

CHARILAOS TRIKOUPIIS AND THE EMERGENCE OF MAJOR LEADING ACTORS IN 19TH CENTURY GREEK THEATRE¹

Alexia Altouva

National & Kapodistrian University of Athens

This paper focuses on the effect of Charilaos Trikoupis' policy on Greek theatrical practices during the second half of the 19th century and as the contribution of the major leading actors in the dissemination of his vision to their audiences.

The dream for a new and more "European" Greece, disconnected from old mentalities and oriented to the progress that Europe represented, created new trends in theatre through which a cosmopolitan spirit was imported and spread to Greek society.

Since theatre had always had the power to attract public interest, at this particular moment, it functioned as a strong tool, capable of promoting a "national" plan effectively.

This theatrical renaissance reached its peak just before the bankruptcy of the state announced by the prime minister himself, in December 1893.

Charilaos Trikoupis (1832-1896) has been called a "Great Visionary and Reformer" by many of his contemporaries as well as several historians, because his political vision is considered to have contributed to Greece's modernisation. The main lines of his policy, its ambitious goals, and the causes of its failure have been studied in detail and remain under discussion. What has not been highlighted, however, is how that vision affected theatrical practice at the time, mainly due to a lack of sources that until recently had left this period of Greek theatre in the shadow. New studies published during the last decade have provided us with new data on the influence of political reforms on the domestic theatrical reality during the second half of the 19th century². Within this context,

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2. The citation refers to the works of Chrysothemis Stamatopoulou-Vasilakou, Thodoros Chatzipantazis, Andreas Dimitriadis, Alexia Altouva, Irena Bogdanovic and Walter Puchner focusing on Greek theatre during the same period (see the References Cited section).

this paper focuses on the effect of politics on Greek theatre during a period dominated by the presence of a distinguished politician, and it highlights the contribution of prominent actors in spreading his vision to audiences both inside theatre halls and in society in general.

To begin with, it is worth mentioning that Charilaos Trikoupis was a rather popular Greek politician, having been elected Prime Minister seven times (in 1875, 1878, 1880, 1882-1885, 1886-1890, 1892-1893, 1895). Trikoupis started his political career as a diplomat in 1862, eventually becoming one of the two figures who dominated Greek politics for more than thirty years. His name is connected with the democratisation of the political system, the successful management of foreign affairs, the huge engineering projects implemented under his supervision, and the industrialisation aimed at modernising the country (Deschamps n.d., Tsokopoulos 1896, Sergeant 1897, Miller 1898, Damianakos 1977, Tzokas 1998 and 1999, Phlerianou 1999, Arōnē-Tsichlē & Tricha 2000, Tricha 2001 and 2009).

One of the main objectives of his policy had been to promote the advancement of the bourgeoisie. His policies in this particular domain earned him the name “prophet” of the Greek bourgeoisie (Ventirēs 1970: 25). This emerging class, representing progress in Greek society, was inevitably connected to Trikoupis’ modernist political ideas in the struggle against old social structures (see: Pournaras 1950, vol. 1: 251-3). His belief was that a strong middle class would support a strong economy thereby making his plan for Europeanisation possible. The theatre proved to be an effective assistant to the positive outcome of the project since it aimed to play a didactic role in society at that time, and therefore the ideal means to spread a modern way of thinking and new mentalities³.

Trikoupis’ first term in government started in 1875; a few years later, in 1880, a gradual change in Greek theatre was observed. The insistence on profound reforms that Trikoupis was determined to impose on all aspects of social life inevitably affected theatre as well. Until then, families of actors formed troupes and staged plays under challenging conditions. The repertoire included a large number of patriotic or historical dramas, novelistic plays, romantic dramas and a selection of classical or, more often than not, one-act comedies. There was no systematic training, either

3. The emergence of a bourgeois class and subsequently of the celebrity system appeared late in Greece compared with other European countries (see Luckhurst & Moody 2005). During the last decade of 19th century the European theatre had already turned to forms of Theatre Group (Fischer-Lichte 2002: 244-247).

theoretical or practical, on the art of theatre or on modes of acting. The modernisation of Greek theatre was long overdue.

