Abstract

Since the 1980s, Greek American theatre practitioners have been making their presence increasingly felt in the theatre and performing arts landscape of the United States (US). Their work evinces that Greek American theatre has come a long way from the Modern Greek Diaspora theatre, which began in Chicago at the end of the nineteenth century and flourished in several US cities during the interwar period. The motives, springboards, and driving forces of contemporary Greek American theatre are markedly different from those underpinning the work of early agents of Greek American theatre in the US, whether individual practitioners, troupes, or companies. The aim now is not to serve the ethnic imperatives of cultivating the Greek language, spreading Greek culture, and staying in close contact with the ancestral roots. Instead of serving the centripetal forces of Greek history and tradition, as well as the idea(1)s of ethnic identity and belonging, the latest works of Greek American theatre artists are animated by the centrifugal energy of the desire for a reconfigured transnational and transcultural selfhood. Their commitments lie more squarely than ever before with extroversion, movement, mixture, and interaction. The present paper discusses Yannis Simonides’ *Socrates Now* (or *The Apology Project*) as an illustrative example of the new directions Greek American theatre has embarked upon in the last few decades. It places special emphasis on what this work reveals about the emerging trends in Greek American theatre’s reception of the Greek classics—the latter being the erstwhile core of Greek American theatrical activity in the US. I argue that Simonides’ *Socrates Now* offers an alternative understanding of Greek American theatre and (its) classical reception praxis by acting upon the will to assemble a viable and generative, performing and performable Greekness from heterogeneous formal and conceptual elements, in line with an ethic that we shall call, after Vassilis Lambropoulos, transcompositional.

*Keywords*: Greek Diaspora, Greek American theatre, transnational, transcultural, transcompositional ethic.

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Introduction

It is, by now, a common topos in theatre and performing arts scholarship that theatre offers a cultural laboratory in which practitioners and participants can experiment with different ways of be(com)ing in the world. More recently, diverse lines of thought, directly or tangentially related to the world of the theatre, have converged on formulations of theatre as an incubator of and testing ground for diverse ethnroracial and cultural identities. Prominent among them, contemporary scholarship on ethnicity lends emphasis on the potential of transnational, transcultural, and diaspora theatre to shape alternative configurations of the ethnic and post-ethnic self.

Building on insights drawn from the above frameworks, the present paper addresses Greek American theatre, a cultural element central to the diachronic physiognomy of the Greek presence in the US, and engages it as a revealing, albeit idiosyncratic, case of recent developments in ethnically inflected theatre. Through a discussion of Yannis Simonides’ *Socrates Now* (or *The Apology Project*), I reflect on how contemporary Greek American theatre recasts Greekness by means of a different treatment of Greek selfhood’s relation to the products
of the illustrious Greek past, and by opening up Greek culture to transcultural currents, thus also shedding light on the new functions of theatre in twenty-first century global societies.

**Historical Context**

Since the late decades of the twentieth century, Greek American theatre practitioners have exhibited a robust presence in the theatre and performing arts landscape of the US. In Katerina Diakomopoulou’s 2014 account on the subject, their works evince that Greek American theatre has come a long way from the so-called Modern Greek Diaspora theatre in the US, which began in Chicago at the end of the nineteenth century by first- and second-generation immigrants and flourished in several metropolitan areas during the interwar period. Modern Greek Diaspora theatre primarily sought to preserve the connection of immigrant Greeks to the values of Hellenism, especially treasured notions of the illustrious Greek past; to boost Greek pride; and advocate for Greek language and culture, as well as for the goals and interests of the Greek community and nation, both at “home” and in the diaspora. The theatre emerged as “a mode of expression, an opportunity for social association, a political podium, a link of national unity, a means of protest but also of entertainment” for the Greek immigrants (Diakoumopoulou 129).

Yet, Modern Greek Diaspora theatre also evidenced some avant-gardist intentions and aspirations, which have been documented in terms of experimentation with theatre poetics and aesthetics, in line with the spirit of modernism that seeps through the first decades of the twentieth century.

