The “Polis” and the “Political” in Contemporary Greek Drama since the Eruption of the Greek Crisis: A First Appraisal (2009-2015)

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This article attempts to explore the way(s) contemporary Greek drama responded to social reality since the eruption of the economic crisis. Although Greek dramatists, in their struggle to redefine their relationship with the “polis,” have rejected the polemical tone of traditional “political theatre,” one wonders whether they have something, politically, new to propose. Focusing on the repertoire tendencies of the last five years, this paper argues that parody seems to have replaced the organized critique of social relations. Moreover, examining plays of contemporary authors, we detect an all pervasive determinist, passive and frequently self-destructive spirit. With this in mind, the question that seeks for an answer can be summed up this way: Can the Greek play re-imagine its role as a therapeutic mirror, rather than as a merely punitive and vindictive one?

A revolution without dancing is a revolution not worth having
Emma Goldman, 1931

The definition of the “polis” and the “political” in contemporary Greek drama is highly problematic. Contrary, perhaps, to expectations, during this period of crisis in Greece, one is confronted with the absence of the “polis” in its capacity as a force of social cohesion, as well as with a degeneration of the meaning of the “political.” Barring blatantly “political” patchworks of texts or documentary-theatre performances, which, however, leave a lot to be desired in terms of poetic substance, most contemporary plays dismiss explicit political orientations as outdated and irrelevant.

In fact, since 2000, and especially since the crisis erupted, Greek drama brims with political concerns, which are nevertheless formulated either in a trite, one-dimensional manner or, in strikingly “non-political” fashion, rejecting the polemical and subversive connotations of “traditional political theatre.” At the same time, contemporary Greek dramatists struggle to redefine their relationship with the “polis,” further distancing themselves from a type of “domestic” drama that was prevalent in Greece during the 1980s and 1990s.
Due to the extreme polarization and ideological confusion of our times, it is important to re-conceptualize drama as a privileged forum of debate which allows for distance and reflection, impervious to spasmodic calls for action. Thus, a return of the author, as the creator of a self-contained work, which is powerful not only poetically but also socially and politically, becomes necessary. However, in a theatrical landscape dominated by performance art and a fragmentation which cuts across categories of body, representation, and text, it is difficult for this type of author to resume his or her position, having been exiled from the stage since the 1960s. Furthermore, contemporary Greek drama has long abandoned its clearly socially-oriented character, which reached its apogee during the first years of *Metapolitefsi*, the period immediately following the fall of the junta in 1974. One could claim that the strictly naturalist form of the 1970s and 1980s Greek drama accounts to a great extent for our difficulty in connecting with contemporary mentality, which craves subtleties and despises black-and-white interpretations.

A case in point is Dimitris Kechaidis and Eleni Chaviara’s 1979 play *Laurels and Oleanders* [*Δάφνες και πικροδάφνες*], which adequately illustrates the reality of post-junta Greece, low-scale corruption, partisanship, and a diseased political system, which sustained itself after the end of the Greek Civil War through a perpetual network of nepotism. Regardless, its characters clearly originate from an era long past; it is difficult to overlook how simplistic their depiction is by today’s standards. In fact, attempting an onstage association between late-1970s Greek reality and the opportunism of memorandum-laden Greece appears to be a facile and even misleading choice. Our fixation on a mirror effect of sorts prevents us from discerning our true faces as they emerge through the intricate nexus of reality. It is required that “from the character’s corruption we proceed to the system which corrupts the characters” (Ioannidis 2010). This shift in emphasis demands an alienation from contemporaneous events at a stage level, an alienation which may very well be metaphorical. The contemporary stage demands a wider focus: from the psychological to the collective, from the conscious and fully controlled to the subject’s silent associations with the outside world. Contemporary dramatic language, fragmentary and anti-representational as it is, aims at assimilating an expanded viewpoint of all of the above. Therefore, the identification of the political with the denunciatory or militant content of a play is far from being obvious.

