“Facing Mirrors”:
Contemporary Greek Theatre Productions
and the Issue of Identity

Grigoris Ioannidis

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Greek theatre began an open discussion with each one of the components that had hitherto constituted its identity, sporadically at first, but with increasing intensity in the following years. Although this discussion was initially broad, including new as well as older theatre-makers, writers, directors, and actors, its most interesting and challenging part concerned mainly young artists. This change was brought about by a number of factors that will undoubtedly be part of future Greek Theatre Studies. A brief mention will nevertheless be made of a few factors that deserve special attention. A key reason for this change was the profound crisis within the institutions that, until recently, had provided the foundation for the identity of the Greek theatrical tradition. This problem, which dates back to the past and was not necessarily a by-product of the recent economic crisis, concerns a younger generation of artists, who felt that the questions of citizenship and cultural identity that had nourished the post-dictatorship theatrical world were now obsolete and had lost their relevance. Over the years, the issue of identity had started nurturing introversion and became a matter of convenience. The new generation of theatre-makers could clearly see that theatrical developments abroad had left Greek theatre and theatre criticism far behind, and felt more and more strongly the urge to catch up with the dictates of the international scene. In this context, there was abundant evidence indicating that Greek theatre was in the grip of a subtle collusion that backed the post-dictatorship theatrical status quo and left no room for experimentation.

One of the most difficult challenges facing modern Greek theatre has been the attempt to acquire an identity; that is, the creation of theatrical productions worthy of participating in the forum of international theatre, as expressions of something genuinely and truly Greek (Grosby 213; Smith, Nationalism 35). In practice, this would mean devising an interpreta-

1. The present paper is part of a broader viewpoint on the stance of the Greek theatre towards the construction of its identity since 2001, and the redefinition of modern tradition, with
tive style and a dramaturgy that springs from the Greek people’s deepest and purest means of expression. Thus, Greek theatre would embody the quality associated with an authentic and traditional artistic identity, namely “Hellenicity.” This very broad attempt ramified in two different directions. Most Greek theatre practitioners turned to the original ancient Greek drama, believing it could quench their thirst for identity (Gourgouris 28; Tziovas 2006; Patsalidis 2010 and 2012; Bhabha 78). And whatever is generally believed about the value of this trend, during the early post-war decades in Greece it succeeded in uniting the “big guns” of the Greek theatre at that time (Dimitris Rontiris, Alexis Minotis, Katina Paxinou). Furthermore, it appeared to have an artistic vision that could attract a large audience. After the establishment of the Greek Festival

special emphasis on building a modern Greek identity. In this context, one could examine not only ancient Greek drama, but also many other productions that share the same concept, this time from the point of view of the relation between past and recent heritage. The survey actually follows Marilena Zaroula’s recent analysis (2014) of the same issue, which focuses on two famous Greek performances: National Hymn (2001) by Michael Marmarinos and Orestes (2010) by Yannis Houvardas. Marilena Zaroula offers a detailed consideration of the ‘place’ of ancient Greek theatre in Greek culture by focusing on a production of Euripides’ Orestes by the National Theatre of Greece that was staged at the Epidaurus Festival in 2010. Placing the production in the context of the socio-political turmoil of the Greek riots that erupted during December 2008 and the economic collapse that devastated Greece in 2010, Zaroula contemplates how this staging of an ancient Greek tragedy had profound resonance with the contemporary tragic moment in Greek history. Significantly, Zaroula is not concerned with any attempt at mimetic reflection on contemporary politics but on how the monumental classic status and rich cultural heritage of Greek tragedy, alongside the auspicious historical setting of Epidaurus, succeeded in evoking complex narratives of national affect for its audience, whilst recognizing the multiple nature of any such affect. She also explores how certain staging decisions such as the use of a young mixed-gender chorus served to complicate the temporal and cultural distance between ancient Greece and the contemporary state of crisis. In effect, she argues, the production situated the chorus as witnesses to both the ancient fictional tragedy and the tragedy unfolding in the streets as young men and women, like them, faced precarious futures. (12).

12. The important role of classical Greek theatre in shaping the national identity has been widely examined (Mavromoustakos 2006 and 2008; Patsalidis and Sakellaridou 1999; Papazoglou 2014).

2. National theatres have formed and evolved over time, and the different functions they have acquired depend on the nature of the political regimes and cultural circumstances in which they have been situated. These institutions encounter difficulties today, in an environment where nationalism and national identity are increasingly contested by global, transnational, regional, pluralist, and local agendas, and where economic forces create conflicting demands in a competitive marketplace (Wilmer, Writing and Rewriting National Theatre Histories 19-27, 191-99; Rebellato 2009). According to Wilmer: “Similarly, theatre historians have to decide whether to feature work that has been imported from abroad, such as touring theatre, or concentrate on domestically produced theatre. Generally, national theatre historians look for the connections between different generations of national artists (rather than their transnational links) to show the continuity in national themes and discourse and the links with other national artistic work. As an extreme case, Greek national theatre history,
in the 1950s, and with the reopening of the ancient theatre of Epidaurus, this
movement found even stronger support: ancient drama was soon placed at the
forefront of Greek theatre abroad and became one of its best-known assets,
even though many productions of ancient tragedy in Greece emulated the ideas
of foreign directors (Gounaridou 132 et seq.). Notwithstanding its success, this
venture seemed to bear the burden of inherent conservatism. 4

Another branch of Greek theatre followed a different route: its quest for Hel-
lenicity led it not to ancient but to modern Greece, where it drew inspiration from
the country’s bustling marketplaces. The remnants of any existing Hellenic quality
would have to be sought in the present, not the past; in contemporary life and not
among the ancient ruins of a nation struggling to survive. Therefore, attention had
to be directed to where Greek identity still existed in its “purest form,” that is,
among the lowest urban social strata.

