The Theatre of Identity: Changing Survival Mechanisms of Diasporic Hellenism in South Africa Through Apartheid to the Present Day

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RÉSUMÉ

Une analyse de l'expérience théâtrale de la diaspora grecque en Afrique du Sud révèle l'influence du théâtre grec classique. Parallèlement aux églises communautaires grecques avec leurs salles pour la célébration des mariages et des salles de spectacles, les associations grecques, luttant pour le maintien de leur identité dans un pays étranger, ont produit des pièces de théâtre et ont organisé des festivals de danse. Durant les années d'Apartheid, les Grecs étaient perçus de façon stereotypée comme des immigrants impliqués dans les *cafés du coin.* Dans la nouvelle Afrique du Sud, la contribution des groupes minoritaires, dans des domaines allant du légal au medical est reconnue; et en termes artistiques, le théâtre de la diaspora grecque moderne réflète de façon croissante les angoisses partagées de la société. Dans cet article l'intérêt pour le théâtre grec n'était et n'est pas confiné aux premiers immigrants et aux générations subsequentes. Nelson Mandela, inspiré par Sophocle, a monté sur scène l'interrogatoire d'Antigone par le Roi Creon, avec des camarades de prison, durant son incarcération sur l'île Robben. L'auteur dramatique Athol Fugard a immortalisé cet événement dans les pièces *The Island* et *Demetos,* en décrivant les tragiques réalités des masses dans des sociétés non démocratiques. J. M. Coetzee, récipiendaire du Prix Nobel de la littérature, a présenté la corruption dans la pièce *Waiting for the Barbarians.* Plus récemment, *Plutus* d'Aristophane, retravaillée par la seule école grecque du jour du pays, a résonné avec les défis actuels auxquels font face tous les Sud-Africains.

ABSTRACT

An analysis of the Hellenic diasporic experience in South Africa reveals the influence of Classical Greek Theatre. Alongside Greek community churches with halls for weddings and feast days, Hellenic associations, striving to maintain identity in a foreign land, produced plays and organised dance festivals. During the Apartheid years, Greeks were stereotypically perceived as immigrants involved in *corner cafés.* In the new South Africa, contributions of such minority groups, in fields ranging from legal to medical is

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acknowledged, and in terms of the arts, Modern Greek diasporic theatre is increasingly reflecting shared angst. Regard for Greek Theatre was and is not confined to original immigrants and subsequent generations of offspring. Nelson Mandela, inspired by Sophocles, staged Antigone's interrogation by King Creon, with fellow prisoners, while incarcerated on Robben Island. Playwright Athol Fugard immortalised this event in *The Island* and in *Demetos*, addressing the tragic realities of masses in a non-democratic society. J. M. Coetzee, recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, presented corruption in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. More recently, Aristophanes' *Ploutos*, reworked by the country's only Greek Day School, resonated with the current challenges facing all South Africans.

Introduction

Diasporic research should necessarily seek archival material in order to capture and comprehend the patterns and processes of immigrant survival in the new home or host land. In the case of Hellenic diasporic records in South Africa, sources point to an ever present range of ethnic groups involved in the proprietorship of "Corner Cafés". Undated registers of licensed businesses, estimated to span the years 1908-1935, indicate the café involvement of "Asiatics" (Gujarati-speaking Muslims and Hindus), "Africans", Greeks, Jews and Germans, the "Asiatics" and "Africans" entries having pass book (identification) numbers and residential permit codes. According to data contained in the Johannesburg Commercial Directories, the dominance of café ownership by Hellenes appears to have been area-specific and fluctuating. More specifically, a Greek majority (ranging from 32% to 49%) in fruiterers stores spans the years 1893 to 1932 but indicative of ethnic upward mobility, changes its fabric and emerges as area-specific dominance in general dealer stores until 1944, restaurants, tearooms and fish-and-chips stores until the mid 1950s and cafés and milk bars until the early 1980s.

At present, Hellenic dominance in retail food and catering enterprises is even more area-specific and appears in a range of businesses including supermarkets, hyperamas, family food stores, Greek restaurants, steakhouses, fast food outlets and property investments. Hellenic dominance, or at least presence, in areas other than food and catering enterprises has been on the rise since the mid 1970s and continues to grow. This presence has been in spite of Apartheid regime rise and fall and even in the light of the most recent xenophobia sweeping the country presently. Diasporic assimilation has facilitated the involvement and world class recognition and success of South African Hellenes in almost every single aspect of activity including

Law, Medicine, the Arts and Education. It is clearly evident that as time passes from the initial immigration, arrival, survival and settlement of the first generation (immigrant parentage) of Hellenes in South Africa (from mainland Greece and the islands, including Cyprus, Lemnos, Ithaki and Crete), so the second and subsequent generations (immigrant offspring) reflect an increasing identification with and assimilation into South African culture, norms, ideals and behaviour. It is suggested that, as is the case in most regions of Hellenic and other diasporic processes on the planet, this increasing identification is reflected in such realities as inter-marriage, loss of fluency in mother or ancestral tongue accompanied by verbalised denial of roots and acceptance of the notion "the soil upon which one is born is the soil that determines one's individuality".