“Modernisation” was Trikoupis’ motto and, therefore, theatre had to be reformed not only to follow his optimistic plan, but also to further its implementation. Greek actors, most of whom were practically illiterate, had to be educated so that they could optimally serve their art as well as guide and teach their audience. To this end, in 1871, the Greek Conservatory was established to provide more comprehensive training for artists. One of the founders was, of course, Charilaos Trikoupis, who was also chairman of the Theatre Department (Dēmētriadēs 2006: 76-77). However, the academic personnel at the time were considered inadequate, creating a general demand for an expert from abroad, preferably a Greek. The notion of sending a literate person abroad funded by the state to be educated and become a tutor for his colleagues upon his return was quite popular among intellectuals up to the end of the century⁴.

Temporarily, a suitable person for this position was deemed to be Nikolaos Lekatsas (1847-1913), repatriated from Great Britain, he was appointed to the Conservatory in 1881 (*ibidem*). It is well known that Trikoupis had shown special interest in this pioneer of Greek theatre not only because of his bond with England but also for political reasons. Trikoupis was a keen Anglophile and this fact along with his reserved nature garnered him the nickname “the Englishman” (Damianakos 1977)⁵. Lekatsas had enjoyed a long career as an actor in England before coming to Greece. It was a unique opportunity for the young premier to promote his plans with the help of an artist who specialised in Shakespearean plays and was thought capable of introducing British theatre to Greek audiences and bringing them closer to northern European culture. The plan, however, did not proceed as expected. It was partly due to the offensive behaviour of Trikoupis’ opponents that Lekatsas did not manage to introduce the innovative work and methods into Greek theatre⁶. Additionally, the reluctance

4. Greek actors reacted strongly to that will. See the official statement of their representative, Petros Lazaridis (Andreadis 2006: 88-90).

5. In fact the whole Trikoupis’ family was affiliated to English interests. In addition, Charilaos Trikoupis’ career as diplomat began in the Greek Embassy of London when in 1856 he was assigned as General Secretary while in 1862 he had risen to be *Chargé d’Affaires* (Tricha 2009). At the same period, in 1865, he ruled the negotiations and obtained the cession by the United Kingdom to Greece of the Ionian Islands (Tsokopoulos 1896: 42-78).

6. Trikoupis’ decision to support a Shakespearean actor provoked some ironic commentary published in the Press (Andreadēs 2006: 88-90).

of his colleagues led him to professional isolation as they felt undermined by Trikoupis' "favourite" and his pioneering art. Apparently, they were both ahead of their time. Fifty years of independence proved to be a short period for the Greek nation to gain a consciousness, to develop and assimilate new ideas. Europeanisation needed some extra time and work.

Some years later, right after the beginning of his second term in government, in 1887, Trikoupis organised a series of special events and inviting foreign dignitaries in an effort to create a framework of strong friends for the country (Tzokas 1999: 145-146). In this context, a performance of *Oedipus Rex* was held in May of 1887 on the occasion of the celebration of the University of Athens' 50th anniversary. The performance was organised by the Rector and directed by Angelos Vlachos (1838-1920). The music for the chorus by Erick Wellermann⁷ was conducted by Gaudembergen, a German musician who lived and worked in Athens (Siderēs 1976: 74-76). The stage sets had also been transported directly from Germany especially for the performance. The play was performed by young artists with the participation of university students. The role of Iokaste was performed by Evangelia Paraskevopoulou (1865-1938), a member of Lekatsas' troupe and one of his students.