These tendencies were essentially defined during the interwar period, thanks
to the theoretical work and reviews by important intellectuals of the time. During
this period (from 1922 to 1940), and especially during the Metaxas dictatorship
imposed in 1936, a turn to the history and roots of Greek civilization was at-
tempted in order to help define Greek identity and art. 5 At the same time, various
branches of intellectual nationalism developed during the 1930s. The restoration
of the collective national consciousness was openly discussed and a keen interest
was manifested in Greek folk culture, in which the pure features of the Greek
race were sought. During the interwar period, these features developed in the
form of ideological constructs expressed by the slogan “Motherland – Religion
– Family.” One of its main advocates was Spiros Melas, but the requirements of

following the strategy of nineteenth-century national historians who wished to assert a dis-
tinct Greek national identity for the new nation-state despite centuries of subjection to the
Ottoman empire, has jumped over two thousand years of Byzantine and Ottoman history
to emphasize the links between ancient and modern (nineteenth- and twentieth-century) 
Greek theatre” (Wilmer, National Theatres in a Changing Europe 19-20, 120-23).
4. Langhoff’s performance of Bacchae in 1997 by the National Theatre of Northern Greece
played an important role, due to the scandals it provoked, for creating a new representation
of the classical texts’ productions in contemporary Greek theatre.
5. “Although the notion ‘Hellenicity’ was barely used by the 1930s literary movement, not only
is it closely linked to it but it is also considered by many to have been coined by it. The ques-
tion, therefore, that arises time and again is how the 1930s generation of literary figures came
to be synonymous with the concept of Hellenicity if it did not make extensive use of the
term. In my opinion, the reason is a simple one. From this Hellenicity emanates the romantic,
though utopian, vision of resistance to Western culture, expressed through the ideological
concept of Hellenicity, just as in other countries the same resistance was expressed through
concepts such as ‘italianità,’ ‘hispanidad’ or ‘negritude.’ This resistance is not a simple refusal
to conform, an outright hatred of all things foreign, as was the case before, but a confrontation
on equal terms, a dynamic challenge and yet a quest for ways for the Greek nation to become
a trailblazer. Thus, the concept of ‘Hellenicity’ in the 1930s, among other things, springs
from the aggravation of the problem of Greek self-knowledge and especially the tense rela-
tions between Greece and the West. From that moment on, the Greek intelligentsia, tired of
what Metaxas called the Third Hellenic Civilization also reflected that trend. According to this ideological construct, the Greek Christian culture is the safeguard of the country’s welfare and the element that would ensure Greek intellectual leadership within the European culture.

Another ideological construct also exerted substantial influence. It belonged to a liberal trend and was mainly associated with the literary movement of the 1930s. According to this new trend, the upcoming generation of artists and critics should combine elements of the Greek tradition with the requirements of European modernism. Intellectuals, with whom the fate of the Greek theatre was inextricably intertwined, such as Georgios Theotokas and Angelos Terzakis, followed this trend. The liberal trend was both Europhil and Hellenocentric. It claimed that the identity of the Greek race should be protected from Western decadence and distortion by means of language and religion. This protection should not entail the isolation of Greek folk art, but rather the projection of its features, in order to lend it a kind of Hellenicity that would put it on equal footing with the art of major European nations. Hellenicity was thus linked to popular culture, to forms of Greek folk theatre (Karaghiozis) and art, to previous periods in the Greek theatre which it highlights, to the development of historical drama, and to the effort to combine traditional comedies of manners with psychodramas. Notwithstanding the fact that popular culture was not considered “important” by the contemporary intelligentsia as a whole (because it fostered features of the Greek people’s Ottoman past), this trend quickly led major artists to use motifs from Greek folk art.

To this context undoubtedly belongs one of the artists who had led the quest for Hellenicity during the interwar period: Fotis Kondoglou. It is primarily to him that Greek literature owes the shift to the search for “Romiosini”: a Hellenicity that was embellished with folk features and emotional descriptions.
Thanks to Kondoglou, Hellenicity acquired new spirituality as well as a new perspective. As he put it:

“Romiosini,” the image of the Greek people, derives from Byzantium or to put it differently, it was the Greek people who constituted Byzantium in its later years. As early as the reign of Focas, the characteristics of Romiosini could be clearly discerned, while in the years of the Paleologian dynasty, when the empire was declining, the troubled Greek spirit arose, that of the new Greece. Christian Greece matured in agony and sorrow, as pain was the new seal of Christ. Romiosini represents sorrowful Greece. Ancient Greece may have been glorious and brave, but the new Christian one is more profound, because pain is a feeling that goes deeper than glory and joy, deeper than anything. People who live with pain and have faith have a character that is carved in the hard rock of life, and are marked with a seal which the calamities and the unbearable raids cannot erase, and has become indelible. Such is the seal that has marked the Greek people. Nations which every hour bleed in agony in exchange for their lives are blessed with invaluable intellectual qualities unheard of to wealthy nations. The latter remain poor in intellectual virtues while also lacking in humanity, because too much comfort coarsens people’s inner self. (Kondoglou 63)

What engrossed intellectuals now was Romiosini, the popular version of Hellenicity that was found mainly in popular art forms. It wielded enormous influence on directors such as Karolos Koun, writers such as Iakovos Kambanellis, and intellectuals such as Marios Ploritis, who were to carry Kondoglou’s teachings on Hellenicity into the post-war period.