Post-1980s Greek American theatre also manifests radical departures from the evidently traditionalist and homeland-oriented theatre of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. During those three decades, immigration from Greece reached a historical peak. Not surprisingly, this contributed significantly to the revival of ethnicity which marked Greek American cultural life and theatre at the time, according to scholar Dimitris Tziovas (1-14). Another factor conducive to the said development was “the widespread dissemination and acknowledgement of the cultural roots and traditions of each ethnic community” comprising the social makeup of the US throughout the turbulent Sixties and well into the 1970s (“Cultural Relations and Greek Community”). At the same time though, “the climate of radicalism and reflection” that was fostered in the country enabled the new generation of Greeks, particularly women, to start reviewing and reconsidering received tradition, patriarchal family structures, as well as community understandings and understandings of the Greek self within and without the community (“Cultural Relations and Greek Community”). The theatre activity of the Greek immigrants registered and responded to this “two-sided development of the Greek presence” in the US (“Cultural Relations and Greek Community”), although the former “side” appears to be more visible than the latter in the theatre records of this period.

Since the 1980s, the “revival of ethnicity” reflected in Greek American cultural life and theatre in the previous decades has receded noticeably. A younger generation of Greek Americans, along with a few older Greek American pioneers and “radicals,” of which Yannis Simonides is perhaps the most renown, reposition themselves and their theatrical output in relation to their Greek roots and heritage, the immigrant community life of the Greek *paroikia*, as well as the dominant US society and its many, ethnically and culturally diverse, constitutive parts. The “path taken by Greeks in America” becomes an object of critical assessment for scholars, artists, and other Greek Americans (“Cultural Relations and Greek Community”),
while the (re)turn to historical memory becomes, as we shall see further, more nuanced and assumes subtler expressions as well as new thematic and formal hues and shades in the theatre.

**Post-1980s Greek American Theatre**

Contemporary Greek American theatre has preserved its ties with the Greek American community and with the ancient Greek cultural production, which it has historically valued. However, its existence is not as tightly interwoven with and contingent on the conditions and peculiarities of the Greek American community as it was in the past, while the terms under which it relates to the distant Greek past have been renegotiated and reworked. Contemporary Greek American theatre activity frames its cultural production based on updated agendas of Greek American identity politics, cultural politics and politics of representation; prevalent American discourses of multi/inter/transculturalism and diversity; and the imperatives of a global cultural economy trading on flexible ethnic specificities (specificities that are not too specific as to be impenetrable and thus non-marketable/exportable). Most importantly, it resituates its production in relation to Greek and American culture, as well as to other cultural constituencies within and without the US.

Largely a corollary of the above interrelated factors, the ideological motives, cultural springboards, sociopolitical outlooks, and aesthetic approaches of Greek American theatre work(ings) are markedly different from those underpinning the production of earlier agents of Greek American theatre, whether individual practitioners, troupes, companies, or other collectives. As was to be expected, the cultural, political, and economic stakes of Greek American theatre have been reset. The aim is no longer to serve the centripetal forces of Greek history and tradition, or the vision of a coherent and cohesive ethnic identity and belonging. Rather, contemporary Greek American artists increasingly exhibit a centrifugal desire for extroversion, movement, mixture, and inter- as well as intra-cultural negotiation.

This is evident not only in Simonides’ work, on which we focus here, but also in the works of other theatre practitioners. Prominent among them are Theodora Skipitares, an innovative and award-winning visual and performing arts practitioner whose pieces have travelled worldwide; Angeliki Giannakopoulou, founder of the Greek-American Theatre Company of Los Angeles and creator of the enthusiastically received *Nick the Greek*, based on her father’s life; Adam Kalisperis, playwright and founder of the BRIDGE arts organization which, among other things, offers theatre education programs to communities around the world; and Sotiris Karamenisis, the first theatre director to produce an ancient Greek tragedy in Rio de Janeiro favelas. The reorientation of Greek American theatre is even more strongly marked in the work of younger artists, such as Sarah Bennett, with her cosmopolitan and musical-inflected pieces (a case in point is her *The Fox and Boulder*), or Steve Apostolina, whose sharp-edged plays have won the appreciation of critics and attracted several awards (a case in point is her *Flight of the Penguin*). The same holds for the New York-based Eclipses Group Theatre which often presents original and exciting new works in collaboration with artists from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Their contributions include fresh takes on classics, such as their *Hercules*:

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1 More information on this point can be gleaned from *Hellenic Studies*’ special issue on the theatre of the modern Greek diaspora, edited by George Kanarakis (2008).
In Search of a Hero, drawing on Euripides’ Hercules and Alcestis for a visually compelling study on the current meaning of heroism which challenges masculinist legacies.