This notion is one which has been addressed by the major practitioners of art of second and subsequent generations of Hellenes resident in South Africa. The focus of the present paper being that of theatre and diasporic Hellenism in South Africa is apt, as it is in this field that expressions of identity occur in both the Greek church halls and in the commercial theatres of the country. In the latter, the expressions are in the form of one person productions in which the artist contemplates and debates whether he or she is South African, Greek South African, South African Greek or Greek-Cypriot South African, to state but a few considerations. In the former, the expressions are in the form of community productions which are also labours of love but which serve to remind Hellenes of the land they left behind, quench their thirst for original Greek thought and philosophy and satisfy the hunger for uniqueness. In both cases, study of the Theatre of Identity provides a window into life outside the businesses and financial survival strategies outlined above.

Delving into the realities of Hellenic immigrant community presence and existence highlights the vital role of recreational support and survival mechanisms during an often troubled South African history. Entertainment such as theatrical productions, poetry readings and competitions, commemoration days, *laika* functions, bouzouki evenings, dance presentations and art exhibitions, all by local Greeks, attest to the expression of identity.

The Diasporic Beginnings

The production of a locally written Greek play in English has not occurred at community hall level which has always been dominated by authentic

Greek plays in Greek by Greek playwrights from Greece. In interesting contrast and parallel diasporic pattern, there is a plethora, most recently and increasingly, of locally written short stories and poems in both Greek and English with some of the most successful commercial theatrical productions in the country having been written and performed by South Africans of Greek origin about the challenges, joys and pain of being at the heart of a diasporic existence. This expression of a Hellenic life journey inevitably refers to the original Greek settlers, their corner stores, their longing for the homeland, their difficult lives "behind the counter" and their hopes for the youth. While these themes are universal to all diasporic communities throughout the world, in the case of South Africa, one needs cognisance of the details of such diasporic beginnings and journeys.

Due to differing opinions and scant archival sources, it is difficult to ascertain when the first Greeks arrived in South Africa. It is believed (Nicolaides, 1923) that the first Greek immigrants arrived in the late 1800s and were seamen who had first emigrated to America and then travelled to South Africa. A social historian (Mantzaris, 1978) maintains that by 1888, there were about twenty Greeks in Kimberley and in 1891 approximately fifteen Greeks lived in Cape Town. In 1896 there were at least seventy Greeks in Johannesburg and by 1903, the first organic unity – The Mutual Help Organisation – was formed and the first Greek Orthodox Church, to serve the now 1000 strong Greek population of Cape Town, was built. Another, albeit different organic unity, the Greek Miners' Association, was formed the previous year in Johannesburg (Callinicos, 1987) to safeguard against the Transvaal Miners' Associations' actions of undercutting the wages of unqualified immigrants.

The First Immigrants

What appears to be a now generally and academically accepted diasporic beginning is the account that towards the end of the nineteenth century, Hellene immigrants reached the Southern shores of what now constitutes the Republic of South Africa (Gerondoudis, 2002). The first immigrants inhabited the area of Cape Town and as their numbers gradually increased, they began travelling northwards towards Johannesburg and Pretoria. At the beginning of the twentieth century, small concentrations of Hellenes were formed in the towns in which they settled. Numbering a few hundred individuals each in most cases, they were aware of the need to safeguard their religious, linguistic and cultural tenets and ideals, and so formed themselves

into regional societies which they named Hellenic Communities, each Community named after a town or region.

The formation of the Hellenic Community of Johannesburg and the Hellenic Community of Pretoria occurred in 1908, five years after that of Cape Town. As the Hellenic population increased and sizeable concentrations of Hellenes were formed in other major towns of South Africa, additional Hellenic communities, whose aims were consistent with the pioneer Hellenic communities, were established.

The Establishment of a Federation of Hellenic Communities

Simultaneously, ethnic regional societies were formed alongside the Hellenic communities to serve the interests of Hellenes originating from a particular island or region of Greece or the needs within a specific field of human endeavour and expression, such as teaching Greek to the youth, a benevolent function for those facing financial difficulties or illness, a sporting club, a chamber of commerce, a group of professional practitioners and a recreational *omadha*. These last mentioned groups or troupes were often thespian in nature and focussed not only on theatrical productions but also on festival dances and commemorative celebrations. However, such a wide range of groups and gatherings was at times counter productive, and so resulted in the formation, in October, 1950, of The Federation of Hellenic Communities of South Africa, a unified body to coordinate the efforts of the Hellenic communities towards a common purpose, supported by the other Hellenic organisations, all working in unison to uphold the ideals of Hellenism in South Africa.