This is an extremely broad and complex phenomenon which obviously cannot be exhausted within the limits of this study. It is, however, worth noting that, for Dimitris Tziovas, the question of Hellenicity was an artificial concept invented and imposed by the 1930s movement to bridge Greek “consciousness” and “identity,” in order to prove its cultural particularity. Regarding the Greek theatre, such an investigation is still lacking, and this article may be considered the precursor of a future one in which I hope to study this intriguing topic in greater depth. As Tziovas puts it:

The people in the ‘30s movement in Greece realized that if they wanted to demonstrate the modern Greek cultural particularity what they should “export” to Europe was an identity, not a consciousness. But how can people
admit to constructing an identity to be projected outward when they belong to a nation that has been nurtured believing in a national consciousness? How can you convince people at home of the need to project a constructed identity if not by joining consciousness and identity through Hellenicity? The problem did not reach such proportions in the past because the Greek people had never attempted to export their “identity.” They either adopted an identity already defined for them by the Europeans, or struggled to denounce foreign myths or foreign manners without, however, projecting any other kind of dynamic image abroad. By the end of irredentism, the need to find a young and outward-looking identity had become imperative. That was why some representatives of the ‘30s movement (because of whom the definition of the movement is still pending) tried to juxtapose the (new) “Greek Hellenism” as Seferis called it, onto “European Hellenism.” In other words, they tried to forge a modern Greek identity that could be used both at home and abroad. Hellenism naturalizes the construction of an identity, transforms it into consciousness and feeling, and therefore makes it acceptable to the Greek public. (2008)

By the end of the 1960s, however, this movement seemed to have lost its initial momentum. Greek artists and writers started expressing the intense need to free themselves from the constraints of realism and follow the winds of change from abroad that were blowing their way. In fact, the problem was that this “Hellenic identity” did not hold the same appeal for young artists as it had for the older generation of theatre-makers. The original quest for identity now seemed obsolete, if not meaningless, due to a complete change in the historical context.

Greece’s accession to the European Economic Community in the 1980s posed a new challenge: the reappraisal of the Greek national identity in a transnational environment. The decade that followed the end of the Cold War introduced a completely new phenomenon into Greek reality: the arrival of a large number of immigrants, placing Greece first among all European countries in terms of the ratio of total population to immigrants (Kershaw 169 et seq.; Holdsworth, Theatre and Nation 220).

The shift towards Hellenism posed a constant challenge to Greek theatrical writing throughout the twentieth century. By the end of 1950s, however, the superficial, traditional portrayal of the working class had given way to the effort to reveal its genuine, deep realities. This movement, which was prompted by foreign authors, such as Lorca, and foreign dramaturgy, such as the American theatre, had its impact on Greek writers after the war. Some of the best works of modern Greek dramaturgy originated from the need to document everyday life through accurate representations of specific events as well as the Greek people’s great expectations and shattered dreams. Thus, playwrights such as Iakovos Kambanellis and Dimitris Kehaidis sought inspiration from their country’s reality, and tried to present this reality as a product of the historical and social conditions in post-war Greece. The truth is that the country’s modern history provided fertile ground for thought and inspiration: the liberation from German occupation was followed by civil war (1945-1949) and a period of rapid economic
growth (1950-1961), which, however, resulted in intense political and social con-

The whole period, realism in all its versions was at the heart of the
debate in Greek theatrical circles. At the same time, many interesting offshoots
developed, such as political theatre (clearly due to Brecht’s influence and the
ongoing political turbulence of the period) but also the theatre of the absurd
(which sprang from the need to tackle government censorship during the dicta-
torship). So until the fall of the junta, and from 1974 on, a group of writers who
bore the distinct signs of Greek writing gradually appeared. This time, however,
Hellenism was not isolated from either Greek society, of which it claimed to be
an organic part, or from the broader achievements of European theatre. Pavlos
Matessis, Vassilis Ziogas, Petros Markaris and Margarita Lyberaki succeeded in
expressing the concerns of a society in the making by turning to its typical social
and political aspirations or by revealing its secret desires and hidden fears.

In the last twenty years of the twentieth century, a new generation of play-
wrights emerged alongside older and renowned ones. Each of these young play-
wrights (Kostas Mourselas, Marios Pontikas, Giorgos Skourtis, Loula Anagnos-
taki, Giorgos Dialegmenos, and Andreas Staikos) tried to enrich and breathe life
into the movement of realism, while inventing their own creative style. Espe-
cially since 1990, many younger writers (Akis Dimou, Giorgos Iliopoulos, Elena
Penga) have made it clearer that the subject of a person’s inner life is becoming
central to contemporary Greek dramaturgy, along with new themes that seem to
interest today’s Greek society such as migration and the financial crisis.

The new Hellenic Festival, which was set up after 2006 under the direction
of Giorgos Loukos, played a decisive role in this change. In the eyes of most
theatre-goers, Loukos very soon became the leader of a “velvet revolution” that
transformed Greek theatre. The reasons for this were twofold: a) first, because,
right from the start, he had the courage to oppose the interests of those who had,
until then, feasted upon the Greek Festival, and whose influence resonated in
both artistic and political circles, and b) because from the moment of his ap-
pointment, he managed to impose extroversion, meritocracy and high standards
and to build an open channel of communication, especially with the contempo-
rary European theatre. Thus, the Hellenic Festival shed its role as representative
of the established mainstream theatre and instead evolved into a venue of great
interest and controversy. Luckily, the audience, whom the artistic events of the
past had left indifferent, was more than eager to embrace the revamped festival
(Sampatakakis 40-44). The advent of the economic crisis in 2009, which quickly
turned into a political and state crisis, is yet another factor that should be men-
tioned. Young artists, who were now forced to work without the usual state sub-
sidies, and the institutions that in recent decades had shaped the theatre, quickly
turned to political discourse and in-depth criticism, which were aimed first and
foremost at the Greek people themselves and at the path they had followed until
then. The road to deconstructing national stereotypes was now open. It entailed
not only emphatically denouncing political institutions or choices, but also, even
more vigorously, rethinking Greek identity. The current sad state of affairs was also interpreted as a cultural decline. This led to a discussion about what it means to be Greek today.

