Echoes of Contemporary Anglophone Theatre on the Greek Stage

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Abstract: In the post-dictatorship era (1975 and after), the new sociopolitical situation in Greece has called for new radical plays in political thinking, sexual ethics and gender politics to be produced on stage. Under this ideological demand, the new British socialist and later the so-called "*In-Yer-Face*" theatre had, and still has, a great impact on Greek audiences. The keen interest in contemporary political British theatre continued well into the twenty-first century and was further intensified in the period after 2008 when a protracted situation of economic and social crisis heightened the spirit of anger, revolt and despair in the hearts of Greek citizens. At the same time the older generation of writers, with their thematic and stylistic diversity, never fell out of favour. However, as the indigenous dramatic production has been maturing both in writing skills and thematic diversity, there has also been developing a concurrent stronger critique over the reasons for the persisting popularity of contemporary British plays on the Greek stage with commercialization often being blamed for winning over more quality-based criteria. Also, the postdramatic tendencies of many theatre directors complicate further any attempt to pin down the motivation of specific production choices. Besides, in the last two decades, German docu-drama as well as Hispanic theatre have made a remarkable entrance into the Greek theatre market, thus introducing new parameters of competition over the Greek stage. However, one can say for sure that, because of greater familiarity with the English language (if not the culture), contemporary Anglophone theatre continues to hold its primary position in the attention of Greek theatre practitioners and audiences and, equally, as a source of thematic and stylistic inspiration for contemporary Greek playwrights.

When Mark Ravenhill visited Athens for the Greek premiere of his famous *Shopping and Fucking* in 1997, he told the director of the Greek production Thomas Moschopoulos:

> All of you in the rest of Europe tend to face theatre as a form of "art", and this is obvious in the staging of our plays. By contrast, we [in Britain] see it as a form of entertainment and sometimes as a forum through which we can occasionally expose our social, political and ideological positions.[1]

Knowing Ravenhill's playful, postmodern style, one should be cautious about this rather sweeping statement which, under close scrutiny, sounds both monocular and monocultural. It is monocular because it reflects Ravenhill's subjective view on culture and art and it is monocultural because it treats "the rest of Europe" – the continent – as a compact, homogeneous culture, a view which is more than utopian in the multiplying and deepening ruptures within the European community of so many different cultures and mentalities.

The limited space of this essay does not permit a lengthy account of the particularity of the Greek case with respect to its history, nationhood and identity. The present state of multi-layered and protracted socio-economic crisis which has struck the country has certainly affected its theatre both in the themes tackled in the indigenous dramatic production and in the choice of foreign plays for production on the Greek stage. However, Greek dramaturgy has only recently turned, in a more consistent way, to the hazards and complications of life in Greece not only under the heavy legacy of persisting social and political pathogenies of the nation itself[2] but also under the pressure of the sweeping changes in global ethics and macropolitics. The relative lack of challenging new Greek playwriting has naturally been partly filled by the import of contemporary plays from abroad, with British plays apparently being at the top.[3] However, things are not as simple as that.

The State of Modern Greece, since its foundation in the early 19th century, has traditionally split its political affiliation among the foreign powers that initially supported the country's independence from Ottoman rule. Political division was also reflected in the Greeks' divided cultural sympathies among four different European languag-

es and cultures: the French, the English, the Russian and the German. Percentages have fluctuated and continue to do so, according to changing ideological, economic and educational parameters, which create shifts in cultural interchanges between Greek nationals (especially young skilled professionals) and foreign cultures.

Precisely because of all these historical and cultural complications, my methodological choice for the present essay has been to cross my subjective position as a British-bred academic with a parallel, direct access to French language and culture with the views of various other theatre theorists and practitioners. I therefore sent out to writers, directors, critics and translators a questionnaire on a number of issues relating to the impact of contemporary British theatre on theatre activities in Greece.[4] The answers I received converge on many points but they also diverge significantly on issues of cultural preference (just as initially expected in my research) and they also differ with respect to the special position held by individual respondents within the theatre world. Working through all these different voices, I have tried to group together some significant issues on which there seems to be a major convergence of opinion, leaving for later more contradictory issues which might require closer analysis.