Notwithstanding the enthusiasm shown by the representatives of the twenty-five Hellenic communities and organisations at the time, the Federation was short-lived. It was only after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus, when an association named the Hellenic Cyprus Relief Fund formed at the initiative of the Hellenic Cyprus Brotherhood and supported beyond wildest expectation by other Hellenic organisations that the process of forming the Federation of Hellenic Communities of the Transvaal began. In 1975, the communities of Alberton, Benoni, East Rand, Pretoria, Vaal Triangle and West Rand, Germiston, Johannesburg and Witwatersrand and Rustenburg were ratified as representatives. In 1976 the communities of Cape Town and Environs, Durban (Association of Natal), East London, Port Elizabeth and Eastern Province, Bloemfontein, Welkom and Districts became members.

The diasporic identity and survival process continued when in 1976, following the Soweto Uprising on June 16, the Federation changed its name to the Federation of Hellenic Communities of South Africa. In 1978, Hellenic ethnic regional societies begin being represented. In 1978, the Hellenic Cyprus Brotherhood of South Africa, the Ithaquesian Philanthropic Society of South Africa, the Pan-Cretan Association of South Africa and the Peloponnesian Society of South Africa joined the Federation.

At present, the Federation, having grown from strength to strength, is heralded as the only apolitical Hellenic institution in the service of Hellenism in South Africa. In its drive to uphold *Ellinorthodoxia,* it now embraces South African Hellenic communities from Kimberley, the far West Rand and the Northern Cape, as well as ethic regional societies of South African Hellenes from Egypt, Sudan, Lemnos, Kassos, Epirus, Macedonia, Samos, Kefalonia, Mytilini and Pontos.

In light of the demise of Apartheid and the new South African Constitution, the Federation has now been renamed the Federation of Hellenic Communities of the Republic of South Africa. It is important to note that presently, the Hellenic Students' Association, the Hellenic Chamber of Commerce and Industries, the South African Hellenic Educational and Cultural Institute (SAHETI School), the New Pan Hellenic Voice, Hellenes for Human Rights, Equity and Justice, Hellenic Orthodox Ladies Benevolent Society, the Department of Hellenic Studies – University of Johannesburg, the National Association of Greek Youth of South Africa (NAYSOSA) and the Lyceum of Greek Women are among the most active and prolific groups of the Federation.

Economic Activities of Greek Immigrants and Greek Theatre in South Africa

In more general terms, it is the Greek student associations, the radio station, the charities, the universities and the schools of the Hellenic diaspora in South Africa which may be seen as the major practitioners of theatrical presentations both celebratory and educational. For example, university student productions such as *Den Xehno*, reflecting on the 1974 Turkish Invasion of Cyprus, are produced or at least partly presented annually, Kazantzakis and Elytis are favourites in the presentations of readings of their classical and highly regarded works, the on-air blood drive and plea for helping victims of crime and xenophobic attacks refers to the grand ideals of democracy in a dramatic

manner and Odysseus is highlighted in a production which is at once didactic and hopeful. Whatever the style or nature of the theatrical or dramatic form, one aspect of diasporic Hellenes remains within the greater South African context, namely, that of the stereotypical store owner with broken English and gold chain dangling on a hairy chest. This stereotype, while still valid to some degree, in certain areas of the country, is losing its universal reference. Perhaps this changing diasporic Hellene is the one depicted in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding,* received, by all accounts, with great applause in diasporic regions, such as South Africa but not in Greece itself. Whatever the case may be, considerations of Hellenic diasporic theatre, written by South Africans, almost always refers to the café on the corner, the village back home, the sense of being foreign, the Greek accent, the grandmother in black, the Turkish coffee, the breaking of the plates, food and more food, and dancing like there is no tomorrow within a flame of lit whiskey.

In light of these continued stereotypical representations, it is necessary to investigate and record the actual daily lives in general and economic activities specifically, when considering the theatre of the Hellene in the diaspora. A starting point would clearly be a backdrop of such lives and survival strategies in other diasporas with Hellenes. A case in point is the fact that the occupations, institutions and assimilation of Greek immigrants into host communities have been widely studied in Australia and America (Baddely, 1977; Scourby, 1980; Chock, 1981; Lovell, 1981).