This was a dialogue in which, surprisingly, not only the expected groups of young people participated, but also important theatrical organizations, together with institutions that formally expressed the conventional academic theatrical establishment. Companies such as the National Theatre of Greece, and organizations such as the Onassis Cultural Center and the Cacoyannis Foundation supported not only the idea of theatrical revitalization, but also that of the Festival itself, as well as similar efforts by Loukos from the outset, assisting him with funds and forces in the transformation of Greek theatre. Thus, once again, the Greek theatre was welcomed on newly refurbished stages, eager to accommodate original theatrical works, and to nurture a new generation of Greek artists. Several productions in the new Greek theatre attempted boldly to explore and deconstruct the national identity. These performances helped, at least partially, to bring to people’s attention new ways of looking at established norms.

While the issue of national identity took an “ethnic” twist, Greek theatre examined the issue of Hellenicity more closely by trying to introduce a blend of heterogeneous historical and cultural elements on the stage, in an attempt eventually to achieve homogeneity. The theatre was now assigned a “secret” mission: to spread the word that Hellenism originated as a trait in a common past, either remote or recent; a past that modern Greeks are responsible for displaying proudly, giving prominence to, and sometimes even overcoming. Hellenic identity was now projected as a contradiction (Anderson 1983). New productions highlighted the fact that the past of the Greek nation provides no proof of homogeneity, only shared history. It demonstrates a violent attachment (or an attachment by force) to elements that bind the Greek people as a group under ideological forms of dubious moral origin (Smith, National Identity 19). Contrary to its older identity, the new Greek theatre often projects the deconstruction of the idea of Hellenism, breaking it up into several completely unrelated parts.

The choice of productions to be discussed in this paper was made from among many of equal importance. To better illustrate my point, the discussion is separated into three parts. The first examines the relationship between ancient drama and its modern Greek counterpart, citing examples from recent performances whose main aim was to challenge tradition. These productions are the Oresteia (2001) directed by Dimitris Lignadis, Agamemnon (2008) directed by Angela Brouskou, Orestes (2010) directed by Yiannis Houvardas, and Hercules Grigoris Ioannidis

10. “Failure of religious reform conservatism may turn the modes of ethnic self-renewal elsewhere. This occurred among the Greeks at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The Greek Orthodox hierarchy in Constantinople became increasingly remote from middle-class and popular aspirations, including those of the lower clergy who supplied the revolt in the Morea with some of its leaders. Here Greek aspirations found increasingly secular ideological discourses for their goals” (Smith, National Identity 35-36).
Furens (The Madness of Hercules) (2011) by Michael Marmarinos. All these productions were presented at the ancient theatre of Epidaurus, and sure enough, they immediately drew the spotlight, causing a massive and heated debate. The last two productions, in particular, were staged by the National Theatre of Greece, the institution that represents the formal national stance towards ancient drama and its resurgence. Thus, it carries additional weight, quite important to the future of the genre.\footnote{Eleni Varopoulou (2009) notes that the weight has shifted from reviving to using ancient tragedy. See also Pagiatakis (2008).}

Nevertheless, in none of these productions was the primary aim to reinvigorate the performances staged at the festival of Epidaurus. At their core was a deeper criticism on other issues, some of which concerned the contemporary Greek identity. Each of the productions presents the young generation through the way it reacts to an attempt to unite diverse elements by force. The Chorus is portrayed as the critic of the people’s stance towards the state and its institutions. History sheds its traditional role as the link holding Greek identity together and eventually accepts the individual events that have defined the story of the Greek nation, but hinder a single narrative bridging its journey through time.

An adaptation of the Oresteia was produced by the Experimental Stage of the National Theatre in the spring of 2001, under the direction of Dimitris Lignadis and featuring a number of young actors.\footnote{The translation was by Tasos Roussos and K. H. Myris, the stage and costume design by Dionisis Fotopoulos and the music by Giorgis Christodoulou. The cast however was mainly composed of young actors: Stathis Mantzoros, Dimitris Mylonas, Agoritsa Oikonomou, Omiros Poulakis, Giorgos Stamos, Chrysanthi Avloniti, Minos Theocharis, Tasos Iordanidis, Leonidas Kalfagiannis, Christos Karnakis, Nantia Kontogeorgi, Dimitris Konstantinidis, Elina Malama, Marios Mettis, Alexandros Balamotis, Elefteria Benovia, Kleio-Danai Othonaiou, Rafika Saouis, Thanos Tokakis, Ilektra Tsakalia.} Despite the experimental nature of the entire approach, and despite what Lignadis had stated before the play was staged—namely, that the production should be considered as no more than an interval in a work in progress on ancient Greek drama, the Oresteia was generally characterized by critics as one of the most interesting and intriguing new performances of ancient Greek drama (Blatsou, Georgakopoulou, Marinou, Angelikopoulos, Loizou, Hatzioannou, Ioanidou, Sarigiannis, Dimadi). The concept was meant as an experimental, postmodern adaptation of the Aeschylean text, lasting no more than an hour and a half. The trilogy was staged with just five actors who interpreted the main characters and were also part of the chorus in the tragedies. Perhaps the most innovative aspect of the production was that it took place on different “stages,” forcing the audience to move during the performance. First, there was an introductory street-theatre scene that took place in front of the National Theatre building, following which the actors led the audience between Agamemnon and The Libation-Bearers, when the audience had to move from the scene of the action in Agamemnon to a different part of the theatre, with
seats this time, in order to watch *The Libation-Bearers*. The last part of the trilogy, the *Eumenides*, was staged in the thrilling ambience of the theatre’s garage.