This holds true for other literary texts or real-life testimonies whose aim is to politically stimulate and arouse the public. In the absence of major contemporary Greek works written exclusively for the theatre, countless narrative texts whose interest lies in their analogies with contemporary politics have been adapted for the stage. A case in point is Dimitris Dimitriadis’ *Dying as a Country* [*Πεθαίνω σε χώρα*] with its recurring stage adaptations during our current pe-

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1. As in Thodoris Gonis’ staging of the play in the Municipal Regional Theatre of Kavala which culminated in a recorded excerpt of MPs voting for or against the adoption of a bailout bill (May 2015, Athens, Thisseion Theatre).
rior of crisis. Other narrative works that have been adapted for the stage in recent years include: Enke Fezollari’s *The Apology of Socrates*, based on Kostas Varnalis’ *The True Apology of Socrates* (Η αληθινή απολογία του Διοκράτη); *The Start, Athens 1895, Rhoides Material* (Η αρχή, Αθήνα 1895, Υλικό Ροϊδης), directed by Manthos Santorinaios and based on Emmanuel Rhoides’ *The Gravedigger’s Complaint* (Το παράπονο του νεκροθάπτου); *Bouboulinas 18*, directed by Giorgos Giannarakos and based on the testimony of actress Kitty Arseni concerning her arrest by the junta and the abuse she suffered in detention.

The list of such politically-minded works is long and very telling about the public’s keen thirst to draw similarities, analogies, and affinities with the past in order to comprehend what is really happening to us now. However, the past will continually elude us, insofar as it is not captured in a new form, made especially for theatre, one which taps into the potential of live, onstage conflict. Not every political text can retain its subversive character in its theatrical adaptation. If that were the case, we could engage the “political” merely by reading Marx’s *Das Kapital* on stage.

Even in the case of recent theatrical texts which won accolades, such as Efthimis Filippou’s *Bloods* (Αίματα) or Yiannis Mavritsakis’ *Redwards Shift* (Μετατόπιση προς το ερυθμό) one must not be too hasty to hail the return of the author in Greek theatre. As critic Grigoris Ioannidis notes, “the roles of director and playwright, staging and text, are inextricably bound. . . . Nothing in Filippou’s work would be comprehensible and stage-worthy without the work done by the Vasistas in their version of postdramatic theatre” (Ioannidis 2014). In *Redwards Shift*, most critics acclaimed the staging as the best yet of a work by Mavritsakis, thanks to an artistically daring director and actor, Themos Papakonstantinou, and a top-notch actress, Amalia Moutoussi. In spite of the above, the play clearly does not work on a dramaturgical and ideological level. The four segments of the play are hermetic, undermining the cohesion of the plot. Furthermore, the symbols of catastrophe and the commonplaces of brutality are so monolithic that the play’s interaction with the audience lies principally within its repulsive, provocative, and bewildering qualities.

Mavritsakis’ relationship with the “political” is too complex to be analyzed

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here at length. Doubtless, his scathing attack on neo-liberalism has been successfully captured in several memorable scenes of his earlier works. However, not one of his more purely political, earlier plays—Blind Spot [Το τυφλό σημείο], Wolfgang or Fucking Job [Κωλοδουλειά]—has had an impact on audiences in quite the same way his latest work, Redwards Shift, has. These plays have proved more influential as texts rather than performances.

Let us put it in plain terms: the return of the author to the Greek drama, an author as a polemical, incisive, socially active intellectual who assumes a political position without becoming didactic may be brewing for several years, but to speak about a definite return, we need to see first the emergence of a new repertory of plays, which avail themselves to various stage adaptations, reshaping hackneyed ideas or at least expressing how people respond to their liminal reality. None of the above is happening right now.

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However, it is not simply the trend of subjugating the text to its staging which dilutes the concept of the “political” in contemporary dramatic discourse. This subjugation is also accounted for by “the momentary suspension of normative, legal and political modes of behaviour,” as postdramatic theoretician Hans-Thies Lehmann aptly points out. Contemporary texts capitalize on this postdramatic direction and embrace “the non-political: terror, anarchy, madness, despair, laughter, revolt, anti-social behaviour” (Lehmann 175). An interesting case in the study of this break across representational and poetic text, wherein the anarchic aspect of the stage undercuts the structure of language, was Vassilis Noulas’ reading of Manolis Tsipos’ Still Life [Νεκρή φύση] presented at Romantso on April 7, 2014 and at Panta theater during the “Greek Month,” which was held in May 2014 in Caen, featuring French actors.