The whole venture lacked originality, being a reproduction of a performance staged around the same time in Saxony on the occasion of the birthday of King Albert (23 April 1828 to 1902). At that event, the students of the Royal Schools in Meissen staged *Oedipus Rex* in Greek—in the original text, we can assume—using Wellermann's music as well⁸. The event in Saxony was attended by King Albert himself as the guest of honour, while in Greece, at the Olympia theatre, many state officials attended the performance including the royal family, members of the government and diplomats.

This initiative taken by Greek intellectuals involved the performance of ancient tragedy on the modern theatrical stage, a controversial issue touching upon the issue to the continuity of the nation, a hot topic at the time. It was clearly their deliberate intention to fully imitate the content of the performance (scenery, music, chorus) having explored European theatrical practice for possible answers to the question of ancient drama revival. The intended effort to create new standards for Greek theatre originating abroad was also apparent. The participation of a few professionals,

7. Siderēs notes the name of the composer but transcribed incorrectly in Greek as "Δέλλερμαν" (Siderēs 1976: 74).

8. See: *Νέα Εφημερίς*, 132 [12-5-1887].

one of whom was about to become one of the most popular Greek actresses in the following decade, added more prestige to the event. Despite the failure of the venture, it was representative of the new political and theatrical trend to connect European concepts with Greek practices.

The introduction of a celebrity system also originated from abroad. In Europe, celebrities flourished thanks to the bourgeoisie, as they were closely related to the advancement of the middle class. European stages in the 19th century were dominated by female celebrities such as Adelaide Ristori and Sarah Bernhardt. The star-system of *fin-de-siècle* Greece was dominated by two women, Aikaterini Veroni (1867-1955) and Evangelia Paraskevopoulou. Considering the social standards which led to the formation of a celebrity system abroad, we can easily conclude that celebrities appeared in Greek theatre as a result of the emergence of a domestic bourgeoisie. Or rather, the celebrity system in Greece derived from the bourgeoisie that emerged from Tricoupis' policy.

The afore-mentioned actresses were taught the dramatic art by Nikolaos Lekatsas –not in school, but on stage– they were admirers of Sarah Bernhardt and aspired to reproduce the innovative spirit of her art. In order to work more efficiently, Paraskevopoulou and Veroni tried systematically to emulate the Divine Sarah, whose craft and style they both had the opportunity to watch live on stage in Constantinople (1888) and Athens (1893). During their careers, critics often underlined the similarities between their expressions, movements or methods of acting and Sarah's.

Although their art was based on practice rather than theory and education, the new sensations responded to the appeals of the domestic bourgeoisie to bring the Greek stage in line with its European counterparts. As well as a new acting method, the repertoire of Bernhardt including dramas by Alexander Dumas (son), Victorien Sardou and others, was admitted to Greek theatre and reproduced by theatrical companies. The content and ideas of these plays were representative of modern cosmopolitan thought and behaviour, and through them Greek audiences were exposed to European habits, fashions and progressive ideas. New questions arose concerning social matters such as the individual's place in society, family relations, even the crucial question of women's emancipation. By means of didactic theatre, the audience had to be educated as soon as possible, and oriented to a more bourgeois way of thinking. It seemed that Europeanisation could become reality via theatre after all. The dream of a new and more "European" Greece, distanced from old mentalities and oriented towards progress following Europe's model, created new trends in theatre

through which a cosmopolitan spirit was introduced and spread among the public.

Their reputation was not restricted to the domestic theatrical stage but expanded abroad through organised tours to communities in the Greek diaspora. On a political level, foreign affairs were another key point of Trikoupi's policy. His ambition was to make Greece the Centre of the "καθ' ημάς Ανατολή"⁹ while he envisioned and worked for a closer collaboration of all Balkan states (see Pournaras 1950, vol. 1: 125-168, Tzokas 1999: 161, Svolopoulos 2000: 27-42). According to his plans, Greece was to become an active force able to motivate developments in the region, and to that goal he tried to ally with other Balkan countries to create a buffer against the Ottomans. Following similar tactics, Paraskevopoulou and Veroni both adopted the unofficial title of "Sarah Bernhardt of the Orient" inside and outside the country whenever they were on tour. In fact, a significant part of their career was built abroad in different communities of the Greek diaspora, some of which were located in Bucharest, Odessa, Philippoupolis (Plovdiv), Alexandria, Smyrna, and Constantinople (Stamatopoulou-Vasilakou 2006, Chatzēpantazēs 2012, Altouva 2014).