The performance was, in fact, a blend of different theatrical traditions and styles, from ancient theatre and pantomime, through shadow theatre, Japanese theatre, and street theatre. Stage designer Dionysis Fotopoulos purposely adopted a minimalist style in the costumes and set for the production, ensuring that the actors’ masks were the main focus of attention. All in all, the *Oresteia* was staged as a voyage from darkness to light and as a representation of theatre. What Lignadis was trying to do from the outset was to find a new answer to some old questions, dilemmas, and prejudices that have accompanied productions of ancient drama in Greece for more than a century. Some of these prejudices have to do with the influence of ancient Greek drama on local theatrics and its significance to the Greek people.

Despite the director’s first impulse to stage the *Oresteia* in the ancient theatre of Epidaurus, the plays were clearly meant to be performed indoors rather than in an open theatre. Even though they were eventually performed in the small theatre at Epidaurus, the *Oresteia* can still be regarded as having been initially designed for the kind of facilities only an indoor theatre can provide. The whole endeavour presented a huge challenge for the young director in more than one respect; after all, his own background was greatly influenced by the traditional, academic approach to Greek drama. His father, Tasos Lignadis (1926-1989), was one of the most distinguished and highly respected scholars in Greece, whose work on classical drama had a major impact on twentieth-century Greek theatre. Was the *Oresteia*, in fact, a secret dialogue between the son and the eminent figure of his late father? An interview given by Lignadis hints as much; according to the director, he spent years trapped in the “image” crafted for him as Tasos Lignadis’s son. So he somehow felt that it was time to break free from every preconception and to “discover himself” (2005). In the meantime, he was confronted with the persistent demand of a younger audience for “as much modernism as possible.” Even before the opening of the production, Lignadis stated that he was against “modernism for its own sake”; his was meant to be a balanced approach to tradition and modernism. This was why he was more than willing to incorporate, alongside a creative emulation of the ancient Greek theatre, elements from various other theatrical traditions, such as the commedia dell’arte, Japanese theatre, puppet theatre, pantomime, and the circus. During the performance, one could hear both the ancient and the modern Greek language, as well as fragments of the trilogy in two different translations (by K. Ch. Myris and Tasos Roussos).

Lignadis incorporated many of the above-mentioned features into one particular scene in his *Oresteia*: Clytemnestra’s monologue in *Agamemnon*. In Lignadis’s interview, he discusses the influence of ancient Greek drama on local theatrics and its significance to the Greek people.
nadis’ adaptation, the monologue is delivered by a young actress who suddenly stops half way through the monologue, looking disconcerted and somewhat bored. And to the intense surprise of the audience, she starts quietly singing a modern Greek song. “What are you doing?” a fellow actor mutters, “This cannot be right! We are supposed to be playing the *Oresteia* here!” “Oh, get off my back,” she replies and goes on with her song. One by one, the actors join in the song, when suddenly during this seemingly out-of-place transgression, a member of the company arrives carrying a tape recorder playing the recorded voice of Katina Paxinou in the role of Clytemnestra. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this scene has to do with the ingenious questions it raises for the audience; Paxinou’s voice echoing from the cassette player represents the glorious tradition of ancient drama performances, a past which is nevertheless remote from today’s notion of the same genre. Do we really feel comfortable today with the acting style of the past? Is this the way we still want to stage Aeschylus today? And, last but not least, is this something we can do without? No matter how outdated these questions may sound, today more than ever before, there is an urgent need for convincing new answers.

Another production of an ancient Greek tragedy, several years after the *Oresteia* described above, will attempt a groundbreaking approach similar to that of Dimitris Lignadis, but from a different perspective. Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* (2008), staged at the Theatro Domatiou (Chamber Theatre) by Angela Brouskou, will not simply be an iconoclastic performance of ancient drama that will cause conflicting reactions, but also a radically modernist staging of an ancient tragedy. The crux of the production is no longer the revival of ancient tragedy but the use of drama as a parable to portray modern Greek history and to present “a concise version of its political adventures” (Varopoulou 2009). Clearly, director Angela Brouskou has developed a very personal concept about ancient drama, following the contemporary critical stance towards cultural and political decline. In this light, the performance of *Agamemnon* should be considered a political commentary. The shift towards the political arena includes an aggressive deconstruction of the features commonly used in revivals of ancient drama; a deconstruction which in this case creates a new perspective on how to stage ancient tragedy. Brouskou sees *Agamemnon* as a political operetta in which the main protagonist is the Chorus, while the actors represent the figures of authority that unwillingly alternate before the Chorus. The props used come from various eras in Greek history—the most prominent of which is a large-scale map of Greek territory which, when opened, occupies most of the orchestra.14 As noted above, the most prominent feature in Brouskou’s production is the Chorus, which, contrary to its traditional function, now represents the populace, a group of citizens susceptible to both propaganda and demagogy. In Mycenae, the dictator Agamemnon, notwithstanding his long absence in Troy, remains as though present, and the Chorus keeps playing martial music out of tune, alternately shouting revolu-

---

14. Set design was by Guy Stephanou.
tionary slogans and pledges of allegiance. In this ambience, the Chorus is the prevalent feature of the production: consistent with Brouskou’s direction, the Guard’s renowned monologue is delivered by many different voices, while the Parodos, or first entry of the Chorus, is broken down and recited by the different “sub-groups” of the Chorus that are scattered around the Orchestra (Thimeli 2008).