Writers and their works

Regarding contemporary British playwrights who still have an impact on the Greek stage and dramatic writing, the first name is by far that of Sarah Kane, mentioned in all the answers I received. As elsewhere in the world, the views on her work have gradually matured, going now beyond the hagiography surrounding her name as a self-killing young writer. In a recent review one could read:

> We cannot but wonder what [Sarah Kane] would be writing about today. […] As we are distancing ourselves from the emotional tension of her untimely death, her works, […] almost prophetic for the years to come, will always tell us something unexpected, something deserving to stoop over and read it again. (Bozoni 2017: 1-2)

The title of another theatre review brings to the fore the eloquent question: "Why does Sarah Kane's work continue to overwhelm the audience?" Matina Kaltaki asserts that Kane "surpassed the limits of her life: she became the first 'classic' of the twenty-first century" and suggests that "we will continue to deal with Kane's works again and again, just as it happens only with great writers and with important theatre" (Kaltaki 2018a: 3). "Classic" is an almost standard qualifier attached to Kane's work all through Greek theatre criticism. That this is not just a journalistic exaggeration can be proved by the fact that the highly respected theatre director Lefteris Voyatzis, who looked at Sarah Kane's work in the early 2000s,[5] was among the first to express an insightful view about the diachronic quality of her work with respect to both her subject matter and her language, "a language which creates a whole verbal universe, just as in the great classics" (Loverdou 2008: 2).

Other familiar or favourite names to Greek theatre-goers apart from Kane (and of course the older generation of writers like Beckett, Bond, Churchill, Pinter and Stoppard) are Howard Barker, Martin Crimp, Mark Ravenhill, Simon Stephens, Martin McDonagh, followed by a list of lesser known writers such as Dennis Kelly, Duncan Macmillan, Anthony Neilson and Tim Crouch. All these names of course differ so much from one another in style and thematic approach that it would be naive to group them together simply on account of their appeal to Greek theatre audiences and practitioners. Provided that in crisis-stricken Athens there are asymmetrically big numbers of theatre venues and yearly performances (the latter may be estimated to roughly 1200 per season (Kaltaki 2018b), it is hard to put down the motives and aims of individual productions and the exact features of the targeted audience for each. Contemporary Greek theatreland is still a partially charted territory and it will take several years of intense research to have a full view of how and why things have developed the way they have during this period of meagre means and miserable prospects.[6]

It is therefore crucial at this point to ask some more general questions concerning, first, the reasons why British theatre (irrespective of names) seems to hold the top position in recognition, practice and reception in Greece today and, second, the reason why some writers and plays are more popular than some others, still greatly revered, and yet left at the level of legends, rarely if ever to be seen on stage. Does British theatre appeal to the Greeks just because of its greater cultural accessibility by comparison to other languages and cultures? Or is this appeal rather due to the themes, the stylistic features and the stage techniques (including interactive, immersive theatre and digital technology) used by the British professionals today?

It seems, as most of my respondents have pointed out that, because English is beyond doubt the second language taught and spoken in Greece,[7] English culture is far more accessible than others to the Greeks since their early teens. For the same reason Britain has always been an attraction for higher studies, theatre training and, lately, for highly qualified Greek professionals. As theatre people in particular confess – especially translators and directors –London is a regular destination for them to have access to new plays and performances, new trends in playwriting and stage aesthetics. For all these cultural and economic reasons there has been a growing cultural exchange between Britain and Greece, which has developed a sense of familiarity (even though often superficial) and has created a very favourable climate for the reception of British theatre in Greece.