In all diasporic instances of Hellenes, a common thread of concern is the desire for one's children to learn to speak and write Greek, to *tsoungrisi* red eggs at Easter, to dance the *hasaposerviko* and to make *dolmadakia*. Although the café form and proprietorship as evident in South Africa (Spanoudes, 2005) is absent overseas, the Greek immigrants have been found to be involved, as suggested above, in food retailing to varying extents. In a study of business proprietors in Poughkeepsie, New York, during the 1960s (Newcomer, 1962), it was found that the majority of Greek retailers were involved in the food business. An examination of urban adaptation among diasporic Greeks in Auckland (Baddeley, 1977) has revealed the emergence of a Greek coffeehouse establishment within the community, and in Sydney the diasporic Greek owned shops and services (Burnley, 1976) are seen as indicative of the presence of Greek immigrants in suburban areas. Such presence and emergence has continued to date.

In South Africa, the diasporic process and patterns initially existed predominantly in café proprietorship but have continuously declined to date

(Nicolaides, 1923; Added, 1973; Mantzaris, 1978; Spanoudes, 1983, 1997, 2005; Bizos, 2008). Causes for this decline vary from changes in the socio-economic structure of the country to emigration back to one's country of origin or a safer country, upward mobility and diasporic assimilation by the younger generation within South African cultures, sub-cultures, and opportunities.

Present day observations are understood more clearly when cognisant of the various time frames and stages of diasporic process within an economic survival context. Newspaper survey series on "The people who come from other countries to make a new home in South Africa" and "The fascinating immigrant communities of Johannesburg" concur that the first Greeks to have landed in South Africa were sailors in the late 1880s. These reports point to the more authenticated documentation revealing the legal and official emigration of Greeks to South Africa began as a trickle through Lourenco Margues prior to the Second Anglo-Boer War and thereafter gradually increasing (*Pretoria News,* 20 November 1975; *Star,* 28 June 1978).

An example of such a document indicating immigration through Africa of Greek peoples is a list of names of Hellenic refugees from the Middle East (Union of South Africa, Labour Report, 1941). In August 1941, these individuals registered with the Controller of Industrial Man Power of the Union of South Africa, for the purpose of obtaining employment. Interestingly, their stated occupations include carpenter (majority), motor mechanic, engineer and electrician. Further, their stated language proficiencies besides Greek were Turkish, French and English – perhaps indicative of earlier education and social status.

In the 1950s, some of the economically active Greeks in the Transvaal (Callinicos, 1987) were artisans, tailors, cabinet makers, blacksmiths and shoe makers, while most were traders in the general dealer, fruiterer, baker and confectioner, tobacco, bottle store and (predominantly) tearoom and restaurant enterprises. Records of the involvement of Greeks in mining (Mantzaris, 1982; Callinicos, 1987) inform that workers were recruited from the ranks of the unemployed miners from the Belgian Congo. The feudal pattern of land ownership which predominated in Greece, Crete and Cyprus during the first decades of the last century, suggests that the majority of immigrants were drawn from the agricultural and villager strata. These immigrants did not bring a café ownership occupation with them, rather they arrived with their agricultural knowledge, little capital and a meagre education (Added, 1923; Mantzaris, 1978; Michos, 1983, Spanoudes, 1983, 2003; Bizos, 1983, 2008, Greek Community Annual Reports).

In the late 1970s, Jewish tearoom and grocery store proprietorship began to be overshadowed by that of Hellenes. Upward mobility, as already suggested, enables such change. From the late 1980s, Greek proprietorship of the café trade in the major cities was replaced by members of the Portuguese, Indian and Chinese ethnic groups – themselves experiencing diasporic patterns and processes. In the present day South Africa, the remnants of the diasporic Greek café journey are clearly observed. In fact, the further one travels out from the business districts towards the smaller towns and into the rural areas of the country, the greater the unchanged and continued activity and presence of Hellenes in such businesses and survival strategies. In the cities, however, cafés have been a prey for monopolistic and oligopolistic corporations who forged the development of the dominance of large shopping malls, franchised food outlets, petrol station convenience stores, mega supermarkets and an emergence of Hellenic dining experiences alongside a healthy, indigenous coffee society.

From the turn of the century, Black economic empowerment has enabled the emergence of a legal informal trader and will engender an increasingly sophisticated inner city retailer. This retailer, if current political challenges are met, will mirror the original characteristics of the Hellenes in their original activity of survival, namely a first-aid post and provision of a public service to all classes and races of society.

It is against a backdrop of the history of the formations of the Hellenic communities of South Africa and establishments of Hellenic associations and their recreational activities in the country on the one hand, and cognisance of the strategies of survival and assimilation of the Hellenic immigrant and the subsequent generations, that Greek diasporic theatre may be understood, that the voice and witness of Greek diasporic theatre in South Africa may be heard.

Theatre of Identity in Hellenic Communities and Hellenic Ethnic Groups in South Africa

While all the Hellenic communities and ethnic associations have, to a lesser or greater degree, been involved in presentations, festivals, celebrations and productions, there have been those who have excelled in such and so have become synonymous with the broad terms of culture and theatre.