In relation to this last point, Greek American theatre’s reception of the Greek classics has emerged as the site par excellence to engage with the centrifugal orientation beyond Greek culture and the Greek American community and toward a (more and more) globalized world (Diakoumopoulou). And although space limitations do not allow elaboration on this matter, it is worth noting at least parenthetically that this new reception praxis profoundly affects Greek American theatre’s relation to the community, including the politics, ethics, and aesthetics of its cultural projections, representations, and future directions, as it reconceptualizes its very composition and role. In what follows, I discuss Yannis Simonides’ Socrates Now/The Apology Project as an exemplary instance of contemporary Greek American theatre’s classical reception activity. Simonides’ project will be examined as a cultural work that reveals key aspects of the reconceptualization of diasporic Greekness occurring since the late decades of the twentieth century and still under way, with our focus turning to the alternative patterns of ethnic thought, experience, and self-understanding growing on “his” stage.

Yannis Simonides’ Socrates Now, or The Apology Project

Simonides is one of the most prominent figures in the realm of Greek American “arts and letters,” one of the most ardent contributors to and advocates of Greek American theatre in the US and abroad, and, as of 2009, an Ambassador of Hellenism for his lifelong service to Greek culture worldwide (“Global Greek Yannis Simonides”). Born in Constantinople and raised in Athens, Simonides left for the US in the mid-1960s to study nuclear physics, but he ended up studying theatre at the Yale School of Drama. His career in the theatre (as actor, writer, and producer) has been variegated and impressive, earning him international praise and several prestigious awards. Among other roles and functions, he is founder of The Greek Theatre Workshop, the Mythic Media International, and the Greek Theatre of New Work or Elliniko Théatro, perhaps his crowning achievement, which this year celebrates its Ruby Anniversary; forty years of “expanding the temporal, spatial and social boundaries of Greek Theatre,” promoting and dispersing “Hellenic arts and culture” around the globe (Elliniko Théatro).

Simonides has been trying to shore up Greek American theatre artistically, socially, and educationally for more than three decades (1) by tapping into the resources of Greek culture and literature (ancient and modern); (2) by advancing the work of Greek American theatre artists of all specializations (playwrights, directors, actors, stage designers, and so on); (3) by responding to changes in Greek, Greek American, and American life and society; (4) as well as by bringing developments in world theatre, culture, and politics to bear on Greek American theatre workings. His own work for the theatre, whether drawing on ancient or modern Greeks, from Plato and Euripides to Kazantzakis, on other classics, from Shakespeare to Brecht, or based on his own writings, often bears close affinities to the principles and practices of what is commonly known as “social theatre” (to use a portmanteau term that covers a wide range of theatrical relatives). This is so insofar as it blends theatre poetics and aesthetics with social and cultural action and activism, employs theatrical tools to work on real-life issues, and seeks to intervene in various contexts to further social development and change. Socrates Now is no exception as we shall discover.
Socrates Now premiered in 2003, at the Holy Trinity Archdiocesan Cathedral, in New York (Yiannias), and was presented by Elliniko Theatro in 2004, with Simonides as the leading actor under the direction of award-winning Loukas Skipitares, who also contributed to the translation of the original text. It has since been performed “in over 440 theatres, festivals, companies, communities, public spaces, schools, libraries, and universities,” as well as institutes, conventions, and churches, in more than fifty countries, with surtitles in eleven languages, attracting more than 10,000 participants (Elliniko Theatro)—and dithyrambic reviews. This brings the work in line with two of the defining parameters of social theatre projects, namely, utilization of “nonconventional venues instead of traditional theatres and performance spaces” (Lodewyck and Monoson 654), and attracting diverse audiences besides a theatre-going elite. However, this is not all there is to the work’s social theatre import.

