

The Theatre of the Greek Diaspora: The Case of Canada

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RÉSUMÉ

Le théâtre grec au Canada n'a pas été à étudié à ce jour et demeure donc terra incognita. Cet article se veut expérimental et tentera d'élaborer un portrait de la situation depuis le commencement des communautés grecques dans ce pays. Les hommes d'affaires grecs ont commandé les halls principaux de théâtre dans les années 20 à Montréal mais il semble qu'ils étaient seulement les propriétaires des bâtiments et n'avaient pas de relation avec le théâtre de répertoire. Nous en savons peu au sujet de l'activité grecque de théâtre au Canada avant la deuxième guerre mondiale. Curieusement les racines de ce théâtre sont tracées dans les petites communautés canadiennes occidentales. Ce n'est que seulement après la deuxième guerre mondiale que nous commençons à avoir des informations limitées sur l'activité de théâtre. Les années 60 sont la période où nous pouvons mieux l'étudier. Dans tous les cas nous parlons du théâtre d'amateur exécutés principalement à Montréal. Il a été établi par les groupes d'amateurs de théâtre et il a été exécuté dans les écoles grecques. Nous proposons une distinction entre deux genres de théâtre grec au Canada, le patriotique-folklorique et le social-politique.

ABSTRACT

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

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Introduction

From antiquity to the present day wherever the Greeks migrated – and here I will not go into the discussion of the continuity or discontinuity of Hellenism – they transposed with them their theatrical tradition as an integral part of their culture. It seems that in ancient colonies the theatre was a priority as there were the temples of worship of their gods. Throughout the ancient Greek world we find traces of this theatre of worship. The presence of the theatre never ceased through the centuries and influenced the way of life and the thought of the Greeks. In medieval times as well, the theatre remained an integral element of Greek culture. So, for example, we find in 1627 a Greek troupe in Paris, which arrived there from the unknown.¹ According to some scholars it came from the Ionian Islands, while others say it came from Crete.

As in ancient times, when the colonies were in contact with Greek culture and knew the great exponents of Greek drama, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, so in recent times the Greek diaspora communities remain close to the Greek theatrical tradition. Thus we encounter the Greek theatre both in historical Greek communities and in its subsequent immigrant communities during the 20th century. We encounter it in Constantinople of the 19th century, the cosmopolitan Smyrna, in Odessa, in Philippoupolis, the Danube Hegemonies, in Pontus, in Alexandria, in the US, Canada, Australia and to a lesser extent in other geographical regions where the Greeks were established.

The First Steps

The Greek theatre in Canada has not been studied and is virtually unknown. This article is a first tentative to outline the theatrical activities in the Greek communities of Canada, but there is still a need for a lot of research to present something more comprehensive. Unfortunately many details about the Greek theatrical movement in Canada have been already lost or are inaccessible.

In prewar times the sole theatrical presentations which we know were those which were performed in Vancouver and Toronto. In Vancouver the first of these presentations was the well known work of Spyros Peresiadis, *Golfo*, which was performed on 2 May 1933. A few years later according to one source, without knowing when precisely, a patriotic work, *Athanassios Diakos*, was performed.³ A theatrical movement seems to have occurred in Toronto in roughly about the same period.⁴ It is also rather certain that amateur

presentations were performed in 1930 and 1933 on the occasion of the celebration of Greek Independence Day by the Greek Community of Toronto.

Without any doubt, judging from what happened in the neighbouring USA, theatrical attempts would also have appeared in Canada. They would certainly have been amateur efforts from various community organisations. It is particularly unusual that in Montreal, the heart of Canadian Hellenism at that time, we are unable at the moment to detect any trace of Greek theatre performances.

The Postwar Period

For the period after the Second World War we have more information on the growth of Greek theatre in Canada. Nevertheless for this period our information remains fragmentary, and paradoxically it is also limited to Montreal.