One such Hellenic community is that of Alberton which has always been at the forefront of meeting the educational and intellectual needs of

diasporic Hellenes, actively participating in efforts to raise money and establish a thriving family-orientated Greek life of activity. The theatrical productions of Alberton have mostly been an annual event and have always focussed on the great contemporary comedies. The cultural rise of the Alberton Greeks and the Hellenic communities in the vicinity and beyond became richer following the establishment of Alberton's Theatre Group in 1987. Its main aim was to give the opportunity to Greeks of the city to get involved in creative thinking and cultural awareness. Basil Markatselis has been the Chairman and firebrand of this cultural group since its inception to date. Their many theatrical productions have all been written by the well-known theatrical writer, Dimitrios Psathas. The plays are performed in the community hall of the Hellenic Community of Alberton in their official South African premieres and subsequently, they have been performed throughout the country to the very appreciative diasporic audiences.

At the time of going to press, this vibrant community was in rehearsal for this year's production – Psatha's *I Hartopehtra*. Critics who question why such a dated and seemingly irrelevant piece is being produced in South Africa today clearly do not understand the dynamics of diasporic process and pattern. Such a production immediately appeals to an older, established Hellene who inadvertently is wishing to instil some awareness of Greek culture in the youth. At the very least, the desire is to engender the passion and interest in theatre that the younger generation display with regard to both contemporary and "older" music, ranging from Georgos Dalaras to Eurovision success stories, such as Anna Vissi, Elena Paparizou and Sakis Rouvas (all four having travelled and performed to capacity houses in Johannesburg).

The closest that the Alberton and certainly the other South African diasporic Hellene communities have come to appealing to the youth en masse, besides the "socials" (disco, club nights) in terms of somewhat theatrical (costume, make-up, dance) or cultural events, are the Olympic Flame Journey Day in South Africa in 2004 and the very recent visit by Angelo Tsarouchas, world famous Canadian Hellene, who performed his stand-up comedy routine to such demand that he had to give additional shows at other community halls and at SAHETI School. Sadly perhaps, the production of *I Hartopehtra,* or a screening of a classic Greek film such as *Mia Gineka Stin Antistasi, Oratotis Mithen* or *Xerizomeni Genia,* or even famous Greek stories in English motion pictures, such as *Captain Corelli's Mandolin, Ulysses' Gaze* or *Zorba The Greek* would not receive such tremendous support from South African Hellene offspring today. In interesting contrast, a staging of a local *Big* and *Fat Greek*

South African Wedding would, a sign of the diasporic process of assimilation and universal definition of self.

The Theatre of Identity of the Hellenes in South Africa and South Africans of Hellenic Roots

As described above, there is more than a century of presence of Hellenes in South Africa. While there are second, third and fourth generations of offspring, there are also continuous and recent arrivals and departures of Hellenes, driven by factors internal to South Africa and specific to Greece, Cyprus and the *patritha*.

The story of an immigrant who makes a success despite great difficulties is at the heart of great Greek literature and equally stirring international diasporic writings and expression. In terms of dance expression in South African Greek diaspora, major strides and achievements have been realised by Mairy Vasiliou who has been teaching Greek dancing throughout the country since her arrival in 1956. She has won international and local acclaim, having choreographed the movement and dance sequences for Greek productions by South African Greeks, as well as South Africans who have staged Greek plays such as Leon Gluckman's production of *Iphigenia* at Johannesburg's Civic Theatre and *Extracts from the Greek Tragedies* by, amongst others over the years, Taubie Kushlick at the University of Johannesburg, University of the Witwatersrand and the National Grahamstown Festival (Vasiliou, 2008).

In terms of musical expression, members of the Greek community who expressed interest and who participated in the arts, founded the Hellenic Cultural Movement of South Africa (EPNEK) as an organisation in 1978. Their aims were to promote Greek culture in South Africa, to encourage cultural expression especially among the youth and to facilitate cultural exchange between South Africa and Greece. On many occasions, EPNEK has been invited to participate in the Athens Festival at Lykavitos and Festivals by the Ecumenical Hellenism Organisation. While the majority of their productions have been musical concerts, their theatre sub-committee has staged the works of the now deceased Apostolis Parianos such as *Metanastis, Arhontogiftissa, Exomologiseis* and *28 Oktovriou* – all texts which strike at the heart of diasporic angst.

