

Theatre in Cyprus (19th Century – 1959)

Yiannis Katsouris*

RÉSUMÉ

L'écriture théâtrale à Chypre pendant la période de l'occupation britannique demeure plutôt limitée. Pendant les mêmes années, augmentent de façon progressive les représentations théâtrales qui sont présentées autant par des groupes d'amateurs que par des troupes professionnelles provenant de la Grèce ou d'autres pays. Le répertoire des représentations présente une grande variété, et inclut des comédies, des comédies musicales, des tragédies néoclassiques, des drames historiques et patriotiques d'auteurs originaires de la Grèce, de Chypre et de l'espace international.

ABSTRACT

The author of this article focuses on the term "Cypriot literature" and points out its prevalence on other terms used from time to time. He argues in favour of the term Cypriot literature because such terms as Greek literature of Cyprus and modern Greek literature of Cyprus make up a redundant and dangerous grammatological terminology that could exclude or eliminate the "Cypriot" dimension from various expressions of Cypriot life.

Modern theatrical activity in Cyprus may be traced back to the mid-19th century.

Of course, the existence of ancient amphitheatres (Salamina, Kourion, Soloi etc), as well as information that came to us from the antiquity with regards to theatrical activity, playwrights, actors' guilds etc, verify that the dramatic art had a history of many centuries in Cyprus which, however, was often disrupted for long periods of time by conquests and other tragedies that time and again befell the island.

We shall begin our account from the last two or three decades of the 19th century, as our oldest evidence dates back from that period. First however we shall look into a number of historical events that had an explicit or implicit

* Writer

effect on the development of theatre in Cyprus.

The first important event that in fact took place unbeknown to Cypriots was the passing of their country from the Ottoman Empire to Great Britain in 1878, be it at first in the form of rented territory! The study of historical events over the eighty or so years of British rule indicates that the new conqueror was no better than the one before. Nonetheless, as the British were not an oriental force and despite the obstacles they often raised, they allowed a somewhat more contemporary and European social life to develop on the island.

This had an explicit and positive effect on the flourishing of the arts, even though the British took no measure whatsoever in this direction.

The second important event was the setting up of the first printing office on the island in 1878 (first year of British rule), donated by the Cypriots of Egypt.

Books that up until then were being published in Smyrna, Alexandria, Venice, Athens etc, began coming out in Cyprus, but at first mostly weekly one-page or two-page newspapers would be printed. It is precisely these newspapers that provide us today with a unique source of information on the intellectual, artistic and social life of Cypriots that was obviously limited during the first years of the British rule. Newspapers also allow us to observe the course of theatre and theatrical movement in Cyprus which after all could not have gone unnoticed by the Press in the small urban zones of the 19th century.

Naturally, dispersed information on theatrical activity by amateur or Greek companies that visited the island is available from other sources even before 1878.¹

Also, before moving on we need to refer to Cyprus' geographical position which during the 19th and early 20th century, in particular until the 1922 Catastrophe of Asia Minor, had played a significant role in the development of theatre.

Cyprus was located in the center of a sea route that united the Hellenism of Smyrna and the wider Asia Minor with their counterparts in Egypt (Alexandria and Cairo) and on the west coast of Asia (Yafa, Haifa etc.). Therefore, troupes setting out from Athens heading toward Constantinople and Smyrna or directly from Smyrna for the wealthy Greek communities of Egypt could easily make a stop in Cypriot cities such as Larnaka, Limassol and Nicosia. Obviously, after 1922, Asia Minor was removed from their itinerary. With aviation advancements after World War II, the itinerary of Greek troupes consisted mainly of Athens-Constantinople (unto the mid

1950s when the city was still inhabited by Greeks) – Cyprus – Egypt.

In the first years of the British rule and during World War I, theatrical movement was mainly supported by:

- (a) amateur groups, usually made up of students or Secondary Education graduates and
- (b) Greek troupes that arrived on the island in the manner described above.

Local groups usually performed patriotic or other populist or melodramatic plays, always in a didactic mood and with altruistic objectives, as all returns were dedicated to charitable causes – as if young amateurs were forbidden to declare that they acted for the joy of creativity or even for their own pleasure.

