

## RESEARCH PROJECT – CONCLUSIONS

### **“Communal Hellenism” and Ancient Drama Performances in Greece from the Metapolitefsi to the ‘New’ Balkans (1975-1995)**

Given that for most Greeks ancient drama performances represent the main way of communicating with the Ancients, such productions addressed to mass audiences provide a highly effective instrument for disseminating ideas about Antiquity, determining, thus, the commonly held knowledge of things Ancient (a sort of shared ‘hellenism’/‘archaiognosia’). At the same time, theatre reviews, using a quasi-academic rhetoric, are crucial to the very shaping of the public’s ‘communal hellenism’, providing, thus, a most effective index to the way that the relationship between Antiquity and Greekness (*hellenikotita*) was perceived in the Modern Greek consciousness.

#### **I. “Communal hellenism” and Ancient Drama Performances (1975-1995): Periodization.**

For the best part of the 20th cent., and despite the ‘continuity’ idea between Ancient, Byzantine/Folk and Modern Greekness, the imagining of Antiquity in the context of Ancient drama ‘revival’ (at least as far as ancient *tragedy* is concerned) remained classicist, recycling, under a Greek garb, ideas that flourished in Europe during the previous century. The National Theatre –which essentially monopolized ancient drama performances until the Metapolitefsi– strongly resisted folklore and byzantine performative codes, claiming its classicist ‘tradition’ as ‘native’, ‘authentic’ and ‘deeply’ *hellenic*. At the same time, this was a Greekness that aimed at Greece’s ‘Western’ integration.

After the junta, Greece faced consecutive challenges: the transition to Democracy (Metapolitefsi), the entrance to the ECU/EU, its position in the ‘new’ Balkans – challenges that provoked recurring negotiations of a diachronic Greekness, as the Greek cultural identity oscillated between West and East, between integration and ‘particularity’. During the same period, ancient drama productions proliferate (1975: 10 productions; 1980: 18; 1995: 25; 1975–1995 total: ca 320) as open air theatres, summer festivals and touring companies (state/municipal, subsidized, commercial) multiply, putting an end to the ‘hegemony’ of the National Theatre. Performances now address popular audiences too, and the performative codes split between classicism, folklore, modernism and even post-modernism, reflecting broader cultural developments:

- To the more elitist spectators, the ‘tradition’ of the National Theatre appears exhausted. Yet attempts to break new ground meet with steadfast resistance.
- A markedly outdated classicism, however, is now disseminated to and applauded by wide sections of the public, as it permeates the majority of productions by both state/municipal, subsidized and commercial companies. Such a classicist imagining of Antiquity continues to be cultivated in Education too, achieving the status of a cultural dogma.
- At the same time, though, the idea of an anti-‘Western’, more ‘genuine’ and ‘spiritual’ diachronic Greekness rooted to ‘our own East’ (*kathimas Anatoli*), finds its way into ‘alternative’ productions of tragedy, which adopt performative codes based on byzantine and folk culture. Such productions are greeted as ‘legitimately’ innovative.
- Finally, during the same period, the solidification of the country’s European profile provokes also ‘cosmopolitan’ performative approaches, which cause uproar.

## **II. Between Theatre and Ritual(s): “Communal Hellenism” and the Ritual Quest**

Ever since the beginning of the Modern Greek ‘revival’, ‘ritual’ has been a most important catchword, which was and still is systematically invoked with regard to:

- a) the idea of the ritual function of ancient theatre in its ancient context and the need/obligation to reproduce it in the present;
- b) the idea of the ritual nature of tragedy’s dramaturgy (characters/actions);
- c) the demand for ritual/quasi-ritual performative codes, which would serve the above.