Difficulties and substandard work and living conditions constituted another part of contemporary reality. During the late 19th century, the constant political realignments in the region were putting theatre and its artists in the eye of the storm. Apart from living conditions, theatre people very often had to deal with problems deriving from foreign affairs and vulnerable foreign relations, such as censorship of theatrical plays, problems with the authorities, even imprisonment. Studying the timeline of theatrical tours, one can note an intensification of activity from 1866 onwards (Chatzēpantazēs 2012: [Index: Ημερολόγιο παραστάσεων]). In this same year, Trikoupi was appointed for the first time Minister of Foreign Affairs in the government of Alexandros Koumoundouros (1815-1883) and launched his reform programme aimed at revising state relations between Greece and her neighbours. Needless to say, foreign affairs were of great importance for the successful implementation of his vision as a whole. It was probably due to his strategy on foreign policy that Greek theatrical companies had the opportunity to visit even unfriendly areas, expanding their reach and presenting Greek theatre and dramaturgy abroad.

9. The phrase literally means "what lies to our East" and refers to the Greek presence in the Balkans, the Near and Middle East, as well as Southern Russia from the Byzantine times to 1922. (Clogg 2013).

During tours, famous artists were tasked with representing their country, national culture and art, primarily because of the influence they had on international audiences. Moreover, they often attracted the attention of the authorities and very often won the admiration of foreign leaders. The Ottoman Sultans, for example, hosted celebrities in their private theatre inside the palace¹⁰. By staging Greek dramas abroad, Greek actors helped build a better image of the country and contributed actively to a major political objective.

In this context, Evangelia Paraskevopoulou starred in the *Duchess of Athens*, a play by Kleon Rangavis (1842-1917), the playwright and diplomat representing Greece in Bulgaria. When he entrusted his play to Paraskevopoulou, she was already on tour in the area, having earned the admiration of Greek and Bulgarian audiences including Prince Ferdinand himself. The event, held in 1889 in the Province of Plovdiv, was of great significance for several reasons: i) on a political level, it was a performance by Greek actors in their own language staged in a country with hostile feelings towards Greece at the time, despite the Trikoupis' intentions to the contrary¹¹, ii) regarding theatre, this was the premiere of Rangavis' acclaimed drama –it had won a prize in the national competition of Olympia– and a personal triumph of the leading actress. As anticipated, many local dignitaries were attracted by the playwright's prestige¹² except for Prince Ferdinand I of Bulgaria (1861-1948). He was forbidden to attend the performance by authorities for political reasons. This fact reveals the framework in which theatre was obliged to operate and survive during a period of intense political ferment as well as playing the potential role of ambassador under certain circumstances.

Returning to Athens, in 1893 and more particularly in the period between April and October of that year, during which Greek theatre celebrities reached their peak of popularity, one can see the effect that Trikoupis' policy had on theatrical audiences and society in general. This period, from April –when Sarah Bernhardt visited Athens–, until October –when the rivalry between the two protagonists reached its zenith mainly be-

10. Aikaterini Veroni had the honour to perform in front of the Sultan Abdülhamid II in 1895 (Altouva 2014).

11. Trikoupis had envisioned the creation of a Balkan League and organised a political tour in the area in 1891 (Pournaras 1950).

12. Among the audience were Austro-Hungarian and Romanian diplomats, the president of the Ottoman bank and the delegate of Krupp-Kauffmann Company (see: *Νέα Εφημερίς*, 111, [21 Apr 1889]).

cause of the well-known events caused by *Fafsta*, the play by Demetrios Vernardakis (1833-1907)¹³ (Altouva 2009: 148-155)– reveals the extent of this influence.