In terms of local theatrical Greek-themed expression in South Africa, there has been one particular such story which was not staged as a play but was

produced by Grey Hofmeyer, himself married to a Greek woman born in South Africa. Tom Hanks and his Greek American wife Rita Wilson, falling in love with Nia Vardalos' one woman show in Canada, is an enlightening parallel in that in both cases Hofmeyer and Hanks speak to the diasporic heart which longs to tell the story of the home away from home. Hofmeyer's television series was the story of one Savvas Englezakis, who was born in Cyprus in 1939. His studies in Italy and England were halted by the political unrest in Cyprus and so he was forced to return home. In 1956, he was involved in an ambush against the British where he and his fellow freedom fighters faced execution. He was spared due to the fact that he had a strong command of English and so could be interrogated. He escaped and journeyed to South Africa in 1957. His story is here detailed for it is in the specific that one addresses the universal – particularly when dealing with diasporic truths. In 1960, he started his corner café which was a fish-and-chips shop in a downtrodden area where not many individuals ventured to do business. It is recorded that the shop cost him a mere 350 pounds but it turned out to be a highly lucrative business. He thus expanded as time progressed and opened up a restaurant, bakery and supermarket store. In the mid 1960s, he began cattle and game farming and continuing his diasporic process of assimilation and survival, he eventually started an ostrich farm with its own abattoir and tannery. This is an international enterprise today, still owned and run by the Englezakis family (Gerondoudis, 2003). Hofmeyer's television series was entitled *The Big Time* and has been controversially seen as the quintessential story of the Hellene who chose South Africa. It was however not filmed with Greek South Africans in the leading roles, it was not written by Greek South Africans, it was not even considered as potentially a play.

The Englezakis-Hofmeyer collaboration begs questions such as, what does *The Big Time* on television say for Theatre of Identity in the diaspora and what other stories have been told theatrically by Greek South Africans? In response one would refer to the practitioners who have had the courage of the power of a diasporic story to venture into a theatrical expression of their "Greekness", their "South Africaness" and their "identity quest".

Irene Stephanou, graduate of the University of the Witwatersrand's Dramatic Arts School has always written and performed her own work which has been dominated by two main issues or concerns. The first, directly linked to Apartheid South Africa, is a desire to understand what it means to be a foreigner, a child of immigrant parents, a child who becomes educated

to escape the burdensome life behind the counter in the café but who then seeks to embrace her different roots. The second, directly linked to the new South Africa, is the attempt to celebrate one's uniqueness in a country whose constitution recognises the interdependency of a nation that has survived potential anarchy. Once again, universal diasporic themes abound and make for riveting theatre. Stephanou's *Stukkie Jorls* examined the Greek girl at university. *Meze, Mira and Make Up* and *Apollo Café* presented her parents' Odyssean Journey to the foreign land, their joys and struggles, the differences between the richer property owning Greeks and the shopkeeper Greeks as well as her youth growing up behind the counter of their neighbourhood Café and Grocery Store (Krause, 2007). *Meze* has travelled to Australia and England but in the former case, it was not anything special or unusual to the diasporic Hellenes in Sydney and Melbourne. On many occasions, the Hellenic associations and communities have hosted Stephanou's productions in their own halls and venues – in each instance, to raise money for a pressing and worthy cause (Stephanou, 2008).

Harry Sideropoulos, a graduate of SAHETI School who played the lead in all the Greek productions of the Classics at the school, is a producer and actor who examined a similar Odyssean journey of parents alongside an obsession with food in his *No Sugar, Canderel Please*. He is presently in a new piece which is responding directly to diasporic angst. His *Harry Shabalala, the Artist Formerly Known As Harry Sideropoulos* is a comedy dealing with being South African, believing in the country and planning to stay and celebrate its democracy in spite of the odds of crime, AIDS, xenophobia and the threat of a botched 2010 World Cup Soccer event.

The change from a Greek name to an African one possibly mirrors the latest sentiment of South Africans of Hellene descent, namely not forgetting one's roots but rather marrying them with those in the soil of the country where one was born – to the refrain of a Classical Greek tune.

Great Classics as well as Greek and European music have predominated Sideropoulos' productions of *Big Band Blast* and *Song of the Mediterranean,* both of which have earned him the status of a successful Hellene in South African theatre (Sideropoulos, 2008).

John Vlismas is a stand-up comedian whose father was Greek but whose mother he affectionately calls *xeni*. His theatrical productions all deal with the stereotypes of South African society and holding back no bars, he sees no cow as sacred and attacks all races, colours and creeds.

His latest offering, being staged concurrently with Sideropouolos' *Shabalala*, is entitled *Lucky Plebian* and will be similarly commercially successful because it does not depend on the attendance of the Greek community and it appeals to the current trend of comic relief in the commercial theatrical arena of the country (Vlismas, 2008). Therefore, one may categorically state that the theatre of the diaspora is a form of survival in that it not only expresses the artists' identification issues but it also is influenced by the commercially viable style of theatre.