For those who adopt a rigorous critical stance towards the popularity of British theatre in the Greek theatreland – like for instance theatre theorist and critic Dimitris Tsatsoulis, actor and playwright Tsimaras Tzanatos and director Thomas Moschopoulos – it is mainly for pragmatic reasons that a dominant anglophile trend in current theatre activities in Greece has emerged. Access to language, easy travel to London and the success of a new play's production in London or New York are mentioned as major factors for the import of British plays to the Greek stage. Under such considerations, Tzanatos makes a clear point that, unfortunately, Anglophone plays are chosen for the

Greek stage "not because of their dramatic dynamism but as a fad and an easy way out."[8] By contrast, as many theatre voices remark, more deserving writers in thematic inventiveness or poetic style, like Caryl Churchill or Howard Barker, remain less frequently produced. Barker especially, although unanimously accepted as a great writer, has been turned into a legend rather than an actual presence on the Greek stage because of the demanding, costly production of his major plays. Playwright Akis Dimou voices the disappointment of many other theatre people over the fate of Barker's theatre in Greece quite emphatically: "I am struck by the fact that – with the exception of the production by the New Stage company of Lefteris Voyatzis [*The Dying of Today*] – a dramatist of the status of Howard Barker has not been sufficiently introduced to the Greek public."[9] In his assessment of the situation, Dimitris Dimitriadis, one of the most prestigious Greek dramatists of the last few decades goes into more painful depths:

> This kind of dramaturgy [such as Barker's] has little hope of finding followers, as was the case with earlier representatives of English theatre, precisely because the level of culture and interests of most contemporary writers does not allow them [i.e. the audience] to move beyond the limits of a naive and shallow recording of reality, with no other dimension either on the level of language or that of structure.[10]

Slightly shifting the perspective, one should also point out that, despite Sarah Kane's continuing impact as a "new classic", there have also been reservations about the way *In-Yer-Face* theatre has transferred to the Greek dramaturgy and the Greek stage aesthetic. Moschopoulos observes that, although this type of theatre has been influential on new writing in Greece, "it emerges mostly as mimesis rather than as fruitful dialogue and it remains pretty alien to the initial context that generated this style in the first place."[11]

No doubt, this kind of nagging criticism on how British theatre fares in the Greek theatrical landscape *does* reflect a certain reality about theatre's commodification and yet it is only one aspect of the whole truth.

Towards some more constructive perspectives

There is a counterargument that can place things in a much more positive light. Putting aside the theatre industry factors and the dire economics of theatre producers, which may determine the preference for particular types of plays and the popularity of certain writers (topicality of subject matter, small-cast plays or low-budget productions), a basic factor that makes contemporary British theatre so attractive to Greek directors and audiences is undeniably its strong socio-political orientation. The post-Brechtian British tradition and its more recent variants developed by the writers of the 1990s and the new twenty-first century generation offer a well-constructed model of political theatre for a world in crisis,[12] which is most suitable for the deep and complex crisis that Greece has plunged into for almost a decade now. It is true that Greek playwrights have started responding to the confusion, the anguish and the despair of this turning point in human history but this writing is still sporadic and disorganized and it is still looking for an identity and a form hard to be found in its distant classical heritage. By contrast to the huge rupture in the continuity of the Greek cultural and theatrical tradition, the respective new British output has a strong tradition to fall back on concerning both the choice of subject matter and the styling of the debate for the stage. As a consequence, English plays are more trusted on the whole than the indigenous dramatic output, very often undeservingly so, as many new Greek writers point out.

Nina Rapi, a Greek writer who lived and wrote in Britain for about twenty years before returning to Greece, is quite outspoken about "the deep inferiority complex of the Greek psyche, which raises to great heights even mediocrities from the West and undervalues Greek plays that may well be far better than the Anglophone ones chosen for production."[13] Rapi is an interesting case of a new, hybrid Greek writer, who has integrated her prior British experience to the Greek socio-historical situation and the gender and sexual politics of the new generation. If Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* and Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* first brought to Greece the messages of feminism and the gay

movement in 1983 and 1997 respectively, Nina Rapi is now among the original Greek voices of political and identity unrest.