Sarah Bernhardt performed some of the leading roles of her repertoire in the Theatre of Athens inspiring in local society a level of enthusiasm never felt before in the capital. Her departure created a sentimental need for relevant emotions in domestic theatre, so inevitably people's attention turned to the Greek protagonists. In an instant they were expected to become for Greek theatre what Bernhardt was for the French theatrical stage, dramaturgy and culture: a symbol. This obsession soon turned into fanaticism. Supporters of the two artists, not only audiences but also intellectuals, poets, newspaper critics, and ultimately the entire city separated into two factions, arguing about which actress would be the ideal representative of the national theatrical stage, art and culture.

Soon the two opposing teams conducted themselves much like two conflicting political parties. *Ακρόπολις*, the Athens daily newspaper published an article in September 1893, entitled "What a change: the new parties", referring to this new trend¹⁴. According to its editor, people were more interested in theatre than politics but they were treating it like a political matter. As a result the formation of "parties" became commonplace in both the political and theatrical realm.

Some years earlier, Charilaos Trikoupis had inaugurated and established in Greek politics a two-party system aiming at public freedom of expression. It was the beginning of "bipartisanship" on the political stage of Greece according to which two rival parties having different political objectives competed for the government. New standards in politics seemed to impact strongly all aspects of social life. So, while in politics there were two opposing parties, those of Charilaos Trikoupis and Theodoros Deligiannis, fighting to dominate the contemporary political scene¹⁵, in the theatre there were another two parties, those of Evangelia Paraskevopoulou and Aikaterini Veroni, also fighting to dominate the national theatrical stage. It is noteworthy that the people participating in

13. Vernardakis being himself a historian, a writer, and an academic belonged to the intellectuals who supported Trikoupis and his revolutionary politics (Pournaras 1950, vol. 1: 252, Tzokas 1999: 217).

14. *Ακρόπολις*, 4187 (28 Sept 1893), "Τι μεταβολή: τα νέα κόμματα".

15. Deligiannis was Trikoupis' almost permanent opponent since the introduction of bipartisanship in Greek politics. The names of the parties, Trikoupis' "Νεωτεριστικόν" (Modernist) and Deligiannis's "Εθνικόν" (National), reflect the beliefs of their founders.

these parties, whether political or theatrical, belonged to all social classes and economic levels, not exclusively to the wealthy bourgeoisie. For a few months, from April to October 1893, politics and theatre were the two poles between which people were living and acting in friction. The rivalry between the actresses and their supporters culminated during the parallel performances of *Fafsta* in September, while Trikoupiis undertook the administration of the state for the last time on 30 October.

Overall, 1893 was marked by the dominance of celebrities in the theatre and the bankruptcy of the state in politics. On 10 December, Charilaos Trikoupiis made the announcement in Greek Parliament. The bankruptcy stalled the country's economic growth and the subsequent development of the bourgeoisie. Due to a lack of financial and moral support, the short-lived celebrity system began to decline. After Trikoupiis' death in 1896 and the war of 1897, his vision was withered and by the end of the century the actresses, who had previously reached their peak of glory, now represented the old regime in the theatre.

We can conclude that the Greek celebrity system in the 19th century: i) emerged thanks to Charilaos Trikoupiis' tactics in accelerating the advancement of the domestic bourgeoisie; ii) aimed to meet the needs of the Greek bourgeoisie and to contribute to the Europeanisation of Greek society by reproducing the French model in dramatic art and repertoire particularly; iii) contributed to the amelioration of Greece's image abroad and to the dissemination of Greek theatre and dramaturgy on performance tours, and iv) flourished alongside Trikoupiis' reforms for the country's economic development. It declined shortly after the bankruptcy.

As a result, the Trikoupiis' reforms as well as the emergence of celebrities on the Greek stage introduced significant innovations and set new standards for subsequent generations in both politics and theatre in Greece.

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