

Theatre and the Greek Community in Venezuela

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RÉSUMÉ

Le théâtre grec au Venezuela et son répertoire a une présence relativement récente, avec la fondation du théâtre de la Communauté grecque de Caracas en 1973 et une année plus tard avec la fondation du groupe les Grecs du Venezuela, une organisation communautaire qui incluait un groupe de théâtre (1974 à 1984). La présence grecque a continué à se développer au sein du Théâtre National du Venezuela (1985-1991) avec la contribution importante des frères Pantelis et Constantin Palamidis, dans la mise en scène d'œuvres d'Aristophane, Lorca, Ritsos, Racine et autres.

Cet article fait le point sur les années de 1984 à 2002 au cours desquelles des troupes de théâtre de Grèce ont participé au festival International de Théâtre à Caracas, aussi bien qu'à des représentations en langue grecque dans les communautés (*paroikies*) de Caracas et Valencia (2000-2002).

ABSTRACT

The Greek theatre in Venezuela and its repertory has a comparatively recent presence, with the founding of the community Greek theatre of Caracas in 1973 and a year later of the Greeks of Venezuela, a community organisation which included a theatre group from 1974 to 1984. The Greek presence continued to expand within the National Theatre of Venezuela (1985-1991) with the significant contribution of the brothers Pantelis and Constantine Palamidis, in the staging of works by Aristophanes, Lorca, Ritsos, Racine and others.

This article surveys the years from 1984 to 2002 presenting the theatre groups of Greece which have participated in the International Theatre Festival of Caracas, as well as their performances in Greek in the *paroikies* of Caracas and Valencia (2000-2002).

Greek immigration made itself present in Venezuela in the 1950s, at a time this oil-producing country required productive imported labor in the fields

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of industry, trade and agriculture. During the Pérez-Jiménez dictatorship more than two million Spanish, Portuguese and Italian immigrants, among other European nationalities, arrived by sea and settled in the land Columbus had baptized, centuries back, as “The Land of Grace”. Most Greek immigrants to Venezuela came from the south of Greece – from the Peloponnesus and the islands – as well as from Rumania and the Pontus, all of them devastated not only by the Second World War but also by the immediately following Civil War. A majority chose to live in Caracas, the capital, while smaller numbers settled in the towns of Valencia, Barquisimeto, Maracay and Maracaibo. By the late 1960s and 1970s, the Greek community in Caracas numbered more than three thousand people and in the whole of Venezuela well over four thousand.

Greek immigrants ventured mostly into the manufacturing and trade of textiles and apparel as well as industry and imports. Those were the years when most of the Greek community associations came into being as did the conflicts that have characterized the Greek diaspora’s community-life: the struggle for power between the church and civil society and the yet-to-heal wounds of the Civil War. The hope of establishing a school to serve the needs of the community gave life to a project that lasted less than a year due to ongoing conflicts between conservatives who favored a strong oversight by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North America and liberals who clamored for independence from religious authorities. At the time Greece was under right-wing governments, followed by the dictatorship of the “Colonels”. Under the circumstances, the liberals could hardly have been expected to win the debate. The school never saw the light of day and a Saturday-only school was established under the aegis of the Orthodox Community, by then already well under the authority of the North American Archdiocese, and particularly of Archbishop Iakovos, of unfortunate memory. It was within the framework of this Greek Orthodox community school that cultural events and small theatrical productions were first organized. Poetry recitals, songs and theatrical sketches were the easiest and more agreeable ways for children and young adults to practice the mother tongue. Under the guidance of Bishop Gennadios Chrisoulakis and of the teachers Amalia Zianettos, Evangelia Biraki and Sofia Papasaki a series of commemorative school activities took place that can be seen as the earliest expressions of a theatre of the diaspora in Venezuela¹.

In 1973 a group of personalities (among whom the teacher Amalia Zianettos is to be noted) established the Greek Theatre Company and

produced a one-time benefit gala for the Greek School and for the establishment of a youth organization. Overcoming great difficulties, this “Greek Volunteer and Cultural Group”, as it was known, staged the social manners comedy by Asimakis Yalamas and Kostas Pretenteris entitled *The Two-Penny Youth*. Presented at the National Theatre in Caracas, it brought together for the first time Greeks from different generations and different political inclinations, all joined by a common desire to spread the knowledge of the Greek language and culture among their fellow kin.