Few are the artists who will venture out of the financial safety web of comedy. One such instance, which received local and critical acclaim and accolades was Renos Spanoudes' one man play about Dimitrios Tsafendas. *Tsafendas* dealt with the issues of identity, and the man himself was an individual who had a life-long struggle to be accepted, for whatever reason, by any of the countries he visited as a merchant seaman. He is notorious for the assassination of the architect of Apartheid, Prime Minister Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd in 1966, and this incident has been recorded as one of the most traumatic events that had to be dealt with by the Executive Committee of The Hellenic Community of Johannesburg and by the Greek community at large. The assassination had disastrous consequences for small Greek businessmen who were operating and living in predominantly Afrikaans-speaking and National Party supporters' areas. Spanoudes' motivation was to tell the universal story which is Tsafendas', namely that prejudice, intolerance and inhumane judgement of any human being, on the basis of his skin colour, religion, sexual persuasion, beliefs or abilities can lead to unthinkable actions of desperation.

Dimitrios Tsafendas was the son of a Cretan father and Black Mozambiquan woman. In the Portuguese terminology he was labelled a mulatto, a mule, a half-breed. The themes are deeply diasporic, particularly when many Hellenes were forced to carry non-European identity documents due to the curliness of their hair or their dark complexions. The protagonist in Spanoudes' deeply dramatic and powerful piece is a man rejected by his Greek step-mother, his half brothers and sisters and who, when resident in South Africa, experiences the Apartheid regime on both sides of the fence. He was given a "White" ID Book due to his father being Greek but then changed it to that of a "coloured" ID Book, so that he would be allowed to marry the coloured woman with whom he had fallen in love. The Apartheid *Immorality Act* was one of countless laws and regulations which prevented the mixing or intermarriage of South Africans of differing race.

Plays, such as *Tsafendas,* which have a social conscience and adopt Classical Greek Theatre, Brechtian and Growtowskian techniques in a Post-Modernist framework, have been met with much controversy and have not been financially viable. They are diasporic theatre pieces which are highly respected and lauded by academics and enlightened individuals. This is not to suggest that *Shabalala, Apollo Café, Lucky Plebian, Meze* or Spanoudes' new work *The Apple Tree,* inspired by the writings of Tennessee Williams and South Africa's most famous playwright, Athol Fugard, are not of quality. Athol Fugard has always been at the forefront of Protest Theatre and his colleagues Barney Simon and Mannie Manim placed South African theatre on the international map with their ground-breaking work.

Their main source of reference for Political Theatre were the classics of Greek Theatre and the most famous example is surely the play workshopped and collaborated by Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona. The work was originally entitled *The Hodoshe Span* so that the Apartheid authorities of the early 1970s would not recognise it as a human rights piece.

Inspired by Sophocles' *Antigone,* the work uses the techniques of Poor Theatre and presents in a minimalist fashion, two prisoners on the infamous Robben Island. Incarcerated for life, they are serving sentences for burning their pass books (ID Books) and demanding justice. In prison they are required to create recreational pieces of theatre for entertainment of fellow prisoners and the wardens. John and Winston, retaining their real names, fight a daily battle against the punishment of hard labour and at night rehearse their play. It is the scene between King Creon and Antigone when she is sentenced to death after her trial for disobeying the law and burying her brother. Antigone (Ntshona dressed in a blanket for a dress, a mop for hair and tin cans for breasts) tells Creon that both her brothers, Eteocles and Polynices, deserve a decent burial. Creon (Kani dressed with a necklace of nails and a blanket as a cloak) attempts to justify his decision and exert his power over Antigone.

They become metaphors and representations – Creon of the oppressive Apartheid Government, Antigone of the masses who seek justice and an end to human rights infringement. While *The Island* was first staged in the 1970s and was constantly hounded by police – Blacks were not allowed to perform on the same stage as Whites let alone be seated or even in the same theatre as Whites – it is still performed today throughout South Africa and the world.

The universal truths and philosophical messages of Sophocles remain ever

present and are seen as guiding lights to solving problems of injustice and inhumanity (Kitto, 1994). Like Fugard who had made a conscious decision as early as 1964 to discontinue writing and setting plays in terms of local specifics and produced *Orestes,* in which superimposed the image of a young White radical hanged for a bomb outrage upon that of the Ancient Greek Tragedy, many cultural groups and South African theatre practitioners, as well as drama departments at universities and schools, have produced and continue to this day to stage Greek texts in many translations and adaptations from the originals (Fugard, 1999). *Medea*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone* and *The Birds* are regular features at National Festivals and are staged in varying formats ranging from *Medea* and *Elektra* in *Molora* as a post-Apartheid truth and reconciliation scenario to an *Antigone* in the proverbial Black township.