Rapi is one example of fruitful intercultural creativity that has formed a distinct style of writing, crossing borders and opening a dialogue with her British peers. Lena Kitsopoulou is another striking example of a hybrid writer who has crossed the borders of local theatre and has made a name abroad. Kitsopoulou has created a Greek model of *In-Yer-Face* theatre which is certainly not mimetic because it is not only based on the writing of extremely violent and aggressive theatre scripts but is simultaneously transformed into a stage aesthetic by the artist herself – a performer, a singer and a director who can give flesh to her own fictional creations. Her theatre is a vibrant physical experience – anarchic, insolent and sarcastic – which involves her audience (in Greece and abroad) in a highly affective way. Even if her dramatic and stage tactics can be compared to those of Sarah Kane and Martin McDonagh, her strategies diverge from her Anglophone peers because her constant references to Greek history and folk tradition as well as her corporeal presence make her political anger and existential agony a genuine experience of "precarious living" in the social wasteland of the Greek capital and the chaotic existence of our age worldwide.[14]

The theatre institutions

There are yet other positive aspects concerning a fruitful intercultural exchange between Greek and British theatre. An issue to consider at some length, for instance, is the case of the Neos Cosmos (New World) Theatre, whose founder (and current artistic director of the Greek Festival), Vangelis Theodoropoulos, has twice decided to celebrate seminal moments in the life of his theatre through the production of contemporary British plays. Those were Simon Stephens's *Motortown* for the 10th anniversary of the theatre in 2007 and *Heisenberg* for its 20th anniversary in 2017. As Theodoropoulos explained in a lengthy interview on the occasion of the more recent celebration, one of the aims of the Neos Cosmos Theatre has been to create a supportive haven for new artists and a friendly theatre space for

the neighbourhood (Anonymous 2018). Artistic diversity, collectivity and solidarity are the basic features of this dynamic theatre organization, whose progressive ideology lies behind its repertory and management strategies. Contemporary British plays have always ranked high among the successful productions of this theatre. Apart from the Stephens plays mentioned above, Martin McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2003-4), Dennis Kelly's *The Orphans* (2010/2011-12) and Marie Jones's *Stones in His Pockets* (2017-18) (and some others) have been identified by Theodoropoulos as "hav[ing] left a strong mark through time [and] having an influence on the character of the theatre itself" (Anonymous 2018). For the stern theatre critic, the fact that the Greek productions of these plays followed immediately after their London success may raise questions about the motives behind the particular choices: have the commercial hit or the topicality or dramatic quality been the criteria of selection? However, despite such eloquent reservations, the popularity of a play should not necessarily be dismissed as a sign of populism or consumerism on the part of a theatre which aims at encouraging larger audiences to attend, provided of course that the quality of the production meets the standards of good theatre, which Neos Cosmos usually does.

There have been several other independent theatre organizations (all receiving State subsidies in the past), which have made contemporary British theatre one of the highlights of their repertoire. Their role must be stressed here because they have been on the whole much more attentive to British developments than the two National Theatres of the country (in Athens and Thessaloniki) and the Art Theatre of Karolos Koun, which had been much more open to modern Anglo-American theatre in the past.[15] For example, Yannis Houvardas' Theatre of the South at the Amore theatre has hosted some earlier signposts of the new British theatre such as Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* (1997) and Patrick Marber's *Closer* (1998). These acclaimed productions, both directed by Thomas Moschopoulos (who is developing an international director's profile),[16] do not leave any room for speculation about the actual cause of the plays' great success on the Greek stage. The high standard of the productions was appre-

ciated by the Greek audience of the 1990s, which was craving for the exploration of contemporary sexual ethics and politics that did not find a bold and articulate expression in the Greek dramatic writing of that time.

Equally important was the contribution of director Lefteris Voyatzis and his Nea Skini (New Stage) Company, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, in drawing Howard Barker and Sarah Kane to the attention of the Greek public (together with reviving an interest in Harold Pinter's plays). His productions of two of Sarah Kane's plays (*Cleansed* in 2001 and *Crave* in 2003) and the production of Howard Barker's *The Dying of Today* (2009) were distinguished for the deep appreciation of poetic language and a correspondingly fine aesthetic in the mise-en-scène and have acquired a prominent position in the recent history of the Greek stage.