If in the first part of the performance, participants witness Socrates going on trial for his life and are invited to consider “his arguments on virtue, justice, politics, corruption, civic duty, love of life and hope in death” and draw their own judgement, in the second part, they discuss with Simonides the ramifications of their verdict (Elliniko Theatro), which the actor makes sure to relate to the participants’ immediate sociopolitical and cultural context. In other words, the 80-minute Apology merges into often hours-long “Interactive Ethics Seminars,” in which the Socratic method is applied, and which are tailored to serve each target body of participants. More than the choice of venue and the audience’s composition, then, the function of Socrates Now as an itinerant social theatre workshop on ethical discursive (self)reflection aligns the project conspicuously with the principles and practices of social theatre.

Presentation: Socrates’ Apology

In the first part of the performance, Simonides re-enacts a dramatized version of the Platonic Apology of Socrates, essentially the monologue that Socrates delivered in self-defense at the Court of Athens, which eventually condemned him to death, not long before he drank the hemlock. To those not well-versed in the classical text, it is worth noting that the Greek philosopher, in his apology, sought, initially, to reject four charges:

a) the slander which had been circulating indirectly for decades, ever since Aristophanes had satirized him in Clouds as an atheist and profiteering sophist, who taught the young to break away from the paternal authority under which they lived;
b) Meletus’’s straight accusation, that he has no faith in the traditional gods, but in new divinities;
c) another straight charge of Meletus and his advocates, at least of Anytus, that he corrupts the moral of the young; and
d) the covert charge that he has such anti-democratic tendencies that he is a threat to democracy. (Beys)

2 Elliniko Theatro has recently announced that, in 2018-2020, The Apology Project is scheduled to tour South Africa, Germany, Italy, Israel, Abu Dhabi, China, Japan, Greece and the US.
3 Simonides’ TED Talk allows for a glimpse into Socrates Now, as does the short passage that Elliniko Theatro has shared with audiences worldwide on YouTube, under the title “The Apology of Socrates.”
He then responded to the jury’s first decision of his conviction and refuted it, and, finally, addressed the judges after they announced their final verdict: the death penalty. Simonides’ performance in the first part, then, consists in offering a compendious version of the content of the platonic Apology that remains faithful to the ante-text, at the same time as it is rendered accessible to contemporary audiences and seeped through with humor, irony, and an idiosyncratic affection for the human species that is as heart-warming as it is tough.

Simonides breathes new life into the “highly enigmatic philosopher,” focusing on his complex character and adding depth, dimension, and richness to the “controversy over what Socrates was really like,” to borrow from Erin Meyer’s review of the performance. “Was he a brilliant examiner of ideas and a model of moderation? Or, was he an oddball who liked to go around in bare feet, unwashed and wearing lousy clothes? Was he an early advocate of free and open discussion or a subversive corrupter of youth?” Sara Monoson, academic advisor to Socrates Now and dramaturg for Elliniko Théatro, rhetorically asks and claims that “[t]he truth is likely some combination of two disparate personas” (qtd. in Meyer). According to Meyer, it is Simonides’ ability to express both, that makes this work so unique; that gives “audiences a way to appreciate the way the text creates a spectacle for the mind’s eye.” Indeed, there is no glorification or facile vindication of Socrates to be found in this work; as Simonides interprets him he is a figure embedded in indeterminacy or, better, in indeterminate conflict, in more than one sense.

According to National Geographic’s documentary The Greeks, which has interviewed Simonides on the question of Socrates’ importance to the ancient Greek world and to our own, it could be no other way. It is not just Socrates’ inquisitive mind that accounts for his almost mythical status; it is also that he was the first to unearth and put into productive use conflict’s transformative pedagogical or educational potential. For the philosopher, the unexamined life is not worth living; “If you do not explore [life], if you do not examine it, you might as well go die,” Simonides spells out the gist of Socrates’ provocative philosophy (qtd. in The Greeks). The aim was not to discover or devise definitive answers though, but to embrace the agon (struggle, in all of its guises) and conflict, the former’s modus operandi, as constitutive of the human condition and as inherent to our consciousness. For Socrates, agon and conflict lend dignity to our human experience, and to give up on them translates into upholding the status quo, however unjust or cruel it may be.