Its success, and the fear that the Group could serve as an excuse for further divisions within the community, made Bishop Gennadios call upon four of its young members (Fena Antonatos, Elisa Piourzetian, Pantelis and Kostas Palamidis) to establish, within the framework of the community and with the requisite autonomy, the “Greek Youth of Venezuela”. Thus, in 1974 this important organization, without parallel in all of Latin America, was established. It indefatigably fostered Greek cultural values for more than a decade, not only within the community but all over Venezuela. The incorporation of Cristos Aguridis, Anastasia Chimaras, Stella Athanasiou, Anastasia and Basilio Andriopoulos, Dimitri and Antonio Constantinou, Atanasio and Maria Kazana, Apostolos Goropoulos strengthened the group, as did the later addition to the theatre, dance and music group of Giorgos and Dora Bacatsias, Maria Marangoudakis, Cristos and Giorgos Mitsicostas, Demetrio Lambrou, Panagiotis Melimopoulos, Lazaro Georgiadis, Teresa Dimopolous, Sofi and Lucy Tsortsotsidis, Mihalis and Manolis Liarmakopoulos, Maria Palamidi, Sultana and Efterpi Haralampidis, Haris and Sofia Panagiotidis, Dimitra and Maria Giannouli, Elena and Kostas Filipou, Dionisio and Maria Arvanitakis, Ilia and Giorgos Papasarantos, Nikos and Vangelis Hatzikostantis, Elena and Giannis Esperidis, Marisol Forlakis, Liana and Sofia Laliotis, Ana Luisa Drosos, Helena Mendis, Mercedes, Maria and Rafael Meligonitis. Already in 1974 the Greek Youth of Venezuela presented a very important show called *Greek Joviality*, which comprised two important one act plays, *The Parade* by Loula Anagnostaki (Greece) and *A Sunny Morning* by the Quintero Brothers (Spain).

For a full decade, the Greek Youth of Venezuela not only devoted itself to organizing Greek music and folklore presentations all over Venezuela but also to staging in different theatres throughout Caracas plays such as *Liar Needed for Hire* (1975) and *The Insatiable* (1976), by the great genre writer Dimitris Psathas, fragments of the review *Oh, What a World, Daddy!* by Kostas Murselas (1976), *My Love, Huahua* (1977) by Pierre Lacroze, and

Aphrodite (1979) by Peter Shaffer, among others. It also organized a children's theatre presentation based on the poems of Odysseas Elytis with music by Linos Kokkotos and Mihalis Tranoudakis, under the title *Forward on, Forward on, Little Machine* (1980).

With much public acclaim, theatre, music and poetry came together in many a great soirées such as *Kostas Varnalis and Us* (1977), *Yorgos Seferis and Us* (1978), and *Yannis Ritsos and Us* (1979). Dramatic representations of Greek poems, particularly by Tasos Livaditis and by the poet and journalist Nikos Palamidis (1978-80), were also staged in honor of the Athens Polytechnic and the students' struggle.

The organization's activities expanded into many fields, covering the edition of *The Shape of Absence*, a book of poems by Yannis Ritsos, and *Bolivar*, by Nikos Engonopoulos, with translation by Miguel Castillo Didier, as well as the launch of Greek Cinema Weeks and a radio program.

Severe criticism of the isolation, conservatism and intellectual backwardness of the Greek Orthodox Community, at the time under the chairmanship of Diogenes Duzoglu and of the newly-arrived priest Lefteris Konakas, published in the first edition of the art journal *Pegasus* (1981), caused a schism within the community and after seven years of existence the Greek Youth Organization drifted away from its roots. During three years it continued its activities in association with another community organization, the "Greek-Venezuelan Center", at the Teatro Chacaito, and with the Greek Embassy, under the sponsorship of Their Excellencies Antonios Protonotarios and Nikos Dimadis. During this period, it produced such shows as *Four Eras* (1982) and *Café Concert* (1983) that combined music and theatre under the direction of its two founding members, Pantelis and Kostas Palamidis.