The vulgar environment of Mycenae calls for a matching Clytemnestra. Amalia Moutousi embodies her as if she were a “First Lady,” known to the Greek public from the years of the dictatorship. The actress does not hesitate to bring into play an interpretative realism, which often borders on comedy. Clytemnestra is a seemingly simple woman, a working class, affable person. However, within the maze of thoughts and decisions that fill her mind there hides a secret, a cunning plan. The arrival of the Messenger, played by Konstantinos Avarikiotis, is just as interesting. He enters the orchestra dressed as a rebel of the Greek Revolution, and, as if that weren’t enough, he’s carrying a watermelon. Later, at a moment of great dramatic intensity, he smashes the watermelon on the big map of Greece which is spread out in the orchestra. There is no doubt that he represents a man who has just returned from the front and cares only for himself and for loot. He talks about the Marshal as if he were the boss of a company, using all kinds of insulting language to describe him. He is the personification of a nation struggling to adjust both to the new political conditions and to a modern

15. “Using a translation that was more like prose than poetry (by Nikoleta Frintzila), and a set that comprised one simple scene (by Guy Stefanou), Angela Brouskou tried to bring together an amalgam of different elements. She tried to bring the Aeschylean myth and heroes to 20th century Greece. She paralleled the invasion of Troy by the Achaeans with the Macedonian struggle for freedom and the war in Asia Minor. The parallel would have been successful if it had been more concise and lacked a number of false steps that did not match the symbols she used. Aeschylus calls the Chorus of the Kings’ consultants ‘My Lords!’ and ‘honoured sirs.’ Brouskou, however, in her modernist staging, instead of portraying the Chorus as twentieth century upper-class citizens with close links to the palace, turns them into workers wearing caps, and abusing the working class stereotype, she portrays them as a bundle of uncivilized, uncouth brown-noses who are desperately trying to get on the good side of those in charge. She even has them act like pigs, when she has the Chorus eating the smashed watermelon straight off the floor, not to mention rolling in its juices. Ignorantly (or perhaps knowingly) she disregarded both the era and the reasons that prompted the composition of the anthem of the Communist International, and used it as a song the Chorus sang for the heroes of an imperialistic war. She also abused the sign of peace, which may not have been her original intention, placing it on the track suit Cassandra wore and then took off appearing naked, in a crazy and humiliating portrayal of the heroine (played by Parthenopi Bouzouri). The messenger’s part was greatly expanded (played by Konstantinos Avarikiotis in a traditional Greek costume), while the part of Clytemnestra (an excellent Amalia Moutousi) was lengthened beyond measure. Agamemnon (a merely satisfactory performance by Minas Hatzisavas, who adhered to the director’s guidance) was dressed in a sailor’s uniform and had exotic jewelry hanging around his neck, while Aegisthos (played by Maximos Moumouris), who is usually portrayed as a hideous person, was given more depth” (Thimeli 2008).
Greek language. The Messenger’s monologue is followed by the entrance of Agamemnon. His appearance is all too consistent with the image of a tyrant who is accustomed to seeing people bow in front of him and subserviently kiss his hand. The scene of his return is clear; the people of Mycenae recognize in the face of Minas Hatzisavas the ruler they deserve: arrogant, uniformed, wearing stolen boots, and with Cassandra by his side—his precious loot. And like sheep-dogs, they express their joy to see him and offer their blind loyalty to him. In this context, the revolutionary mood of the Chorus at the end of the play, right after Agamemnon’s murder, is anything but convincing. They do brandish a stone at the (new) tyrants, but will not throw it as they’re always inclined to submit to any ruler. A new ruler might be less charismatic than Agamemnon, but he will not be less moral.

It is obvious that Brouskou’s Agamemnon could be seen as an overview of Greek political history, from the country’s liberation from Ottoman rule to the present day. The common point of reference is the Chorus of citizens, always ready to serve the mighty, fully unaware of their own condition. Brouskou’s direction introduced onto the Epidaurus stage images of a Greek identity, reversed in such a way as to underscore not the homogenous but the heterogeneous elements of the nation’s history. Every single device used in the production, from the Messenger’s costume to the watermelon smashed on the huge map of Greece, indicates that Agamemnon aims to break down Greek identity into its constituents. Its core objective is to break away from the past and oppose a tradition that repeatedly tries to unify and secure a sense of continuity, in order to suppress any attempted criticism or rebellion.

16. During the dictatorship, there were two very distinct languages used in Greek, the formal one, otherwise known as “purist,” descending from ancient Greek, and the vernacular, known as the “demotic”, which the common people used in their everyday life interactions.

17. The bloggers were generally in favor of any innovative performance of ancient drama. According to one of them: “The last performance of the Athens Festival was indeed one worth watching. The hostility of the audience that was from the start prejudiced against the . . . unholy outcome . . . was so palpable I could sense it from the moment I set foot in the theatre. Yet, notwithstanding a couple of reactions from the crowd—and needless to say this was not just any “crowd” but a cultivated, well-educated in theatrical matters, “professional” audience—and except for a few giggles from little girls—who reminded me of broads laughing at shocking adult jokes they actually enjoy but which at the same time make them feel embarrassed—the play was a winner thanks to its simplicity, its aesthetics, and, most importantly, because of its original, unbelievably contemporary ways of making hints and drawing parallels with today. Right from the start it was obvious that it would give some very useful lessons to those who, carried away by a creator’s illusion of grandeur, by their naiveté and swagger, try to stage an ancient tragedy. Perhaps the finest Chorus we’ve seen this year was that of Agamemnon. Amalia Moutousi’s simplicity and fine acting, and the incredible confidence with which she used her amazing skill, was undoubtedly a lesson that one needn’t be tense to play a solemn character and, most importantly, that they may, finally introduce some irony in their acting. . . . She was simply magnificent without seeming at all pompous. Konstantinos Avarikiotis was like a figure from the past, a cross between painter Theofilos and ancient...
The production of *Agamemnon* caused a number of reactions and was greeted in reviews with as much praise as criticism. The venture was repeated two years later, this time by the National Theatre, the theatrical institution considered “most competent” in matters of national identity, under the direction of its artistic director Yiannis Houvardas. *Orestes* (2010) was staged by Houvardas with the same objective as Brouskou’s *Agamemnon*: the genre. However, the aesthetic style of the two productions was quite different. This time, ancient tragedy played the part of the mirror into which the nation could see its true and genuine reflection, and discern the parts that had been artificially welded together. Identity once again became the key issue under investigation by the young, affecting their attitude to ancient myths, modern culture and the official version of Greek history (Ioannidis 2010).18 In both *Agamemnon* and Houvardas’ *Orestes*, the main innovation concerned the function of the Chorus. The National Theatre production included a multinational group of young people, tourists, and students in classical courses visiting the theatre at Epidaurus, who entered and attempted to engage them in conversation (Varveris 2010).19