Concluding Remarks

The salient observation in terms of the ambit of this paper, of the various presences of Greek Theatre in South Africa is that it is the informed theatre and arts festival goer who will ensure his or her attendance at Hellenic productions such as *Orestes*, *The Island, Molora* or *Tsafendas,* it is the older generation Hellene who will ensure his or her attendance at Hellenic productions such as *I Hartopehtra* and it is a range of audience members from the pool of South Africans of all walks of life, who will be in attendance at Hellenic plays such as *Shabalala*.

Once named a "Nation of Shopkeepers" due to their predominance in such enterprises, the Greeks of South Africa today are wide and varied in their influence, contributions, endeavours and activities. Their presence is felt in business as much as in law, medicine, the arts, research and finance – to name but a few.

They do not dominate in terms of presenting theatrical productions of the great Greek tragedies and comedies. This arena is dominated by South Africans who have embraced Greek Theatre through the ages and have used it to voice comment on societal problems and unbearable injustice.

Greek Theatre staged by a Hellenic local community, a Greek association or a Hellenic ethnic group, has been in the form of more contemporary texts which serve to appease nostalgia and bring a taste of the land, people and culture left behind with uncertainties regarding returning. Local productions featuring sons and daughters of Greeks are supported in general and provide a source of pride for the achievements of the young. From time to time,

locally written plays about being a Hellene in the diaspora, as well as productions of both locally written and international plays are frequented as a function to raise funds.

The very successful television series, *The Big Time,* reflected the universal South African Hellenic diasporic journey while at the same time retrenching the stereotypical perception of the "Greasy Greek who can't play soccer because every time he is in the corner he opens a café". A film by Greek graduates at the local Johannesburg Film School AFDA, entitled *Dizzy Stone*, tells the story of a Black gardener winning a Greek dancing competition after watching his mother's employer's Greek children practicing for the competition.

Interestingly, the producers called their film *Dizzy Stone* because they believed that the Greek dance they always dance at socials and parties was a *petrozali* as opposed to a *pentozali*. Does the diasporic process reach a stage where the aim to retain Hellenism, the principles of Greek culture, education, traditions and the Greek language and religion within the community becomes fruitless? Such an issue begs intense debate and sharing of experiences across the globe.

The only South African diasporic prose writer to be formally honoured in Greek literary circles (The Lountemis Award in 1985 and the Association of Greek Authors and the Diamantopoulos Awards in 1992) was Dimitris Dimitriou Leos. Although writing was his passion, he owned and ran the highly successful Engineering College in Johannesburg. His writings range from lectures on great South African authors (such as Herman Charles Bosman) to periodicals (such as *The Southern Cross*) and newspapers in Cyprus, Alexandria and Johannesburg (in particular, *Nea Hellas* community newspaper columns collected and published as *Johannesburg Calling*) as well as many novels all dealing mainly with people who leave Greece in search of a better life – an ever present feature of Greece from its Classical Epoch.

His works have not reached the stages or silver screens but they are powerful testaments praised for their depiction of the effects of Greek diaspora on its emigrants and how, despite many seemingly significant radical and all-encompassing changes to the main characters over the period that they are away from Hellas, it is not possible for them to shed any part of their essential *Romiosini*.

This core remains unchanging for the older generation, irrespective of the country they reside in or their actual circumstances (Gerondoudis, 2003).

Their very *Hellinismos* enables them to adapt, to form part of a larger picture and to contribute to it but, at the same time, always being aware that their Greek identity is not something that can be discarded at will. It remains an essential feature of the emigrant Greek. It remains a feature which diasporic Hellenes long to develop and maintain in the future generations.

Perhaps in the case of South Africa, what is now needed, in its trying times of xenophobia and mistrust, are texts by Hellenes of its diaspora, of all generations, of origin or birth, which express the themes of *A Big Greek Wedding in South Africa, Eat Drink and Be Married in South Africa, Middlesex South Africa* or *Ploutos* and *Irini* in the country (Makis, 2004; Eugenides, 2003).

Perhaps a work in progress, *Zorba in S.A. – Greek to Me,* will address common, bleeding edge realities of a planet in diasporic flux.

Perhaps even a return to the *Elliniko Kinimatographo* Sunday night screenings (one screening at 18h00 for those who did not own cafés and a second screening at 21h00 for those who had to close their shops first) of Aliki Vouyouklaki, Rena Vlahopoulou, Costas Voutsas and Nikos Xanthopoulos Finos Film Classics and *Epikera Apo Tin Patritha* at Downtown Johannesburg's Little Greek Cinema *Mon Cine* or the taverna and bouzouki Saturday evenings which always attracted Greek and non-Greek alike will make most welcome companions and distractions as inhabitants, Greek and South African alike, are comforted and entertained by the sounds and strains which are unmistakably Greek, distinctly Hellene.

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