In the above text, which is clearly inspired by the events of December 2008, the citizen’s apathy and powerlessness in defending the threatened city is symbolized through a description of castration. Noulas’ team of amateur actors recited this fragmentary text, which was also inspired by Dimitriadis’ Dying as a Country (Kondylaki, “Can the Poetic and the Political Be Reunited?”). Their performance at Romantso was predicated upon a series of simultaneous, seemingly unconnected actions. At the same time, the director deliberately underscored the influence of postdramatic theatre in his (metonymic) projection of the cover of Lehmann’s book on the ceiling. Noulas pursued the same direction of stage chaos and dispersion in his presentation of Tsipos’ play at Panta Theatre, in his attempt to dissuade the actors from their traditionally French, logocentric performing approach. He fascinated the audience by having, for instance, one of the actors’ frantically dance to Madonna’s Like a Virgin, stressing the theme of political castration in this text of almost Biblical overtones. In his direction of the same play in Athens, starring the Nova Melancholia troupe—“with the

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8. First presented in Athens, at BIOS (February 19-April 5). Also presented at the 2014 Avignon Festival (dir. Michel Raskine).
actor’s” bodies as the focal point of various actions unfolding at various loci on a very large stage, while iron platforms formed diverse levels of simultaneous actions” (something we also saw in Caen), semiotics scholar Dimitris Tsatsoulis discerned an attempt to “physicalize a city that is at once suffering and brimming with life.” According to Tsatsoulis concluding comments,

[t]he Nova Melancholia group delivered a purely postmodern presentation which played to the strengths of the demanding text, proving that postmodernism is neither meaningless nor, even more tellingly, apolitical. It accuses without becoming banally denunciatory. It is multilayered and multilateral, and demands an active spectator rather than an eager clapper. (Tsatsoulis 2015)

While acknowledging the multidimensionality of such postmodern approaches, it is also worth questioning whether the dissociation of the stage from the confines of representational affinity with the text ultimately favours parody as the only avenue of contact with the “real.” While the wealth of semiotic allusions and the anti-establishment affinities of body and meaning are enhanced, parody cannot constitute an avenue of action. In spite of its brutality, this highly aesthetized “genre” of the non-systematized, the non-specific, the anarchic, the desperate, and the sarcastic, fails to answer the fundamental political question: “What can we do?” To what extent do the depictions of the void, the awkwardness, or the terror suffice to stand for an organized critique of social relations which utilizes both the stage and the tools of drama: dialogue, plot, conflict?

Lena Kitsopoulou’s popular text/performances are illustrations par excellence of this form of parody. In her double capacity as writer and director, Kitsopoulou delivers aggressive parodies of social narratives. As a writer she demolishes the concept of Greek hospitality in Aoustras or Couch Grass [Αούστρας ή η αγριάδα]9; as a director she tackles love as social convention in Rejoice Nymph [Χαίρε νύμφη],10 or matrimony in Blood Wedding [Ματωμένος Γάμος].11 Kitsopoulou, however, is less interested in the mechanism and function of stereotypes, and keener on maintaining a narcissistic, liberating, self-referential exhibitionism. Her drama is a postmodern transfiguration of the political “denunciatory theatre” as didactic as the Manichaean dualities it assaults (“Greek villain” versus “innocent foreigner,” “heartless corruptor” versus “fallen young woman”), and as kitsch as the skyladiko aesthetics which she reviles.

Kitsopoulou’s last performance at Theatro Technis, The Vapidity of Being [Η ανουσιότητα του να ζει],12 takes this distortion of human relations to its extremes, intent on reflecting everybody’s share in responsibility, hypocrisy, and

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indifference. However, this emphasis on ridicule and parody negates rather than provokes a reaction to reality, and reflects the prevalent nihilism of our times.

It is particularly in drama that the de-politicization of the last few decades before the crisis, both in Greece and overall in Europe, removed the playwright from his/her social context. In his or her revolt against the spate of politically committed drama of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the playwright of the 1990s justly focused on more private dramas, which became increasingly violent, self-destructive, and self-referential. The emphasis on form and language, and the vindictive, destructive and self-destructive mania against the hypocrisy of a consumerist, stagnant society were the main aspects of European drama from 1990 to roughly 2010. Kitsopoulou’s self-flagellating, parodic theatre of extremes is clearly a product of those times. It may be incisive and extreme; yet deep down, it is navel-gazing.