This experience would naturally transform each of the tourists individually, but also the group as a whole. The group would first become a team, then a community, and finally mutate into the Chorus. What is more, these same young people, by attending the different episodes of the play, would gradually lose their initial naiveté and become personally involved, assuming active roles. The problem faced by the heroes now seems to be their problem too: that is the penalty for the crime hanging dangerously over their own heads. As a result, a tragedy about the destiny, passion, and ethos of the characters is linked to a political ar-

---

18. “With the exception of some instances of bad timing that one can expect at a premiere, such as the initial dispersal of the Chorus in the auditorium, this could well be the most important production of this particular tragedy in the history of Greek theatre. And taking into account its warm reception by the audience, we may have witnessed one of the most important productions of ancient drama in the last decade” (Ioannidis 2010).

19. “A somewhat eccentric and unclear play which provided director Houvardas an all too familiar canvas to work on. Justly torn between two different points of view, like the play itself, he interpreted the tragedy sometimes as a satirical drama and at others as a play taunting gods and mortals. The Phrygian slave’s portrayal as a bisexual (a wonderful Nikos Karathanos and before him Thodoris Katsafados), as well as Glastras’ self-mocking Apollo, indicate just that. The performance lacked any genuinely innovative comical elements, and the few that were there were rather expansive. However, the director managed to bring out the wonderfully poetic and musical translation by Stratis Paschalis, deciding at the same time on a set design reminiscent of Brecht’s plays. A nude, geometrical set and simple but beautiful clothes were chosen for the actors (by Johannes Soutch). In my opinion the idea of the Chorus being a school class participating in the play and being reborn through the drama, was a good one, but lasted a little too long at the beginning” (Varveris 2010).
argument. In a sense, just like *Agamemnon*, *Orestes* too is a political representation in its own subtler way. Orestes (Nikos Kouris) represents the young people who feel disoriented and lost, and who resort to senseless violence as a means of revenge and self-determination.

The two productions, however, have more in common than their political dimension or innovative use of the Chorus. *Orestes* is also an attempt to review a historical narrative. In Houvardas’ production, two very different concepts of time meet on the stage of Argolis. First, we witness a circular concept of time in which the characters in the tragedy who have not found justice are trapped, tied to a cycle of blood, doomed to start over from the beginning every time Tantalus’ descendants walk onstage. This concept of time encounters a transverse linear one, which defines the past, present and future alike, giving hope that the timeless circular repetition of history will end sometime (Polenakis 2010). The setting of the production also reflects this dual timeline concept by distinguishing two separate theatrical spaces: the first one is the orchestra and the main theatre, where the chorus moves. Behind the orchestra there is a waiting room and the backstage, where the characters of the tragedy take off their masks and become actors once again. An ironic game takes places between these two theatrical spaces: the theatrical stage conceals another “stage” where the characters are stripped of their theatrical personas. On one side, we have theatrical reality and, on the other, everyday reality, each with its own timeline and action space. In the end, Apollo, assuming the part of Master of Ceremonies, will settle everything. He will not however resolve the characters’ internal drama. The terrified Chorus—perhaps suspecting that what they are witnessing is beyond them—flee from the stage. And everything recommences: Electra (Stefania Goulioti) appears on stage once more, with her exhausted brother Orestes before her. Things start all over again. A circular narrative is juxtaposed with the young people’s urge to break the cycle of tradition. The most important element of Houvardas’ approach to ancient drama is his resolution to break away from tradition and question everything about it. *Orestes* serves as a parable addressing the attempt of the young to overcome their contradictions. It symbolizes contemporary Greek young people who are struggling to overcome archetypes and find new ones that will lead them into the future.

The following summer, it was the turn of director Michael Marmarinos to

20. “In the production of the National Theatre, the director Yiannis Houvardas tried to square the circle so that the play would somehow fit in our own time. Using Stratis Paschalis’ fine translation he experimented with a number of theatrical genres: musical theatre, comedy, urban drama, modern and postmodern theatre, Rontiris’ tradition, operetta, farce, and numerous others. The result was nothing short of a confusion of theatrical traditions and, consequently, Euripides’ tragedy was presented as a grotesque, freakish reflection in the distorting mirror of our times” (Polenakis 2010).

21. In the words of Marilena Zaroulia: “If December 2008 has become a turning point in an alternative history of the Greek nation and the history of post-1974 radical politics, the National Theatre’s production, perhaps unintentionally, communicated continuities and dis-
work with the Greek National Theatre in another innovative approach to ancient tragedy, and through his production, to examine a different aspect of modern Greek history. *Hercules Furens (The Madness of Hercules)* (2011), which was staged at Epidaurus, could also be considered a political play, as it deals with specific features of the Greek public and private experience. One of these features concerns the sense of a new national collective memory composed of private, “solitary” perceptions. Another analysis of Marmarinos’ production reveals a transposition of History and Memory, where the former is regarded as an invented official version of the latter (Koltsidopoulou 2011).

In an undoubtedly impressive entrance, the National Theatre Company arrives at Epidaurus on an old bus and gets off muttering some lines borrowed from Theo Angelopoulos’ film *Travelling Players* (“We are tired, we haven’t slept in two days”). The bus will remain in the background, with the lights on ready to depart, throughout the play. Its role is to stay parked there as a contrast to the eternity of the scenery.