We also have more explicit testimony for the theatrical movement in Toronto during the postwar period, which appears to have developed in the frame of the celebration of various national anniversaries. Thus, for example, on 25 October 1959 a theatrical group of the Greek Community of Toronto presented a play by Haris Grigoriou, *Homeland of Heroes*, on the occasion of celebrations of the anniversary of 28 October 1940.⁵ We know nevertheless that after the war there were definite theatrical activities even in small communities, such as that of Calgary in western Canada. Peresiadis' *Golfo* was performed in Calgary in April and May 1963 and *The Beloved of the Shepherdess* (O Agapitikos tis Voskopoulas) a few years later in 1967. It seems that the theatrical group that presented this work and which belonged to the Greek Orthodox Youth (Greek Orthodox Youth of America), staged it in other communities of western Canada, as well as that of Edmonton.⁶ It is interesting to note that the play put on in Calgary in 1963 – *Golfo* – was directed by a priest, Father Demetrios Kavouras.

Thus in western Canada, even if the Greek communities were much smaller than those in Toronto and Montreal, they kept alive a certain theatrical movement that, as mentioned above, had already been encountered in Vancouver in prewar times around the 1930s. In the same city in 1958 an amateur theatre company of young persons also staged *Golfo*, the well known play by Spyros Peresiadis.⁷

We have, however, more precise information for theatrical activities in Montreal. On 1 May 1953 we know that the Benevolent Fraternity of Greek

Ladies of Montreal (Filoptohos Adelfotis Ellinidon Kyrion Montrealis), staged *The Temptation* (O Peirasmos) by Grigorios Xenopoulos. The play was presented on the national theatrical stage of Quebec, *Monument National*. One can observe here two paradoxes. First, the Benevolent Fraternity of Greek Ladies presented a relatively bold work, if one takes into consideration the conservative values that would have prevailed then in the Greek community of Montreal. From another perspective, the benevolent associations as we know them today in the Greek communities of Canada are fairly conservative and they would present such a play with difficulty even in our days. We know of course that the association that staged this play and that continues to exist today was not attached to the church as it happens with the other Greek women's benevolent associations in Canada. Nevertheless the question remains regarding this "deed of daring" in 1953. The second paradox arising from the performance of Xenopoulos' play is the theatrical stage on which it was presented. It is not a parochial hall but the most important theatrical stage of Montreal, the mother French-speaking city of Canada.⁸

In 1962, that is to say almost ten years later, the same association presented in Montreal, once again at the *Monument National*, the *Crabstick* (To Stravoxyllo) of Dimitri Psathas. The unanswered question that arises is whether the same association staged other plays in the intervening period. Potentially research will reveal it to us at some time in the future. Unfortunately, even if the Benevolent Fraternity of Greek Ladies exists today, the continuity of this organisation has not been able to preserve its archives from which we could draw the relative information. We suppose, of course, that in the same period some wider amateur theatrical movement would have existed in Montreal and potentially in the other Greek communities of Canada. It is certainly not possible to have had amateur theatre only in 1933 in one small Greek community in Vancouver in western Canada and then to find it, almost only in Montreal, with two productions twenty years later in 1953 and in 1962.

The period of the dictatorship appears to have been the golden season of Greek theatre in Canada. At that time certain Greek artists lived for some time in Canada and more specifically in Montreal where their efforts were overwhelming for the development and growth of Greek theatre. Among them were the director Nikos Perelis and the actors Yioula Gavala and Panos Xynos.⁹

In Montreal between 1966 and 1968 Panos Xynos created the Greek Theatre of Canada that performed various Greek plays. It was in essence an amateur theatre company which survived on some small government

subsidies. We encounter Xynos again later in 1986 in Toronto trying to create a theatrical movement.

Yioula Gavala performed *Medea* in Montreal in 1970. We do not have information on her other theatrical activities in Montreal or elsewhere in Canada. We know, however, that she was active in New York around this period and we can imagine that her Canadian experience was part of her American itinerary.