The ideological chaos that dominates Greece during this period of crisis and the concomitant dire need for political awareness remind us how crucial it is that the theatre artist partakes in a process of “social change,” as Brecht defines it. Given how many analysts parallel our era with the last days of the Weimar Republic (Pappas),\(^\text{13}\) due to the harsh austerity and the rise of neo-Nazis in Greek society, it is tempting to revisit the interwar period in order to discover the primary meaning of “political theatre.” Both with Piscator’s “documentary theatre,” which draws from news reports and documentary, and Brecht’s “theatre of alienation,” whose main instrument is myth, the political theatre of that era, which peaked in the 1960s, aims to disclose the mechanisms of history and lead to social change. Certainly, as problematic as it may be to draw parallels between the Weimar Republic and contemporary Greece, it is also problematic to project contemporary drama onto interwar drama for a number of reasons. To start with, we are more familiar, both emotionally and aesthetically, with absurdist theatre, tinted as it is with the Holocaust experience, rather than with the aesthetics of agit-prop or cabaret which appealed to working-class audiences. Secondly, the infiltration of an apolitical pop culture into lower social strata entails that people’s anger and their sense of social injustice are less likely to find expression in theatre. The aesthetics of brutality and determinism, which are constitutive parts of contemporary drama, as well as theatre’s social marginalization end up undermining the collective display of faith in something greater, something grand which in turn may give birth to genuinely polemical works.

Without overlooking the danger of turning the artist and his or her work into “instruments” (because any “functional art in the service of the revolu-

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13. “The Brussels-mandated austerity is a source of shame for Greeks, the equivalent of the ‘shame’ experienced by Germans on account of the Treaty of Versailles. In contemporary Greece one sees a surging rise of the far-right and the far-left, not unlike 1920s Germany. The country’s political system is collapsing. There are those who fear this will escalate into a coup d’état.” Quoted from Spiegel in its Greece-themed issues, entitled “Goodbye Acropolis” (14 May 2014).
tion,” for instance futurism and constructivism in the 1920s following the October Revolution, inevitably becomes an instrument of propaganda), it is hard to perceive a genuinely political theatre separate from its author’s political views. Can political theatre be the product of an isolated poet who claims no political identity on the public sphere and who does not fight for it outside the theatre? The answer today is maybe less obvious than it was back in Brecht’s time.

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But before I am accused of vindicating a “militant” theatre, I want to go back to 1830 and consider Georg Büchner’s plays Danton’s Death and Woyzeck, two of the best examples of political theatre by a writer who participated in the liberation movement against feudalism, became himself a revolutionary and as a dramatist undertook “to get as close as possible to history as it actually happened” (Letter dated July 28, 1835: Büchner 201). Given this “double mission,” in his twofold capacity as dramatist and revolutionary, inspired by his involvement in historical events, he conveyed the defeat of the revolution, the fatalism of history, and the crushing pressure of society and protestant ethics on the individual (issues which are still relevant two centuries later). Few contemporary texts can be regarded as more political than Woyzeck, featuring a character who turns against himself under pressure by society. This play keeps returning to the Greek stage in the last few years, as in the performance by the “Simio Miden” troupe at Attis (2013-2014), directed by Savvas Stroumbos, Woyzeck Quartet by Elli Papakonstantinou at Athens Festival 2012, and Angela Brouskou’s adaptation in 2002—by far one of the most fascinating Woyzeck adaptations in Greece. Let us not forget Manos Lambrakis’ adaptation by Roula Pateraki (Puerto Grande, Historical Memory Space, 2009), which re-imagined Woyzeck as an inmate of Guantanamo, thus overemphasizing the aesthetics of atrocity and horror in accordance with contemporary dramatic language. A work of considerable clarity, the original text does not really benefit from its transcription into a more brutal, “updated” version, as in Lambrakis’ version. The original text is already political in exemplary fashion, precisely because “it does not leave us at peace, because it does not allow us to accept the current order of things, because it pushes us to pose the question of a universal emancipation of humankind,” as Savvas Stroumbos puts it (2014). It is a highly political play, not only thanks to its author’s incisive portrayal of his character’s mind, but also thanks to the sympathy expressed towards the desperate military barber in spite of his hideous deed.