In addition to this, it should be noted that these were ephemeral groups, made up exclusively of men; in fact, they would usually break up with the end of a play's streak of performances. Bright exceptions to this were the Limassol "Aris" Theatrical Company in the 1880s,² Larnaka "Sophocles"³ in 1909-1910 and the Nicosia groups of "Agapi tou Laou" [Love of People] and "Proodeftikos Syllogos" [Progressive Guild], also in the first decade of the 20th century.⁴

It should be clarified, however, that many of these theatrical groups, for instance the Nicosia "Agapi tou Laou" were in the service of political movements rather than theatre itself; therefore, their groups gained in popularity over the first ten years of the 20th century, when Cyprus was divided by the notorious "Archbishopric question".

In those years, mainly in the 19th century, Greek companies were small, often family troupes touring the wider Eastern Mediterranean area. Yet, since the early 20th century Cyprus also hosted a few fine Greek companies with significant actors and contemporary plays. These companies were headed by actors such as Aimilios Veakis, Edmondo First, Rozalia Nika, Christina Kalogerikou, Pericles Gavrielides, Evangelia Paraskevopoulou etc. who staged plays that had been successfully received on the European stage.⁵

In the late 19th century and until 1914, a Greek actor, Xenophon Esaias played a significant role in the management of troupes visiting Cyprus. In fact, for a long period of time after 1900 Esaias took up residence on the island.

Apart from bringing his own troupes to the island, Esaias managed many other troupes, directed the Cypriots' amateur stage, starring with them too, and even published theatrical pieces applying the system of subscribers' pre-

registration. In all, Esaias undertook quite a notable theatrical activity for his time.

There is no Cypriot counterpart for Xenophon Esaias, during the same period. It should be noted however, that Aristeidis Zenon (1882-1919) was the first Cypriot actor to perform in Greece in his student years (as an “initiate” in K. Christomanos New Skini [New Stage] and a cooperator of Y. Mystriotis in the early 20th century staging of tragedies in ancient Greek).

In Cyprus, he became involved in amateur theatre (staging “Oedipus Rex”, staging and playing in “Antigone”) and active in the wider intellectual life, especially in Limassol, until his untimely death in 1919.⁶

During the interwar years (1918-1940), local theatrical activity was intensified, owing to:

- (a) amateur groups set up mainly in Limassol (ETHEL, Aischylos-Arion, EOL, THON etc.) and also in Larnaka (EPL, AMOL), that usually staged *revue* shows (musical variety theatre). In its Cypriot version, revue entertainment was a courtesy of the Markides brothers from Paphos and their three “Paphian Revues” (1918-1922) that were obviously imitations of Greek shows, especially with regards to sketches drawing on the Balkan Wars and World War I.
- (b) workers syndicates appearing in Cyprus in the 1920s as well as other guilds (i.e. “Panergatikos” in Nicosia) that used the theatre and its social messages for their own purposes, often staging populist, melodramatic plays highlighting albeit naively the exploitation of the poor from the rich and
- (c) Secondary Education schools that used to promote ancient Greek tragedy, which after all was part of their curriculum.

Around the end of this period (1938) the first Revue Company appears in Nicosia, the Mousiki Skini Lefkosias [Nicosia Musical Scene] which would lead up to the heyday of professional musical theatre during the World War II years.

At the same time, Greek companies increase their visits to Cyprus, following the same itinerary as in the previous period – excluding obviously, Smyrna and other Asia Minor coastline cities after the 1922 catastrophe.

In any event, the Asia Minor catastrophe and the consequent poverty that weighed heavily upon Greece with hundreds of thousands of refugees urged Greek troupes to seek employment in Cyprus and of course Egypt.

The result was an influx of fine Greek companies – of M. Kotopoule, V. Argyropoulou, Alikis and Costa Mousouri, Yannis Apostolides, Th. Naizer and K. Raftopoulou as well as smaller troupes that toured Cypriot towns and villages for months on end.

Actors Angelos Vazas and his wife Marika were members of one such troupe. The couple played a huge role in the development of local theatre, just as X. Esaias did during the first period. Angelos and Marika Vazas took up permanent residency in Cyprus and became both impresarios and directors of Cypriot companies from 1931 until the end of World War II.⁷

Within this period, Cyprus got to see everything that was performed in Athens. Everything! From ancient Greek theatre (i.e. *Oedipus Rex* by Veakis) to contemporary European theatre, social theatre, the French boulevard, German low comedy etc. and plays by Greek playwrights such as Xenopoulos, Melas, Synodinos and musicians like Th. Sakellarides and N. Hadjiapostolou with their operettas.⁸

The Third Period, spanning from 1940 – 1959 is in fact divided in three sub-periods: the World War II years (1940-1945); the challenging postwar years (1945-1955); and the years of the struggle against the British rule (1955-1959).