The well known director Nikos Perelis reached Montreal in 1971, studied at the French University of Quebec, and stayed in this city until 1976 when he returned to Greece. During this period an appreciable theatrical activity developed around Perelis with the help of Tassos Nifakos in the city of Montreal. At that time the Greek Popular Theatre was founded and presented works of Notis Pergialis, Iakovos Kampanelis, Giorgos Skourtis and Dimitris Kechaidis.

During the same period the Federation of Greek Associations of Montreal created under Tassos Nifakos the Popular Theatre of *Park Avenue* named after the well known avenue of Montreal which flourished then with the life and activities of Greek immigrants. On the stage of this theatre were performed plays such as *Good Night Margarita* (Kalinihta Margarita) by Gerasimos Stavrou, *The Engagements* (Arravoniasmata) by Dimitris Bogris and *The Musicians* (Oi Mousikoi) by Giorgos Skourtis.

In the same period Tassos Nifakos also presented shadow theatre, the well known Karagiozis, and performed children's theatre, as well.¹⁰

In 1971 an amateur team performed plays by Dimitris Psathas and Iakovos Kampanelis in the Canadian capital, Ottawa. Unfortunately, we have only fragmentary information about these activities.

We know that in other communities of Canada, in Toronto, Vancouver and elsewhere a certain number of plays was also presented in the period of the dictatorship but this theatrical movement has not been studied. Even the basic research into these theatrical activities is lacking.

In the period that ensued after the fall of the dictatorship in Greece, we encounter a theatrical movement that developed in Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and other smaller Greek communities in Canada. In the case of Toronto and Montreal this theatrical movement had developed first within the two large historical organisations: the Greek Community of Toronto and the Greek Community of Montreal. In the other communities of Canada theatre has also developed within the communities but also around other community organisations.

In the Greek Community of Montreal the Cultural Foundation has functioned since 1976. Among its other activities there have been numerous theatrical productions with amateur groups, almost each time with different actors. These amateur theatre companies of the Cultural Institute of the Greek Community of Montreal have staged works of the most renowned theatrical writers of Greece, such as Grigorios Xenopoulos, Dimitris Psathas, Alekos Sakellarios, Iakovos Kampanellis, Kostas Mourselas and others.¹¹

In the Greek Community of Toronto the Nefeli Theatre was founded in 1992 and it functions until today having staged many works of Greek playwrights. This theatre group has also occasionally presented its work in Greece, having been invited by Municipalities and Prefectures of the country.

Occasionally various cultural associations were also created which dealt *inter alia* with the theatre, as well. In Montreal, for example, the Greek Cultural Association staged a series of plays between 1975 and 1980 while presenting simultaneously works of the shadow theatre. In the same city the Association of Greek Workers of Quebec that was founded in 1970, also performed a great number of plays. Similar efforts of other cultural associations are also found in other Greek communities of Canada.

Apart from Greek playwrights, occasionally the work of non-Greeks has been presented as well. Sometimes a few attempted to deal with ancient Greek tragedy.

In all cases this was the work of amateur companies, and the performed plays were usually presented up to three times.

School Theatre

The theatrical movement in the Greek-speaking schools of Canada has had an intense presence from the decade of the 1960s onwards. Short plays have been presented at almost all the school festivals by the children of these schools. Many of the capable child actors, when older, became involved in various amateur companies.

The Theatre from Greece

Various touring theatre companies from Greece occasionally have visited the Greek communities of Canada during the postwar period. As a rule their itineraries were organized for the big cities of the United States to which they included the two large Canadian cities of Montreal and Toronto. Performances included ancient drama, presented mainly by the National Theatre of Greece.

Theatrical Writers

No playwrights exist who sprang from the Greek communities of Canada. Individual efforts, of course, of certain amateur writers have appeared occasionally. In certain cases some plays of well known Greek playwrights were adapted to local needs and in other cases works of fiction or even poems from Greek literature have been dramatized.