The idea was as radical as the notorious line of questioning he employed to interrogate all and everyone’s assumptions, widely known as the “Socratic method” or “Socratic midwifery.” His method was “relentless” and, “in the Agora, he became a professional thorn in the side” to citizens and non-citizens, slaves, even children (The Greeks). Simonides, rather amusingly, explains, “Like a gadfly stinging a sleeping horse awake, Socrates confronted politicians and poets, craftsmen and kids, questioning them ad nauseum about their views on everything: from democracy and tyranny, to love, war, and death” (The Greeks). The purpose of the reflective dialogue in which Socrates engaged his “victims” was to challenge views of all kinds, plow all the way through to their generative assumptions, expose their uncritical assimilation, and trace them back to the sources from which they derive, be they the family, education, religion, political or cultural leaders, the government, the status quo; sources that are often immune to serious, viable, and sustainable criticism, as Kenneth Seeskin points out in his work. Thus, people are enabled to revise, more or less radically, their assumptions and expectations, the
frames of reference where these reside, and even the actions (their *dran*, or “to act” in Greek) issuing from the above.

In the mid-twentieth century, Socrates’ ideas were taken up, whether explicitly, implicitly, or subconsciously, by thinkers whose work was to shape our working epistemologies as well as our ways of thinking about and acting upon contemporary culture. From Michael Foucault and the intellectuals of the Frankfurt School, all the way to the neo-Marxist “school,” to philosopher and educator Paulo Freire, and to sociologist and seminal figure of (adult) education Jack Mezirow, theorists and cultural critics have built on different aspects of Socrates’ philosophy. This very productive phase of Socrates’ afterlife gave rise to an important development. Namely, the late 1970s witnessed a striking convergence between educational and theatrical lines of thought evincing strong Socratic undertones, which was to develop a rich legacy that involves *inter alia* today’s applied theatre practices.

Augusto Boal’s corpus of theatre work and writings, especially his Theatre of the Oppressed, and educators active in the context of Transformative Pedagogy, of which Mezirow is probably the best-known advocate, revisited and reworked Socrates’ ideas in a similar manner and applied them in their own respective praxis. Both strands of knowledge and practice, emphatically grounded in human communication, acknowledge and act upon the concept that: people need to reflect on their views and assumptions and share this reflective process with others through informed discourse and negotiation, in order to construe an alternative, more valid and functional, interpretation (or interpretive scheme/structure) of their and others’ experience in/of the world, so that their future courses of action can be(come) more beneficial to them and to society. Socrates’ presence in the premises of the said concept is hard to miss.

What is also hard to miss is that the foregoing streams of influence have, for all intents and purposes, shaped Simonides’ own creative response to Socrates’ thought. This is true for both parts of the performance, the presentation and the discussion. In the first, Simonides brings “Socrates to life so that audiences might come to know him and be inspired” by the passionate yet profoundly thoughtful way he sought to defend himself against Athenians’ accusations; a defense so resonant with our “post-truth” present condition that manages to “bring us up against ourselves,” according to reviewer Mary Harris. “In an age of ‘alternative facts,’ [when] many insist that we have entered a new phase of history in which truth no longer matters,” and when “the role of special interests and specific policies in degrading public discourse” triggers well-founded concern over its implications for the shaping of public opinion and for our future (Mueller), Socrates’ apology appears more pertinent than ever. It comes to remind audiences that however inevitable epistemic conflict may be and however contested democracy and factual knowledge may be, the former never ceased to generate life affirming meaning and drive progress forward, while the latter have lost none of their relevance and necessity, especially inasmuch as no other viable option has been proposed to take their place. As Alexis

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4 This is an idea elaborated in the works of Mezirow and Associates (2000); Augusto Boal (2000); Baddage (2018).

5 The term of “post-truth,” coined in the formulation “post-truth politics” within the context of the 2016 US presidential election and the U.K. Brexit referendum, refers to “the disappearance of shared objective standards for truth” (Illing) and the “circu\textit{tious slippage between facts or alt-facts, knowledge, opinion, belief, and truth}” in public discourse (Biesecker 369).
Papazoglou puts it, “[l]istening to the other side and taking it into account – seeing the world through as many eyes as possible – is now more important than ever.” This is what Socrates, by means of Simonides’ presentation, hammers home to us.

