (1996), Dimitris Koromilas' *Pericles' Death* (1992) and *Maroula's Fate* (2001), Anton Chekhov's *A Marriage Proposal* (1992), Th. Papageorgiou's *Good Bye!* (1994), Kostas Mourselas' *The Aquarium* (1996), M. Tsikliropoulos' *The Garden with the Swallows* (1997), D. Vyzantios' *Vavylonia* (2002), M. Korres' *Lumbago* (2003) and others.

Since 1995 the Workshop has also directed its attention to developing a rich program of children's theatre and its productions have staged Alki Zei's *Matias the First* (1995), A. Adamopoulos' *The Semolina Man* (1997), K. Rouggeri's *Angelina, Cinderella* (1999) and her adaptation of Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae [Like a Tale]* (2002), *Chrysovergis and Iliotati* (a children's folk

tale) (1999), George Theotokas' *The Dream of the Dodekamero* (2003), M. Kontova's *The Tangle of Weird Happenings* (2004) and P. Tsaroucha's *The Kidnapping of Princess Aeora* (2005).

In parallel, the Greek Theatre of Belgium was founded in 1992 and its contribution has also been characterized by a varied and continuous program over the past decade and a half. In Brussels it has staged eighteen Modern Greek plays and one Ancient Greek. A number of the company's members who started with this group have developed into professionals who work in both Greece and Belgium.

The Theatre's productions have been staged under the direction of Vasso Androniki, Petros Sevastikoglou, Costas Lambroulis, Yiannis Economidis, Evi Economidis and Yiannis Gavras, and include Yialama and Pretenteri's *Worthless Youth* (1993), Yiannis Kambanellis' *The Courtyard of Wonders* (1994), *The Dialogue* (1995) and *The Road Passes Inside* (2003), G. Skourtis' *Karagiozis*, *Almost Vizier* (1994), Kehaidi and Haviara's *Laurels and Oleanders* (1995) and *With Force from Kifissia* (1998), A. Galanos' *Red Lights* (1995), A. Staikos' *Clytemnestra* (1996), Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (1996), P. Matesis' *The Ceremony* (1997), V. Zioga's *Antigone's Matchmaking* (1996), Nikos Tsiforos' *Women Prefer Tough Guys* (1997), Ch. Gianakopoulos and A. Sakellarios' *Alas, Youth* (1999), Giovanna's *The Waiting Room* (1999), M. Korres' *Midas Has Donkey's Ears* (1999), D. Yiannoukakis' *The Lady's Tantrums* (2003), Thanassis Papathanasiou and Michalis Reppas' *The Stork Brings Babies* (2004) and others.

## NOTES

1. For more information on these plays staged by the Wuppertal Greek Theatre, as well as for critiques mainly by German newspapers and magazines covering the years 1990-2006, see Maria Karavia, "The Theatre in Germany After the Political Changeover", in Tilemachos Moudatsakis, comp., *Theatre, Diaspora and Education*, Rethymno: E. DIA. M. ME., University of Crete, 2007, pp. 111-117 [Symposium Proceedings, 22-23 July 2006. In Greek].