14. “The dramatist is in my view nothing other than a historian, but is superior to the latter in that he re-creates history: instead of offering us a bare narrative, he transports us directly into the life of an age; he gives us characters instead of character portrayals; full-bodied figures instead of mere descriptions. His supreme task is to get as close as possible to history as it actually happened.”
This sentiment of sympathy towards the characters seems to be the crucial element which contemporary Greek drama lacks. This lack is exacerbating its non-political, determinist, passive, self-destructive spirit. There are contemporary Greek plays which are poetic and have big historical and political scope. This is the case with many of Dimitris Dimitriadis’ plays, both his earlier plays, such as The Unknown Harmony of the Next Century [Η άγνωστη αρμονία του άλλου αιώνα] and Elevation [Το ύψωμα], and more recent ones, including Labour [Τοκός], Phaethon [Φαέθων], and The Touch of the Deep [Το άγγιγμα του βυθού] (Kondylaki, The Theatre of Dimitris Dimitriadis 29-33). These texts touch upon the issue of Greek identity and family. However, they also demonstrate a punitive rage against Greek society, especially the more recent ones. Only in a play such as Dimitriadis’ La ronde du carré [Ο κυκλισμός του τετραγώνου] do I detect a form of reconciliation with the human condition and a greater understanding for characters repeating the same mistakes and the same behavioural patterns. By touching on the problem of repetition both in terms of form and in terms of content, this play calls on us to recognize ourselves in a spiral of errors, which repeats itself ad infinitum, to face up to this fact and turn it into a brand new start. I argue that this is, in fact, the challenge of the “political” in contemporary drama: to re-imagine the stage in its capacity as a therapeutic mirror, rather than a merely punitive and vindictive one.

15. “Historicity / Greekness”
This transformation seems impossible in the case of narrowly political and accusatory texts, which exhaust the meaning of the political in issues such as labour relationships, immigration, the *panopticon* of power and so on. However, I detect no such transformative signs even in poetic, largely metaphorical plays, which draw exclusively on the darkness and desperation of human existence, shunning variations, nuances, self-sarcasm.

In a recent paper dedicated to dramatists who have been repeatedly staged in France, Dimitris Dimitriadis and Yiannis Mavritsakis, plus three playwrights who have only recently been translated in French, Elena Penga, Manolis Tsipos, and Konstantinos Tzikas (all three of them presented in May 2014 at the “Ecrire et mettre en scène” Festival), I referred to the drama that emerges from the Greek crisis as primarily symptomatic of the pathology of Greek reality, regardless of the poetic and stylized ways it chooses to reproduce it. Mavri-tsakis’ *Redwards Shift* [Μετατόπιση προς το έρυθρο] perfectly illustrates my point. This play features no characters in terms of victimizer or victims; it is the process of contamination that dominates the plot. As the writer himself puts it: “The core of the play is the darkness inside man, the birth of darkness which brings about destruction and brutality.” There is no possibility of escape; any human intervention is tragically frustrated; one can only passively stand by and witness the impending doom. Hence, this play belongs to a post-political, or even “anti-political” direction, if I may coin a word, which
does not allow the *polis*, the outside, or the Other (who is treated solely as a vector of a catastrophic allure) to gain access to the confined space of an attacked, yet also toxic Ego.

I consider Manolis Tsiapos’ *Still life*, Konstantinos Tzikas’ *Dead Leaves* [*Νεκρά φύλλα*], and Elena Penga’s *Woman and Wolf* [*Γυναίκα και λύκος*] as equally symptomatic of this catastrophic tendency. None of the above plays suggests the possibility of a conscious transcendence. The characters appear to be mesmerized, ensnared in movements and actions which are beyond their control, subject to a dreamlike flow. The violence, often unjustified, unpunished, and primarily self-destructive, looms large in all three plays. However, the Greek crisis is also palpable in these plays through their sense of flight, through the characters’ yearn to escape the familiar surroundings; naturally, this desire is mostly unsatisfied and as such turns into an obsession. It is a morbid theatre, reflecting social reality without quite facing up to it. Even in Penga’s play, which associates savageness with a claim to happiness and life rather than castration, mutilation, and the impasse of civilization, the main heroine fails to assume responsibility for her choices and own up to the murder she committed. The presence of “crisis” in all three plays is indicative of the failure to transfigure poetic language into a language of conscious reaction, revolt, uplift.

Nevertheless, “our” actual *polis* and everyone in it is seething, only feigning normality in an attempt to cover up the desperation fermenting inside. Year in and year out, the anguish grows, no matter how much the official statistics deny it. Will the author’s drama metabolize this despair? Will this despair cease to turn inwards, or towards the body? Will it succeed in cracking the surface, articulating a rational interpretation of various issues, facilitating a collective comprehension of our current challenges? This awareness should not only be dark and self-punishing but also productive in a positive way, envisaging a social transformation, and thus even joyful, dynamic, explosive. It should be free from dogmatic conventions but also capable of re-awakening the need for life, co-existence and collective action. Most of all, it should not undermine nor ignore “everybody’s right to beautiful, radiant things” (Goldman 56).
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