**Forum: Socrates’ Interactive Ethics in Action**

Equally important to the presentation is the second part of *Socrates Now*, the forum. This is where Simonides puts aside Socrates’ mask, the literal mask that, after Skipitares’ suggestion, was sculpted on Simonides’ face by the renowned late costume designer Theoni Vachlioti Aldredge, and implements Socrates’ method of “midwifery,” or rather a contemporary approximation of it, with the audience. As the performance of *Socrates Now* transforms into a public forum where Socrates’ brand of “applied ethics” is exercised, with Simonides as a facilitator, sometimes in and sometimes out of role, audience members become true participants in a reflective public dialogue that, in many cases, runs for hours. Here, the work’s strong social theatre and pedagogical/educational inflections become pronounced.

Audiences have responded readily and with eagerness to the second part of the performance wherever *Socrates Now* has been performed to date, thereby proving Socrates’ thought to be “more pertinent and patently applicable than ever” and on a global scale no less (Elliniko Théatro). Whether in US ghettos, Oxford, Delphi, or Sharjah, whether in corporate companies, world-class universities, public schools, state-funded cultural centers, or theatre venues, participants have seized on *Socrates Now* as an opportunity for communication and learning. This is how Simonides describes the forum’s workings:

> We by no means offer a “lecture”; it is all about putting the Socratic method (what he called “midwifery”) into practice: asking questions, debating, arguing. The session usually begins with an informal Q&A session on the play which inevitably leads to zealous debates amongst participants of all ages and backgrounds on issues of ethics, citizenship, truth, justice and the relevance of Socrates’ thought in contemporary society. (qtd. in Elliniko Théatro)

Within the supportive environment of the “Interactive Ethics Seminars,” temporary communities of transition from the safe social space of the forum to the precarious wider society are forged among participants; a collective, common premise of the search for social cohesion and development is thereby set up. At the same time, a politics of affinity emerges that rests in and works through the formation of “alliances,” and even solidarity, across difference of every kind. However temporary, provisional, and contingent, these communities of transition, alliances, and structures of solidarity provide a better and more nuanced understanding of how democracy can operate. They also provide an alternative angle to how we can respond more effectively than we currently do to the realities of crisis with which contemporary life is punctuated: from the Arab Spring, to the Greek financial crisis, to the sociopolitical upheavals of the past five years the world over.

The global reach of *Socrates Now* accentuates the work’s transnational and transcultural impulses. If transculturalism is taken to mean the productive yet not conflict-free merging and converging of disparate cultures beyond nation-states, at the heart of which lies the experience of seeing oneself in the other (Cuccioletta 1), Simonides’ work evidently falls in line with it.
Socrates Now invests into transculturalism’s semantic content and fleshes out its core idea of pursuing the definition of shared interests and common values across cultural and national borders (Slimbach 205-30). A good example of how transculturalism works in and through the project can be drawn from its productions in the Middle East. During the discussion in one such production, a woman donning a black burqa asked Simonides, “I am a devout Moslem and you’ve just told us things that I thought existed only in my Holy Book. And you posited they pre-existed it, by over a thousand years, in a pagan culture, nonetheless. . . . Could [you] be ever so kind to help me marry the two in my heart?” (qtd. in Sirigos). Expanding on the incident’s meaning as “a noble challenge,” Simonides explains that, whether in or out of role, he “could not ignore the fact that the Koran was the foundation of their society and any government that could be built upon it,” and, as Constantine S. Sirigos adds, “any future they might imagine.” That day participants went as far as to explore “the notion of social change in profoundly conservative societies,” Sirigos reports. The reviewer further underscores that “by showing that he appreciated their culture, [Simonides] could credibly talk about their lives and what Socrates had to say to them, returning the treasure of Hellenism to the depths of the Middle East, which the West forgot was once dotted with Hellenistic cities,” thus capturing transculturalism’s very essence.