Mentioning Voyatzis's dedication to the quest for a new form to match the complexities of demanding dramatic texts inevitably sends me back to Ravenhill's earlier quoted statement which stresses the different priorities existing in continental and in British theatre. My earlier reference to his remark was rather dismissive. Making now a slight shift in perspective and while I still stand by my introductory comment, I have to admit that the concern for form *does* rank high in all Greek theatre practices that go beyond the targets of a sheer commodity spectacle. All serious directors and experimental theatre groups place the investigation of new performance possibilities at the very centre of their work and this keeps them alert to artistic messages from all over the globe.

In search of a new theatre aesthetic

Limiting my scope again to possible influences from the British stage, I should stress the role that Forced Entertainment seems to have played as well as the experimental work of Tim Crouch, mostly hosted in another fringe art haven in Athens, Bios, which has also established a close cooperation with the British Council. Bios, as an alternative art hub, has bred a new generation of directors eager for further stage

experimentation. Although as a fringe space it does not appeal to the larger audiences of more mainstream (and yet quality) theatre venues like the ones mentioned above, it is the centre of attention of a smaller group of practitioners and theatre-goers who care for more avant-garde developments. Theatre critic Ileiana Dimadi illustrates quite vividly the mixed reception of Forced Entertainment's shows and Tim Crouch's theatre by the Athenian audience. Drawing a comparison between the types of art they represent, she subtitles her short article in a wittily humorous way as "The Brits we adore for troubling us". Commenting on their ambivalent reception as either "provocatively exceptional" or "revoltingly annoying," as well as "unforgettable or masochistic" experiences, she insists that nonetheless "we will not miss the performances of these two angry Brits" (Dimadi 2011). Because Dimadi's journalistic style may sound a bit frivolous, I will pair it with the view of another Greek writer and director of the younger generation, Elena Penga, who, like Nina Rapi, is in open dialogue with the current Anglo-American theatrical trends, which she adapts to the Greek socio-cultural environment without showing any sign of an authorial "anxiety of influence."[17] On the contrary, both these writers seem to enjoy the challenge of cross-cultural osmosis and they feel at ease, for instance, when expressing their admiration for Caryl Churchill's versatile style and thematic diversity.

These two women writers, together with many other theatre practitioners of the younger generation, prove that Greek theatre artists are finding their own voice and style in tackling the complex situation of a country and a world in crisis. Intercultural loans from Britain and elsewhere begin to be processed critically by a more "Europeanized" and more "internationalized" Greek theatre[18] which develops in two major directions: on the side of text-based theatre there is a focus either on a more or less social materialist analysis of urgent political issues of local and global interest (e.g. the work of Lena Kitsopoulou, Yannis Tsiros, Andreas Flourakis among others) or on a more poetic (but less popular) discourse, where echoes of sociopolitical reality are distilled into a more personal, mythical universe (e.g. the theatre of Dimitris Dimitriadis, Yannis Mavritsakis and Tsimaras Tzanatos,

which follows patterns similar to those of Howard Barker). On the other side, there is an emphasis on devised and verbatim theatre (e.g. the work of young directors Georgia Mavragani, Anestis Azas and Prodromos Tsinikoris), on performance issues and stage aesthetics, including the new hybrid challenges of immersive environments and all other possibilities offered by digital technology.

Conclusion

Summing up my brief survey on the responses of the Greek theatre and stage to Anglophone influences (English, Irish and American), I want to argue that, although lately challenged by Spanish social realistic drama and German docudrama and devised theatre, British theatre in particular continues to matter in Greek theatre life. Its contribution is felt in three distinct but also related areas: as an animating force for the Greek stage, as an inspiration for Greek writers and as an affective appeal to large Greek audiences, who crave plays of social unrest and social inquiry that seem to respond to their own precarious existence as citizens of Greece, Europe and the world.

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[1] Quoted by Thomas Moschopoulos in his electronic answer to my questionnaire concerning the influences of contemporary Anglophone theatre on the Greek stage and dramaturgy. All translations from Greek are mine unless otherwise stated.

