

## Greek and Roman Theatres in Mediterranean area International Seminar

Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> June | Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> June 2019  
Palazzo Badoer, Aula Tafuri

### Vassilis Lambrinouidakis Ancient Greek Theatres in Modern Use

In October of former year, I spoke on modern use of ancient theatres in Greece at the IV International Forum of Roman Theatres in Seville. As the presence and function of ancient sites designed for theatrical, musical and other performances in modern life are the very essence of our associations' mission, I considered it suitable to present briefly also in this panel the way ancient theatres in Greece have been and are used and enhanced today. In this matter "Diazoma", as you have just heard plays a very important role.

Already early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century our modern society experienced a 'revival' of ancient Greek drama (**fig.1**). The essence of this 'revival', which continues to flourish as a special branch of theatrical activity is described by Grigoris Sifakis, a prominent Greek professor of Philology as follows (**fig.2**): "Productions of Greek tragedies have increasingly carved a considerable niche in contemporary Western and Japanese theater, so much, so that one may wonder what it is that ancient tragedy has to say to modern audiences that have no familiarity with or belief in Greek mythology and religion. It seems that the basic shape of the stories, the examples of heroic defiance, and above all the uncompromising dignity with which tragic characters accept the predicament imposed on them by superior powers, which they cannot overcome or avoid, hold a universal message of humanity that is as valuable for modern men and women as it was for ancient ones".

However, it is not only the universal message of humanity of the classical literary works that make the ancient theatre attractive to modern people. The dramas were at the same time performances and as such directly bound to the buildings in which they were heard and seen. Therefore, the 'revival' of ancient drama goes hand in hand with the tendency to use ancient theatres for such performances and, by extension, for musical and theatrical performances in general. Because this second 'revival', the modern use of ancient theatres, has to do with a basic feeling of human nature: By slipping into history, by exploring a place of ancient life and especially by using it, one feels that surpasses the time limits of his life and is integrated in a transcendent realm of being.

Theatres are the kind of ancient buildings that can serve best this transcendental need of human nature because first, many of them are well preserved and – after the necessary conservation – they can house without difficulties modern performances and second, because they are almost the only kind of ancient monuments that can be used in the same way and for the same purpose as in antiquity, that can regain in the present their original function. A third privilege of theatrical buildings is the fact that they best correspond to the democratic feelings of modern times, as they offer equal treatment to their users.

I begin my report with a characteristic event, which offers explicitly the deeper meaning of the reuse of ancient theatres. In 1829 Ioannis Capodistria, the Governor of Greece that had just become a free state, convened a National Assembly at Argos, near Nauplion, the state capital at that time (**fig.3**). The place chosen there for this event was the ancient theatre of Argos, preserved at that time in a ruinous condition. This was not a fortuitous choice: Ancient theatres were incidentally or systematically used in antiquity as venues of the Assembly of citizen of a city-state. Capodistria wanted on the one hand to bind the New Greek State to the glorious past of Greek history and on the other to show symbolically that this State would be governed according to the principles of ancient

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Greek democracy. The authors of the *Expédition Scientifique de Morée*, present at that time in Argos describe the preparation of the Assembly as follows (translated from French: “to this end they cleaned the steps of the ancient theatre in order to receive the public and constructed down a hall for the Assembly, where there were stepped seats for the deputies. The hall was open all around, so that the spectators sitting in the theatre would be able to see and hear everything done and said in the Assembly (democratic procedure)”.

The combination of the tendencies already described led quite early in Greece to the use of ancient theatres for modern performances, of ancient dramas, but also of other artistic events. The couple Sikelianos organized in 1927 the first performance of an ancient Greek drama, *Prometheus Bound*, in an ancient Greek theatre. It was the theatre at Delphi (**fig.4**). The initiative of Sikelianos was taken, as he said, with regard to his effort to develop the site of Delphi as a place of synthesis of contrasting mentalities. In 1930, the same couple staged there the *Suppliants* of Aeschylus (**fig.5**). We have of course to say that the use of ancient theatres for performances of ancient tragedies had already begun in Europe in 1888 with the staging of *Oedipus Rex* of Sophocles in the Roman theatre of Orange by the French actor Mounet-Sully (**fig.6**). The theatre had been restored in 1869.