On the one hand, then, Simonides’ acting upon his belief that in any system of thought there can be dialectic, “discussion, statements pro and con, reasons respectfully requested and thoughtfully given” (Sirigos) in Socrates Now lends concrete expression to what Richard Slimbach, one of the foremost theorists of the transcultural turn, posits as transculturalism’s testing ground: “seeing many sides of every question without abandoning conviction, and allowing for a chameleon sense of self without losing one’s cultural center” (211). On the other hand, the transnational and transcultural experience and processing that the Greek ante-text undergoes owing to Simonides’ revisionist intervention de-center both the text and Socrates’ figure “from what used to be thought of as their dominant western, cultural, social and political associations,” to use Lorna Hardwick’s words from a similar context (“Refiguring” 109). They also work to distance them “from at least some of the effects” of their association with imperial hegemonies. In that sense, both “are freed to assume new identities” (“Refiguring” 109). This allows Socrates Now to be regarded through the lens of contemporary Critical Classical Reception Studies.

The burgeoning field has paid intense and sustained focus on iterations of current reception praxis that, like Socrates Now, signal a more “democratic turn” in the treatment of classical material, in that they widen “the possible meanings of the text and its performance by expanding the agency of all participants in the process” (Gamel 186), “mobilize interpretations of texts to address unseen or neglected public interests, . . . and occasion public discourse and moments of commonality” (Lodewyck and Monoson 652). Yet, besides partaking of the said “democratic turn” in engaging with the Greek classics, Socrates Now exhibits another notable revisionist feature, this time Greek-specific, namely, its affiliative approach toward the classical resources. To paraphrase an idea that Phillip Zapkin has elaborated, instead of exhibiting a proprietary attachment to the Greek past as a source of legitimation for contemporary Greek and Greek American existence on the basis of notions of historical continuity, hence feeding into and off the concept of filiation, Simonides’ work puts forth a view of Socrates and his apology as cultural commons available to a global cultural
“commonwealth,” thus playing up the alternative concept of affiliation, in the sense of social and cultural association across divides (contextual and other), through mutual interests, for common purposes.

The kernel of this approach is simple. There is no need for the Greeks to own the classics as their natural and legitimate heirs in order to be empowered by them. Treating the classics as an integral part of a hybrid cultural heritage (Wetmore 18-19) that can be widely shared and cherished across the world can prove to be even more empowering within our present condition, when the problematics of contemporary culture are emphatically set in terms of relationships, their dynamics and effects, as well as relational meaning-making and power formation. After all, as Hardwick has shown through her “migratory model” of classical reception, “classical texts are themselves diasporic, uprooted from their original contexts, travelers both physically and metaphorically across time, place, and language” (“Contests” 46-47). Her reading applies to Socrates, his apology, and his twenty-first-century agent.

**Socrates Now and the Transcompositional Ethic**

In this light, *Socrates Now*, as revisionist reception praxis, performs an ingenious gesture that serves to review and revise the age-old associations of its primary material with the colonial project and its legacies, as well as review and revise the terms of its relation to modern Greeks, at home and in the diaspora. It brings forward an understanding of the democratic and inclusive theatre reception of the classics as a platform that can enable transnational and transcultural communication and solidarity, at the same time as it recasts Greekness through that very understanding. This recasting of Greekness that it enacts strongly evokes a trope recently proposed by Vassilis Lambropoulos to “describe the creation and reconfiguration of Greek trans-national identity” (1): transcomposition.

According to Lambropoulos, we often encounter Greek transnational identity, “strong in its ethnic enthusiasm” yet not geographically committed, in Greek diasporic literature that “emphasizes movement more than place, mixture more than purity, and interaction more than independence” (1). In certain cases, the restless, varied, “creative blending” that distinguishes instances of Greek diasporic literature created not by a single author but through the collaboration of authors, dead and alive, is best conveyed by the term “trans-composition” (2). The scholar employs poet George Economou’s collection, *Unfinished and Uncollected: Finishing Cavafy’s Unfinished Poems followed by Uncollected Poems and Translations* (2015), as an example of “Greek transnationalism in action” manifesting transcomposition’s signature features: “a Greek writer traverses places, periods, languages, techniques, roles to fashion a composite, composed identity that borrows from everywhere and everything to create something unique” (2). In view of the foregoing discussion it becomes evident that Lambropoulos might as well have been talking about Simonides and his *Socrates Now*.