As expected, the course of theatre on the island was entirely dependent on each period's dramatic events.

Therefore, during World War II, Greek theatre vanished completely as companies could not travel outside Greece because of the war. This meant that some room opened up for Cypriot theatre, which saw a rapid development mainly through local revue shows and the European and Greek operetta. War stress and living conditions were so gruesome that they could not but incite the need for a pleasant and light theatrical life.

Numerous professional companies were then set up in Cyprus, i.e. the "Lyrikon" [Lyrical], "Neon Lyrikon" [New Lyrical], "Enosis Kallitehnon Lefkosias" [Nicosia Artists Union], "Orpheas" etc. Soon after, local writers of revue shows made their debut (i.e. Costas Montis, Y. Stephanides, Y. Anthias etc.) with a group of talented actors performing unto the 1960s-1970s (N. Pantelides, Ph. Karaviotis, P. Philippides and shortly afterwards A. Moustras, E. Gavrielides who went on to become an acclaimed director, Phl. Demetriou etc.).

The scenery changed dramatically in the first postwar years. The Civil War and inescapable poverty that befell Greece because of the German

occupation led Greek theatre to job-hunting among Greeks living outside the Greek territory. The big exodus of Greek companies followed, tracing the familiar Constantinople-Cyprus-Egypt itinerary, now by plane.

It was then that Cyprus saw the greater actors of Hellenism performing with their companies. M. Kotopoule, V. Manolidou, M. Aroni, D. Horn, Y. Papas, Katerina, E. Hadjiargyri, E. Lambeti, the Kalouta sisters, comedians P. Kyriakos, V. Avlonites, V. Logothetides, M. Photopoulos, S. Stavrides endowed the island with a rich and contemporary repertoire of European and Greek plays staging unforgettable theatre nights.⁹

Inevitably, the frequent visits of Greek companies between 1945-1955 had a negative effect on local troupes that despite their heroic efforts had not been able to withstand competition. “Promitheas” (1945-1946), the first prosaic theatre in Cyprus is one of the victims of this predicament. Consequently, local theatre is on the decline without always managing to survive and when it does, it is usually sustained by low comedy acts of little acclaim.

Still, in the period between 1940-1955 one genre flourishes: the theatre of syndicates or better said trade-unionist theatre as well as plays staged by guilds and cultural or other associations. Within these years, the genre takes off to unprecedented heights. In fact, one would have trouble locating a rural community that did not stage one, two or more performances annually.

In the last sub-period, namely the years of the struggle for liberation from the British rule, theatrical activity could not have evolved in earnest. In dreadful conditions that include prohibitions and curfews, theatre is barely kept alive, mostly thanks to the “Kyrpiako Theatro” of N. Pantelides and the “Enomenoi Kallitehnes” [United Artists] of V. Kafkarides in the late 1950s. In contrast, guild theatre keeps up its activities albeit not to the extent of previous years.

Throughout the period under examination (19th century – 1960), Cypriot playwriting does not have much to show in terms of auspicious highlights.¹⁰ During the 19th century, classicist pieces of low acclaim were written in the “katharevousa” [the “purified” Greek] imitating Greek playwrights (Vernardakis, Antoniadis, who in their turn replicate classic European writers i.e. Shakespeare). Yet, some of these plays were being successfully received on stage over a long period of time mostly because they referred to Cypriot historic events in a patriotic mood (i.e. “Kypros kai oi Naitai” [Cyprus and the Templar Knights] by Y. Sivitanides and the notorious “Kucuk Mehmet” by Th. Constantinides.

In the early 20th century a run of one-act comedies or brief dramas was published, indicating that something had changed in playwriting. From the 1920s onwards, dialectal ethnographies made their appearance (Galanos, Liasides, Akathkiotis) alongside plays written in the Modern Greek vernacular.

In the same period (1920s onwards) theatre in the Modern Greek vernacular can boast a few highlights, i.e. “Dikigoros” [Lawyer] by E. Zenonos (1923), “Demoprasia” [Auction] by Tefkros Anthias (1935), “Apogonos” [Offspring] by D. Demetriades (1950), “Omiroi” [Hostages] by Loukis Akritas (1956) and probably a few more. In any event, as the years go by, the Cypriot stage will become more welcoming to Cypriot ethnographies (A. Rodinis, M. Kyriakides) that survived over a period when in other parts of Hellenism they would have been considered entirely obsolete.