After the efforts of the couple Sikelianos, the theatre director Dimitri Rondiris put into practice the already prevailing opinion for the necessity of use of ancient theatres for performances of ancient drama and. In 1936, he staged the *Electra* of Sophocles in the Odeon of Herodes Atticus in Athens and two years later, in 1938, he initiated with the same play the use of the theatre in the sanctuary of Asclepius at Epidauros (**fig.7**). The Odeon was used in 1939 for a concert directed by Herbert von Karajan (**fig.8**). The Second World War and the following Civil war in Greece interrupted the development of this activity, but Rondiris came soon back after the war and initiated in 1954 the Epidaurian Festival with the *Hippolytus* of Euripides (**fig.9**). Since then the theatre houses every year 8 to 12 theatrical performances. The beginning of the systematic reuse of Epidauros coincided with the foundation of the Greek Festival of Athens in 1955, based first in the Odeon of Herodes Atticus, but soon merged with Epidauros, which became the foremost public cultural institution in Greece. The Festival’s agenda was initially twofold: to present major orchestras and to promote the revival and re-interpretation of ancient Greek drama (**fig.10**). In 1956, dance was added to the program.

Since then the ‘revival’ or better said the reinterpretation of ancient Greek drama and its performance in ancient theatres developed into a current and broadly wanted artistic activity in Greek society, nonetheless because it contributes, parallel to its cultural value, to the growth of tourism industry and economy. Festivals based in ancient theatres were created by the time in many places. Some examples are the Festival of Philippi and Thasos since 1957 (**fig.11**), the Olympus Festival in Dion, Macedonia, since 1974, and recently (2017-2018) (**fig.12**) the Festival of Dodona in Epirus or the Young Artists Festival in the theatre of Samos.

The increasing demand for ancient theatres suitable to house modern performances called attention to the crucial problem of the condition of preservation of this kind of monuments and the dangers of damages the modern use could cause to them. A parallel problem, independent per se, but related to and intensified by modern use, was the extent and quality of restoration and generally of modern interventions on the monuments. To the first problem of suitability, the Greek Ministry of Culture reacted in the eighties of the former century by compiling a list of ancient theatres in Greece, which could not be given to modern use. That list reflected the state of things at that time and became soon invalid. In recent years, a diversity of approaches prevailed in the domain of theories and the

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corresponding praxis concerning modern intervention on theatres. There are successful and less successful cases of which I will mention here some characteristic examples.

In 1992, the Greek Ministry of Culture founded interdisciplinary Committees for the conservation and restoration of important monuments, dotted with special funding, some of which were responsible for emblematic ancient theatres. Members of those Committees were prominent and expert archaeologists, architects, civil engineers and conservators, who controlled a crew of scholars and specialized artisans working on the monument of which they were responsible. These Committees functioned until 2015 and produced a remarkable work. Before the intervention they funded supplementary excavations, they documented the current situation of the monument, they produced studies proposing the appropriate restoration of it, they run painstaking research for the acquisition of new stone or other material for the restoration (**fig.13**) compatible with the original one left on the monument and they applied the restoration studies with their specialized personnel.

One of the best examples of this kind of work is the theatre of Dionysos on the southern slope of the Acropolis hill at Athens (**fig.14**). Dr. Boletis has already presented the work done and still going on there. A second example of the same kind is the management of the two ancient theatres at Epidauros in northeastern Peloponnese. The theatre in the sanctuary of Asklepios (**fig.15**) is the most praised theatre in Antiquity and the best preserved to our days. It was never totally buried in dirt and was excavated in 1881 (**fig.16**). The excavator restored already some parts of the building. The needs of modern use led to a second period of restoration, which lasted from 1948 to 1963. Works were done at the gates, the retaining walls and the proscenium of the building (**fig.17**). The colonnade of the proscenium was then almost entirely restored with new material but soon afterwards, it was removed after a negative reaction of actors and stage directors who wanted liberty in stage setting and in acting. Since 1986, the Committee for the Conservation of the Monuments at Epidauros undertook the restoration of the theatre and applied the new methods developed especially by the Committee for the Restoration of the Acropolis Monuments. Fragments of the seats were found and restored. The western tier of the upper cavea was restored (**fig.18**) mainly with its original material found under its retaining wall and the western gate, incorrectly restored and severely damaged by the up to then modern staging, was dismantled and properly re-restored. The disturbed uppermost seats of the central cavea were set in their original position (**fig.19**).

A supplementary excavation produced new evidence for an accurate study for a partial restoration of the stage building, especially the colonnade of its proscenium (**fig.20**). Works are still in progress. Since 1999 the archaeological service enacted strict rules pertaining to the behavior of the public in the theatre (**fig.21**) especially during performances, and created a Committee of experts who control every year the proposals for theatrical performances with regard to the danger of damage that weight, size and works of staging might cause to the monument (**fig.22**). In order to understand how much these measures help to protect the monument I show here two examples of staging in Epidauros before the entry of the measures into force and another two staged in the same theatre this summer [*Thesmophoriazusaë – Oedipus at Colonus*].