Simonides’ project weaves together social theatre, theatre as education, critical classical reception, transnationalism and transculturalism, both as discourse and as praxis. It renders the limits of Socrates and his roles as mythohistorical figure, apologist, and teacher, as well as the

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6 Kevin Wetmore has pointed out that “ancient Greek culture … made no attempt to hide its hybridic nature…” (18-19). Rather, it acknowledged its hybrid past, although “the modern Western tradition was to disregard (and even work to obscure) the hybrid origins of Greek culture” (18-19).
roles of Simonides as actor and as Socrates’ agent and channel difficult to discern. It turns the audience members into members of the jury in Socrates’ trial, collaborative participants in a forum where the Socratic method is exercised, at once students and teachers in “Interactive Ethics Seminars.” The performance itself is theatre, court, and agora. “All these mobilized modalities” generate not only pieces of Socrates but also pieces of Greek identity, ancient and modern, Greek, Greek American, diasporic; and audiences “are invited to assemble them in a meaningful whole,” fitting the pieces together “in different ways so the outcome is not predetermined and results may vary,” to borrow from Lambropoulos’ reading of Economou’s collection (2). The Greekness assembled through this process is obstinately unpredictable, subject to rehearsal and recreation, performing and performable, a stage for inventive performances.

Reconfigured through the workings of a transcompositional ethic, the ethic of “the mixture that travels” (Lambropoulos 3), Greekness is enabled to relate differently to its past and its future. On the one hand, heretofore dormant transcultural energies are activated that bring Greekness into closer and more critical contact with its hybrid, migrant origins lodged (but not lost) in myth and time immemorial origins “to be performed, not recovered – reinvented, not restored” (5). On the other hand, the focus of the transcompositional ethic on “an examined ethnic life [that] assembles and arrangements heterogeneous elements from diverse sources to fashion an entirely new well-tempered βίος/life” (6) is very likely to prove viable and generative of new identities and meanings for today’s and tomorrow’s citizens of the world, whether their transnational routes can be traced back to Greek roots or not. After all, as Economou’s motto in his book has it, “The Unexamined Ethnic Life/ Is Not Worth Living” (9), his pun on Socrates’ gnomic statement bringing the philosopher one last time in our discussion.

Conclusion

Post-1980s Greek American theatre has embarked upon new, transnational and transcultural directions, as the work of both more experienced and younger theatre practitioners, from Theodora Skipitares to Sarah Bennett and Steve Apostolina, serves to demonstrate. At the same time, its reception of the ancient Greek classics has diversified noticeably; a shift reflected, for instance, in the new takes on classics produced by Eclipses Group Theatre New York (EGTNY), including the recent Hercules: In Search of a Hero, but also earlier works such as Andromache, Or Landscape of a Woman in the Dead of Night and In Chorus presented within the frame of EGTNY’s “The Greek Play Project New York.” This quantitative and qualitative change responds to emerging opportunities and challenges which are increasingly global in scope and effect. Yet, the reasons that gave rise to it, its specific operations, as well as its implications have attracted little scholarly interest so far. Despite this scholarly neglect, the contribution of fin-de-siècle and post-millennium Greek American theatre’s reception praxis to the evolution of the Greek theatre, to the formation of global modern Greek culture, and to American theatre itself increasingly transcultural in its import and intent appears to be significant and thus warrants close critical examination.

For the purpose of calling attention to the significance of contemporary developments in Greek American theatre and of the afterlife on the Greek classics in it, we have examined Yannis Simonides’ Socrates Now/The Apology Project as exemplary of the turn of Greek American theatre and classical reception in the new millennium. Simonides’ ongoing project
has been discussed in terms of what it reveals about Socrates, the Socratic method, and of the relevance and meaning of both for our twenty-first-century world. Its first part, the presentation of Socrates’ apology by Simonides, and its second part, the forum or “Interactive Ethics Seminar” that Simonides facilitates, have been treated as equally important to the work’s overall character and effect. We have placed special emphasis on the work’s social theatre and educational/pedagogical inflections, its transnational and transcultural impulses, as well as on its relation to critical classical reception. Finally, we considered Socrates Now through the trope of transcomposition, recently expounded by Lambropoulos to describe transnational Greek identity, and reflected on what the implications of the work’s transcompositional ethic are for Greekness, or rather for a reconfiguration of Greekness pertinent to our own time.

Works Cited


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