NOTES

1. Yiannis Katsouris, *To teatro stin Kypro* [Theatre in Cyprus], Volume A, 1860-1939. Nicosia, 2005: p. 19. For the Greek troupes, see also: Theodoros Hadjipantazis, *Apo tou Neilou mehri tou Dounaveos* [From the Nile to the Danube] Herakleion, Crete, 2002: p. 2026 and Yiannis Katsouris, *To teatro stin Kypro*, Volume A, p. 31.
2. Yiannis Katsouris, *Ellinikon Theatron “Aris” Lemesou (1880-1881)* [Limassol “Aris” Greek Theatre], Nicosia 1990. Over a five-month span, “Aris” staged nine plays.
3. Over an eight-month span, “Sophocles” staged ten plays. See I.Ch. Hadjioannou, *O erasitehnikos dramatikos syllogos Larnakas o Sophocles* [Larnaka’s “Sophocles” amateur dramatic guild] Panhellenic Album of National Centenary 1821-1920, I hrysi vivlos tou Ellinismou [The Golden Bible of Hellenism] Volume D, Athens, 1927: p. 67.
4. For theatrical activity in Nicosia during the first decade of the 20th century, see Yiannis Katsouris, *To teatro stin Kypro*, A. 1800-1939. Nicosia, 2005: p. 89.
5. Apart from populist melodramas of the time (“Dyo orphanai” [Two orphans], “Rakosyllektis ton Parision” [Ragman of Paris], “Pistis, Elpis, kai Eleos” [Faith, Hope and Mercy] etc.) plays by D’Ennery and his associates are staged; by Dumas, father and son, Giacometti, Sardou, Bernstein, Bataille, Hugo and even Shakespeare (i.e. “Othello”, “The taming of the shrew”); Molière (i.e. “The

Bourgeois Gentleman”), Ibsen (“Ghosts”, “A Doll’s House”) etc. Of course, within the said period the “komeidyllion” and dramatic idylls are in their heyday (“Tyhitis Maroullas” [Maroulla’s Predicament], “Lyra tou gero Nikola” [Old Nicola’s lyre], “Agapitikos tis voskopoulas” [The Shepherdess’ Lover] and many more) as well as populist patriotic plays (“Choros tou Zalongou” [Dance of Zalongo], “Sklava” [Enslaved Woman], “Athanasios Diakos” etc) and other (i.e. “Melas”).

6. Yiannis Katsouris, *To teatro stin Kypro*, Volume A, 1860-1939, Nicosia 2005: 98. For the relation between Zenonos and Y. Mystriotis and his effort see Yiannis Sideris, *To Archaio Teatro stin Elliniki Skini 1817-1932* [Ancient Theatre in the Greek Stage], 1936, p. 2003.
7. Antis Pernaris, “O Angelos Vazas kai I Kypros” [Angelos Vazas and Cyprus], *Pnevmatiki Kypros*, XV, 171 (December 1974): 69-70. For more information see Yiannis Katsouris, *To teatro stin Kypro*, Volume B, 1940-1959, Nicosia 2005.
8. I.e. “Apahides ton Athinon” [Thugs of Athens], “Vafistikos” [Godchild], “Halima”, “Christina”, “Mpoemiki Agapi” [Bohemian Love] etc.
9. Among contemporary playwrights, Eugene O’Neil (“Mourning becomes Electra”), Bernard Shaw (“Mrs Warren’s Profession”), Somerset Maugham (“Sacred Flame”), Jacques Anouilh (The waltz of the toreadors), Jean Paul Sartre (“Dirty hands”), Arthur Miller (“All my sons”), Tennessee Williams (“The Glass Menagerie”), Sheriff (“Journey’s End”) etc. are repeatedly put on stage. Nevertheless, many plays of older times are also performed.
Among Greek playwrights, D. Psathas, Sakellarios-Giannakopoulos, Y. Rousos, St. Photiades, P. Kayias and of course Gr. Xenopoulos, D. Mpogris, Sp. Melas and the then young I. Kampanellis are staged, as well as ancient Greek drama (“Agamemnon”, “Oedipus Rex”, “Persians”).
10. For a complete catalogue of Cypriot plays see Yiannis Katsouris, *To teatro stin Kypro*, Volume B, 1940-1959, Nicosia 2005: 248-260.