Another interesting case of modern management of an ancient theatre is the one of the small theatre at the ancient city of Epidauros (**fig.23**). It was discovered in a private property in 1973 (**fig.24**), in which it lay partially under a rural road. The Committee for the Conservation of the Monuments at Epidauros cleaned the site, proceeded to a first study of the monument and stabilized the free part of the upper cavea by restoring the substructure of the seats that were missing. This intervention restored already in some extent the geometry of the theatre and provided



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it with a considerable number of new seats. A partial restoration of the proscenium followed. In 1998 the Athens Concert Hall requested the use of this theatre in July in order to organize musical performances of high quality in it and guaranteed measures for full protection against improper use as well as funding for the completion of research and restoration of the theatre. The Archaeological Service agreed. This treatment of the monument worked perfectly: The small theatre is since then in use adequately protected with wooden coating on its vulnerable parts (**fig.25**), the “Musical July” became immediately a well-visited high quality cultural event, and its success contributed considerably to the funding of further restoration of the monument. Today, it is used also for theatrical performances. The rural road that traversed it (**fig.26**) was redirected outside its perimeter, a wide area around the theatre has been expropriated, and a study for the restoration of the now fully uncovered theatre (**fig.27**) is ready for implementation.

I will refer briefly to two more good examples of enhancement for modern use of ancient theatres, just to show that this kind of work is been done in all regions of Greece. One of them is the theatre at Philippi in Macedonia (**fig.28**), where good work has been done. The other one is the theatre in the Sanctuary of Zeus at Dodona in Epirus (**fig.29**). There the major problem for a restoration enabling modern use is the quality of the stone of the seats that cracks and splits easily apart in the hard climate of Northern Greece. After meticulous cleaning and documentation, analysis, research and studies on the chemical and mechanical properties of the stones, as well as of the kind of grout that should be used in order to repair them and painstaking work, six tiers of the lower cavea are now ready to receive spectators. One can see on the screen how the stones after cleaning and mending regain progressively as time passes their original patina.

Let us now turn to some less successful, problematic cases of management of theatres in order to be given to modern use. One of them is the theatre at Thorikos in Attica (**fig.30**), dating to the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., one of the earliest surviving ancient Greek theatres presenting the primitive, elongated form of orchestra and cavea. Here a part of the cavea has been recently rebuilt with new material in order to serve modern use. The new material imitates the remnants of the original one but this kind of intervention is rather a reconstruction than a restoration. Another problematic solution is the construction of wooden seats on a stepped metal frame above poorly preserved ancient theatres. This solution was first chosen for the theatre at Dion (**fig.31**), the cultural center of the Kingdom of Macedonia. One may assume that in this case the intervention is justified, because the substructure here is an embankment of earth, while the scaffolding is founded in the upper cavea in which the seats are totally missing and it is so constructed that it can be removed in the long periods that the theatre is not in use. But this is not the case speaking of the theatre in the island of Thasos (**fig.32**), where the disturbed seats of the lower cavea were removed in order to make place for a new construction, which got deep and heavy foundations in the ground. The scientific community condemned the heavy construction and a recent study proposes its removal and a possible restoration of the lower cavea, although damages caused while founding the scaffolding may prove irreversible. A similar case (**fig.33**) is the scaffolding, which covers totally the very fragile and vulnerable remnants of the ancient theatre in the island of Samos.

A new approach concerning the ethics of modern use of ancient theatres was initiated in 2008, when Diazoma, the citizens' movement for the Greek ancient theatres was founded. “Diazoma” promotes the protection, conservation and enhancement of ancient theatres in a systematic way involving the civil society and the business world in a dynamic assistance of the State in its task of protection and enhancement of these monuments. Dr. Boletis spoke already extensively on the highly beneficial contribution of “Diazoma” to the conservation, enhancement and integration of ancient theatres into the everyday life of modern society.