[2] In their answers to my questionnaire both director Thomas Moschopoulos and playwright Nina Rapi hint at the necessity of an in-depth psychosocial investigation of the state of the contemporary theatre in Greece. In this domain Constantinos Tsoukalas's recent sociological study *Greece of Oblivion and Truth: From a Prolonged Adolescence to a Violent Maturation* (Η Ελλάδα της λήθης και της αλήθειας: Από τη μακρά εφηβεία στη βίαιη ενηλικίωση, 2012) is often quoted as a useful research resource.

[3] There is of course no unanimous agreement on this issue among theatre scholars, critics and practitioners but the majority seem to agree that Anglophone theatre comes first in preference and influence on Greek theatrical life.

[4] All answers are kept in my electronic archive and are accessible upon request from esakel@enl.auth.gr

[5] He staged *Cleansed* in 2001 and *Crave* in 2003, actually introducing Sarah Kane to the Greek public.

[6] In addition to scattered reviews and short articles published in the press and the research projects conducted in theatre departments of Greek universities, two very useful volumes of collected essays on the situation of contemporary Greek theatre have been published in recent years. These are two special issues, one in the academic journal *Gramma* entitled "The Geographies of Contemporary Greek Theatre: About Utopias, Dystopias and Heterotopias," ed. by Savas Patsalidis and Anna Stavrakopoulou (*Gramma* 22.2, 2014) and a second one in the *Journal of Greek Media and Culture* entitled "Dramaturgies of Change: Greek Theatre Now," ed. by Philip Hager and Marissia Frangou (*JGMC* 3.2, 2017). The two studies stress the gradual "Europeanization" and 'internationalization' of contemporary Greek theatre respectively.

[7] The British Council's steady role in promoting British culture in Greece should not be underestimated here.

[8] Tsimaras Tzanatos. E-text held by Elizabeth Sakellaridou.

[9] Akis Dimou. E-text held by Elizabeth Sakellaridou. There has been one more major production of a full-length Barker play, that of *Scenes from an Execution* at the Porta theatre in 2001, directed by Constantinos Arvanitakis. Smaller-scale productions have dealt with two one-act plays, *Und* and *Judith*, *Twelve Encounters with a Prodigy* and *Thirteen Objects*.

[10] Dimitris Dimitriadis. E-text held by Elizabeth Sakellaridou.

[11] Thomas Moschopoulos. E-text held by Elizabeth Sakellaridou.

[12] Vicky Angelaki gives a very comprehensive analysis of the "Hydra of crisis" in her far-ranging book *Social and Political Theatre in 21st Century Britain: Staging Crisis* (2017, p. 5).

[13] Nina Rapi. E-text held by Elizabeth Sakellaridou.

[14] For a detailed discussion of the theatre of Lena Kitsipoulou as well as that of Yannis Mavritsakis, mentioned later in this essay, see my relevant chapter in the collective volume *Contemporary European Playwrights*, ed. by Maria Delgado, Bryce Lease and Dan Rebellato (Routledge, forthcoming).

[15] Naturally, National Theatres have different policies than independent theatre institutions and commercial theatre as well. The State Theatre of the North has only recently shown a greater interest in contemporary British theatre. Dennis Kelly's *Orphans* in now in its second run after a sold-out season last year. Patrick Marber's *Closer* is opening shortly. A new Martin Crimp play is currently under consideration for a possible future staging. Similarly, in the National Theatre's repertoire of 2018-19 Anglo-Irish theatre is represented by two plays by Duncan Macmillan and Conor McPherson respectively.

[16] Moschopoulos has been invited to direct a production of Pinter shorts at the Soulpepper theatre in Canada in February 2019. He has also directed Jez Butterworth's *Mojo* at the Porta theatre in 2015.

[17] It is worth noting that Elena Penga translated and directed Tim Crouch's play *My Arm* at the Neos Cosmos Theatre in March 2012.

[18] This is the assertion of the editors' introduction in both volumes on the current developments of Greek Theatre mentioned earlier in this essay. For details see note vi.