During the first decades of the ‘revival’, reviewers were divided: many insisted on ‘rituality’, others urged for more ‘realistic’ performative codes, which could ‘modernize’ (*eksygchronismos*) and ‘humanize’ (*exanthropismos*) ancient drama, safeguarding, thus, its appeal to contemporary audiences. During the period under study, however, the ‘Ritual Quest’ prevailed, assuming three basic forms:

- Through the constant recycling of classicist, hero-worshipping/hero-centred and ‘ceremonial’ performative codes, the National Theatre ‘ritualized’ its approach, allowing the spectators to “experience yet again”, as one reviewer put it, “the shudder (*rigos*) of artistic ritual”.
- Performative codes originating in folklore rituals, which had been and continue to be adopted in the ‘revival’ of ancient comedy, are applied now to tragedy too, renewing the ‘ritual quest’ and putting forward a cultural Aesthetics with equally ‘indigenous’ dimensions drawn on a ‘deep’ *hellenikotita*.
- A neo-ritual Aesthetics is introduced by Theodoros Terzopoulos.

Both ‘classicism’ and ‘folklore’ can be seen to create a sort of rituality through the (re)confirmation of the *familiar*. This *familiarity* secured the unanimous response of the spectators, forging what Turner could define as a *communitas* which, in turn, creates and guarantees an ethno-centric collective identity. It is in this anthropological dimension of the Greek ‘revival’ that one should trace the mechanism that feeds the scandals raised by performances which explore new forms based on the individuality and idiosyncracy of the artists involved. Terzopoulos’ ‘neo-ritualism’, on the other hand, does not have a specific *hellenic* reference, but his austere *form* is seen by many as a convincing solution to the ‘Ritual Quest’. Yet, his productions, touring international Festivals, address markedly elitist Greek and international audiences and should be seen as belonging to a category of their own.

## **III. ‘Our’ Tragedy, ‘Their’ theatre: The Reception of Foreign Performances of Tragedy in Greece (1975-1985)**

During the period under study, the Western/European perspective of Greece was simultaneously affirmed and undermined. The designation of Athens as the first ‘Cultural Capital of Europe’ (1985) celebrated Greece’s centrality to the European cultural identity. With the European institutional integration being secured, however, the need emerges for the definition of a Greek ‘particularity’. This was sought by many in the ‘*kathimas Anatoli*’ idea, an idea that had been circulating in the previous decades yet now acquires a markedly anti-Western perspective, opposing a sort of premodern and spiritually rich *hellenic* identity to the allegedly corrupt, alienating and ‘drained’ modernity of what is disparagingly dubbed *Hesperia*.

The moment is crucial: in place of the triumphant international tours of the National Theatre before the junta, Greek reviewers and elitist audiences are now confronted with foreign productions of ancient tragedy that tour Greece, at exactly the same period that the need for a radical renewal of local performative codes is widely stipulated. However, the performances of the ‘strangers’ prove deeply ‘estranging’, driving the Greek reviewers, sometimes unwittingly, to idealize the Hellenic ‘tradition’. To the vast majority of spectators, Western productions fail to grasp the ‘tragic Logos’, being deprived of the linguistic diachronic continuity that modern Greek culture is seen to enjoy, safeguarding the Greeks’ deeper, richer and ‘native’ engagement with the tragic Text. Seen as breaching the supposedly ‘authentic’ form, nature and function and the tragic genre, Westerners are claimed to fail the tragic ‘magnitude’ (*megethos*) through the introduction of perspectives that are dubbed indiscriminately ‘realistic’/‘modernistic’/‘postmodern’. Performances which disturb textual integrity or historicize the tragic action through references to contemporary events are immediately dubbed ‘adaptations’ which betray the tragic *achronia*. Performances that employ foreign folklore codes are rejected as ‘simplistic’. On the other hand, Oriental (esp. Japanese) productions are, sometimes, welcomed as capable of rescuing ancient drama’s categoric ‘rituality’, through the exploration of a ‘sublime’ Aesthetics based on their own continuity with a ‘pre-modern’ ancient past. In any case, even to progressive reviewers, foreign directors enjoy a license that to the Greeks is forbidden: ‘others’ make theatre – ‘we’ put on ancient drama.