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We have today more than 40 theatres in Greece that can or could after the necessary interventions accommodate modern performances, which profit from the aid provided by “Diazoma”. This procedure produces already very good results in the domain of enhancement of ancient theatres and of their involvement with the everyday life of citizen. I will finish the presentation of the current behavior towards ancient theatres in Greece, which is highly influenced by the activity of Diazoma, with some characteristic examples:

The ancient theatre of Larissa (**fig.34**), for whose enhancement “Diazoma” secured an award from the American Kaplan Fund, had been buried under apartment buildings (**fig.35**). The buildings were expropriated, demolished, and the ancient ruins were set free. Then a meticulous documentation of the current situation of the monument took place (**fig.36**) and the dispersed building material of it was gathered and studied (**fig.37**). Then the two main phases in the life of the monument, the Hellenistic and the Roman one, were graphically reproduced (**fig.38**). After years of painstaking work, the final study for the restoration of the monument is ready for implementation (**fig.39**). “Diazoma” secured funding for many other similar cases. I mention here only those whose restoration proposals have produced characteristic three-dimensional photorealistic representations. These are the theatre of the Epirotic city of Cassope (**fig.40**), 3<sup>rd</sup> c. B.C., the huge theatre of Nicopolis (**fig.41**), founded by Augustus, the theatre at Thebai in Central Greece (**fig.42**), Hellenistic with a Roman phase, the Hellenistic theatre at Orchomenos in Boeotia (**fig.43**), the late Classical and Hellenistic theatres of Pleuron (**fig.44**) and Oiniades (**fig.45**) in Aitolia and Acarnania, the late Classical theatre (**fig.46**) at the heights of Platiana in the Peloponnese, the huge early Roman theatre of Sparta (**fig.47**) with a double summa cavea and the Roman theatre of Chersonnesos (**fig.48**) in Crete.

The activity and especially the mentality of “Diazoma” that backs this activity infiltrates already the broader Greek public. Allow me to mention just one characteristic example: In the North of Attica, in the ancient deme of Ikaria (**fig.49**), the remnants of a sanctuary of Dionysos and of its theatre are preserved (**fig.50**). This site, although less known, is emblematic in the history of the theatre. According to the myth it was here that Dionysos appeared to humanity and taught the viticulture; it was here that comedies were played for the first time, already in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., by the Megarian poet Sossarion; and it was here that Thespis, the founder of drama (**fig.51**) was born and acted before his show in the theatre of Dionysos in Athens in 534 B.C. The sanctuary and its theatre were “adopted” by the pupils of a school in the region, according to an educational program of “Diazoma”, which urges students to get to know the values of an ancient theatre and to promote its protection and enhancement (**fig.52**). The dissemination of the message was so effective, that a parent of those students conducted a full study for the restoration and presentation of the poor remains of the sanctuary and the theatre and provided it free of charge to the Archaeological Service (**fig.53-54**).

Before closing I would like to address the issue of the ‘revival’ of ancient drama in relation with the reuse of ancient theatres. The performance of ancient drama in an ancient theatre can be considered as the absolute reuse, or better said re-function of the theatre. From this point of view increased awareness is needed from writers and actors who get involved in this kind of activity. Because the reincarnation of ancient images of life in our modern world is not without problems. Intense criticism is often expressed for modern theatrical interpretations of ancient tragedies and comedies, as just an example out of many can show (**fig.55**): Antony Keen argued in 1994, commenting on Peter Stein’s production of *Aeschylus’ Oresteia* in Edinburgh, that “the hopes for grand drama were partially fulfilled, at least in ‘Agamemnon’ and ‘Choephoroe’. But in the ‘Eumenides’ it all went horribly wrong, because it soon became obvious that Stein was deliberately playing the ‘Eumenides’ for laughs, while ‘Eumenides’



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is not a funny play. It is a deadly serious examination of the debate between two standards of justice, one based on equity and one on revenge, a debate as relevant today as it was two-and-a-half thousand years ago. A similar case was a recent staging of Aristophanes' *Acharneis* in Epidauros, which has been described by spectators as 'Acharneis' without Aristophanes, because they saw a rich show, with many elements of modern reference and satire, but missed Aristophanes". It is obvious that there is here a problem with the reception of modern theatrical interpretations of ancient drama: Are modern plays renderings of the classical story with allusions to present circumstances, making use of the *universal messages of humanity* that these plays contain, or are they free, more or less discordant adaptations of the ancient work to present-day realities?

It is of great interest to explore the ethics of artistic creation in this important field of theatre. One cannot begrudge anyone drawing out of the Classical tradition the elements he finds suit his creative imagination and reforming them in any direction his vision or his needs lead him. On the contrary, one would say that this is desirable; at the end, the ever-active, unbounded power of inspiration is the essence of the Classical. On the other hand a clearer distinction between *heritage* and *creation* is imperative. Should not people, whose work is inspired by a Classical play or mythical image but strays too far from it, abstain from entitling their work with the ancient writer's or hero's name? Or at least should they not entitle it in a way that makes clear the modern different version *they themselves* have created? The proper response of those who get involved with the revival of drama to this challenge (**fig.56**) will greatly contribute to the proper modern use of ancient theatres.

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