Nevertheless one must mention the playwright of Greek origin Pan Bouyoucas who, however, wrote all his work in French and English. Some of his plays have been translated into many languages and have been performed repeatedly with success by professional companies in Montreal and in Toronto. His plays have also been performed in Rome, Paris, Belgrade and elsewhere. Nothing, unfortunately, has been translated into Greek. Bouyoucas is also a well known novelist with published novels and collections of short stories. The latter work, which in this case was also translated into various languages, remains completely unknown in Greece.

Pan Bouyoucas has written a dozen successful radio dramas and stage plays, many of which have been translated into several languages. His first plays were written and produced in English before his first work in French, *Le Cerf-Volant*, was produced at Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui in Montreal (1993). The same company performed his *Nocturne* in 1998. Some of his plays deal with second generation Canadians (the children of immigrants torn between two cultures), like the characters of *From the Main to Mainstreet* (a.k.a. *Divided We Stand*), which was a hit both at Montreal's Centaur Theatre and Toronto's Canadian Stage in 1989 and 1991 respectively. The protagonists of *Le Cerf-Volant* (translated into English as *The Paper Eagle*) were, like Bouyoucas, of Greek background, while the eponymous protagonist of his historical play *Hypatia* was the Greek and only woman director of the famous Alexandria Library.¹²

Tendencies

From what has been shown above, two main tendencies in the Greek theatre in Canada become apparent. The first tendency is the patriotic and folkloric one and the second is the political and social one. The patriotic-folkloric theatre is part of the different national festivities and generally the one cultivated in schools. The political-social theatre was cultivated especially during the dictatorship in Greece but it continued to have a place afterwards. Plays like *Golfo* or *The Beloved of the Sheperdess* are the classic plays of the folkloric repertory of the Greek theatre. Plays on heroes of the

Greek War of Independence like Athanassios Diakos complete the patriotic repertory of amateur troupes inside and outside schools. Playwrights like Stavrou, Bogris, Skourtis, Kampanellis, Pergialis introduced a more militant-political theatre which is more favoured by the new immigrants of the sixties than by the old established prewar Greeks in Canada.

NOTES

1. Giorgos Hatzidakis, *I Kathimerini, Epta Imeres* (Seven Days), Daily newspaper, *Tribute to the Theatre of the Diaspora*, 7 September 2003, p. 2.
2. Iraklis Papamanolis, Summarizing History of Canada and Greek-Canadian Directory, Montreal, 1922, pp. 185-189.
3. The Hellenic Community of Vancouver, *50th Anniversary, 1927-1977*, Vancouver 1977, pp. 145-146.
Nevertheless, the first theatrical representation of a Greek play in Canada was Sophocles' *Antigone* which was staged in Montreal on March 26, 1895. The play was performed in Greek by the students and professors of the Seminar of Montreal, a Catholic French College in which were taught ancient Greek. See Jacques Bouchard, «Les débuts de l'imprimerie en langue grecque au Québec», *Études helléniques/Hellenic Studies* Vol.1, No.1 (Montreal), Spring 1983.
4. The Album of the Greek Community of Toronto that was published in 1989, with rich photographic and historical material, includes the photograph of a theatrical group of 1930 with the note that it participated in the celebration of the 25th of March, the anniversary of Greek Independence. The play that was performed is not reported nor is anything else. See Michael K. Mouratidis, ed., *Historical Album*, Toronto: The Greek Community of Metropolitan Toronto, 1989.
5. Michael K. Mouratidis, ed., *Historical Album*, *op. cit.*
6. Nina K. Koliass, *The Greeks in Alberta, 1903-1995*, Calgary, 1997, pp. 186-195.
7. The Hellenic Community of Vancouver, *50th Anniversary, 1927-1977*, Vancouver 1977, pp. 145-146.
8. The reports on the theatrical movement in Montreal, and more general reports on the remainder of Canada, are supported by archival material of the *Centre of Hellenic Studies and Research Canada-KEEK*.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. Information given by Pan Bouyoucas and archival material of the *Centre of Hellenic Studies and Research Canada-KEEK*.