In 1984, upon celebrating its tenth anniversary, the "Greek Youth of Venezuela" organization decided to come to an end and devote efforts to spread Greek culture through two new organizations: a) Greek Dances of Venezuela, and b) AEDOS (Popular Song Collective).

In 1985, Pantelis and Costas Palamidis joined the founding team of the National Theatre Company of Venezuela and during its first five years of existence held with much success the positions of General Manager and Administrator, and Assistant-Director, respectively. By that time they had both concluded their studies at the Central University of Venezuela with degrees in Music (Pantelis) and Theatre (Costas). As artists in their own right, the Palamidis brothers, in association with AEDOS, Greek Dances of Venezuela,

several theatre companies such as the National Company, the Latin American Repertoire Theatre “Teatrela” (founded by Costas Palamidis in 1985), “Contrajuego” and other groups, fostered the presentation of both Greek classical and contemporary plays such as *Pluto* by Aristophanes (1993), *Polis* by Loula Anagnostaki (1994) and *Oedipus Tyrannus* by Sophocles (1995).

During the Nineties, a series of shows were organized to present the music of Mikis Theodorakis, the *Rembetica*, at the National Theatre and the theatres of Caracas’ Atheneum. Moreover, with the support of many famous Venezuelan actors, staged readings were held of *Christopher Columbus* by Nikos Kazantzakis.

During those years, famous theatre personalities from Greece visited Venezuela to participate in the Caracas International Theatre Festival, amongst them special mention should be made of Panagiotis Mihopoulos, Theodoros Terzopoulos, Nikos Sakalidis, Iliana Panagiotouni, Stavros Doufexis and Mihalis Marmarinos.

By the new millenium, AEDOS, Greek Dances of Venezuela and Teatrela have already reached twenty years of existence and have given their support to Greek culture in Venezuela organizing both Greek Cultural Weeks and Months in Caracas theatres and cultural centers. It is worth mentioning that the musical *Good Bye, Alexandria* (1993-2007), produced by AEDOS with music by Pantelis Palamidis, poems by Constantinos Kafavis and the actors Costas Palamidis and Ludwig Pineda, has had over a hundred presentations in Venezuela and has toured in the United States, Puerto Rico, Mexico and Greece. It also represented the Greek diaspora in Latin America on the occasion of the “2003 Heleniada”, held in Salonica.

Between 2000 and 2002, AEDOS in cooperation with the Caracas International Theatre Festival and the Athens Greek Cultural Center staged the first Greece-Venezuela co-production of *The Trojan Women* by Euripides, directed by Stavros Doufexis. Under the sponsorship of the Ambassador of Greece, Lazaros Nanos, and the Orthodox Community Greek School - whose teachers are sent by the Greek Government (at a time when the Greek community in Venezuela counts less than two thousand members) – special presentations of *The Trojan Women*, in Greek and with Greek actors, were organized for the Greek communities of Caracas and Valencia.

During the last few years, AEDOS, Greek Dances of Venezuela and Teatrela have worked together to produce two Greek Cultural Months during which plays based on Greek tragedies have been staged. Thus, *One Hundred Pairs of*

Eyes, a piece based on *Clytemnestra or the Crime*, a tale by Marguerite Yourcenar, and on poems by Yorgos Seferis (2005-2007), and the play *Phaedra* by Jean Racine (2006-2007) have been presented receiving much critical and public acclaim. AEDOS receives vital support from the General Secretariat for Greeks Abroad of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs as well as, since 1996, by the Ministry of Culture of Venezuela. Teatro de Repertorio Latinoamericano “Teatrela” is one of the most successful theatre groups of Venezuela and has received important prizes awarded by the Government of Venezuela. Since 1990 it has received an annual allocation from the Venezuelan Ministry of Culture. “Greek Dances of Venezuela” continues to organize Greek folk-dance workshops in several Caracas cultural centers, as well as in the School of Arts of Venezuela’s Central University.

NOTES

1. This article is derived from the author’s personal research, both for his B. A. thesis *The Greek Myth in the Theatre of Latin America* and his many lectures given over the last twenty years. An additional source has been the work *Chronicle of the Greeks in Venezuela*, Athens, 1995 [In Greek] by his father, the noted writer and journalist Nikos Palamidis.