During his long career, director Michael Marmarinos has intently studied the operation of a theatre that does not interpret but rather narrates the action. Thus, in his production, Amphitryon (Minas Hatzisavas) begins his account like a seductive storyteller. A little later, as Kariofilia Karambeti plays Megara, it becomes more than obvious that the theatre has a “second stage,” which filters and selectively emphasizes a wide range of emotions. Giorgos Gallos’ Lycus stands opposite them, a recreant speaking with the intense theatricality, bluster and bravado of a winner. All microphones, hidden and not, create a vivid scene. The poses, the monologues, all conspire to express the full scale of emotions, from melodrama to the deepest, most sincere expression of human suffering. Here too, however, the most important contribution to *Hercules* is the presence, teaching, and testimony of the Chorus. Half-submerged in the naturalistic viewpoint of old age and half in the vigour of youth, the Chorus, trying to be true to its part, is more of a synthesis of distinct individualities than a choreographed theatrical group. According to the director’s wish, the Chorus in *Hercules* is

continuities with that past. Hence, the national character of Orestes does not lie in the manner in which the content corresponded to the historical moment, which was the main argument put forward by critics” (212).

22. “This is a wonderful occasion for highlighting the relation between the individual and the collective, something Marmarinos has been continually studying, working on, and presenting, unsuccessfully at times, innovatively every single time. And with great persistence and dedication, if I may add, judging from the Chorus’ lengthy parts. A Chorus that consists of a random jumble of city people that could be met at the traffic lights, at a bus stop, and everywhere else, but who, in reality, are members of an undercover Chorus of a certain tragedy, bards of all forbidden memories, of remembrances that have been denied but are still tenaciously vivid, and who couldn’t get enough of expressing their love for populism and repetition (as demonstrated by their songs, phrases they borrowed from others, and their individual or collective fantasies), running the risk of being self-negating at times” (Koltsidopoulou 2011).
fluid and changeable, like a group of friends, and at the same time like a social mechanism, it functions as a bearer of knowledge from one pole of the group (old age) to the other (youth). Sitting in the cheap plastic seats chosen as props by Eleni Manolopoulou, the old and the young take it upon themselves to recount Hercules’ labours. The entrance of Hercules himself brings the next twist to the storyline. Hercules, played by Nikos Karathanos, bears no resemblance to the heroic legend: he returns home after his last labour no longer wearing his lion skin, and walking with a labourer’s gait. And then, just as easily as one would have undertaken an odd repair, he assumes the task of avenging his family.

This completes the first part of the tragedy, which relates the plight of Hercules’ family in his absence, due to the threat posed by the tyrant Lycus. But the play does not end here. The second part addresses the plight of Hercules himself. As Iris, Stephanie Goulioti chortles and, immediately afterwards, Theodora Tzimou’s Madness shrieks up from the “theologeio” (God-platform), interrupting the victory celebration the Chorus has arranged for the demi-god. The lights go down and only the edge of the stage is now lit, lending it something of the magic of Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In the second part, the human drama begins as a Fury starts to nestle in Hercules’ heart. And indeed, Euripides, with his typical naturalism, has the Messenger announce the murder of Hercules’ wife and children by the hero himself. His friend Theseus—interpreted by the equally antiheroic looking Thodoris Atheridis—is Hercules’ only consolation, while the city of Athens receives the former hero as a supplicant. In this real, hostile world where gods are nonexistent or gloating, the former hero leaves the stage as a rag behind the king. The first man of the Chorus, Yiannis Vogiatzis, tells the audience the moral of the story, under no illusion about mortal life. Amphitryon, with his hands in prayer, is the only one remaining on stage; the oldest of three generations.

One could argue that Marmarinos’ adaptation of *Hercules Furens*, in addition to its dramaturgical singularities, is a parable attempting a synopsis of modern Greek history, a story full of triumphs and defeats (Kaltaki 2011). The Chorus represents a nation that observes and, at the same time narrates, the plot. It is the image of a nation that is part of its history but also subject to it. This nation, however, is no longer presented as a seamless whole, but as a group of different individualities struggling to follow a narrative capable of reconciling

23. Music score by Dimitris Kamarotos.
25. “This is the material Michael Marmarinos worked with at this time of crisis. And with it he put on a performance that illuminated this wonderful, misunderstood and largely unknown piece. What will stay with me is Marmarinos’ innovative use of the Chorus, addressing the lingering and bitter issue of collectivity in the theater, with Yiannis Vogiatzis, Yorgos Biniaris, Charis Tsitsakis and Giorgos Ziovas playing the leading men. As far as I can remember, there has been no other production of ancient tragedy in which the choral parts were more interesting than these” (Kaltaki 2011).
its discrepancies. Different generations, different angles, different interpretations of the same event are all present at the same time, while the nation’s memory is being shaped. And this memory is not always compatible with the official version of events, which usually comes later in order to link events artificially, to “interpret” them, and integrate them into a scale of values. So, Hercules is part of a History (first part of the play) that contradicts the Memory of his life’s journey (second part of the play). History talks of the demi-god’s victories, while Memory also retains his fall. The people, represented by the Chorus, participate in the making of History, while struggling to narrate the hero’s defeat. Thus, the National Theatre’s Hercules directed by Michael Marmarinos, in fact, belongs to a series of political theatre productions such as Agamemnon or Orestes, which use classic ancient drama as a means to interpret the relationship of modern Greek identity with history, tradition and memory, and to examine the people’s relationship with power and their stance towards it (Smyrnis 2011).²⁶

Assistant Professor
Department of Theatre Studies
University of Athens
Greece

Works Cited


²⁶. “The direction was inspired and modern. It included a lot of representational symbols in order to highlight the tragic verse, an outstanding piece of poetry which plays with contrasts mainly between light and darkness, the human and the supernatural, reason and madness, politics and morality” (Smyrnis 2011).
“Facing Mirrors”: Contemporary Greek Theatre Productions and the Issue of Identity


