

Grammatas, Thodoros.

To Elliniko Theatro ston 20o Aiona. Politismika Protypa kai Prototypia. [The Greek Theatre in the 20th Century. Cultural Models and Originality].

2 volumes, Athens: Exantas, 2002 (pp 412+445), pb, € 70, ISBN 960-256-500-4.

Thodoros Grammatas' most recent two-volume book is an in-depth portrayal into the History of 20th century Greek theatre. The primary targets are, among other things, a) the examination of the relationship between contemporary authentic dramatic production and local tradition b) the charting and highlighting of the intervening factors – i.e. theatrical stages and companies, direction – that affect the rapport between the spectator and the performance; as well as tracing the overt and covert mechanisms involved in publicizing and promoting the spectacle (sociology of the theatre). c) Lastly, Grammatas focuses on the depiction of forms of theatrical expression and modes of theatre that have largely remained dormant or, despite being widely spread, have not been extensively studied.

The first volume concentrates more on plays and playwrights. It examines local and foreign influences, questions of interculturalism, space, aesthetics, mediation, economics, politics, reception and how they all formulate the local theatre canon. A key-issue in this volume is *ethographia*, the Greek version of the theatre of realism (*ethographia* = theatre of manners), the origins of which are traced back to the tradition of the rural and romantic idyll which later evolves into bourgeois drama, labour and history drama to survive eventually as neo-ethographia after the Second World War. Kampanellis' *Backyard of Miracles [E Avli Ton Thavmaton]* in 1957, constituted a turning point which the majority of Greek dramatists followed throughout the 1960s, a trend called 'neo-ethographia' or 'bourgeois drama' comprising plays that reflect the social reality, the daily life and a common behaviour easily recognizable by the public.

The influence of American theatre as a vital part of local theatre evolution is another focal point of the first volume. Karolos Koun's repertorial choices (plays by E. O' Neill, T. Williams, W. Inge, A. Miller) helped familiarize the Greek public with the potential of American drama and opened up new horizons in the thematics of the local dramatists. I. Kampanellis' statement that his first encounter with American drama was through Koun's stage is characteristic.

Grammatas' main thesis in this first half is that Greek theatre has the capacity to integrate elements of different origin into a uniformed body expressing simultaneously tradition and modernity, the local and the foreign.

The second volume is more diverse and thus less focused. It begins with a long chapter on one of the 'hottest' issues of Greek theatre studies, the revival of ancient drama, which he examines from within the frame of a wider global

perspective; it moves on to the examination of light theatre (revues and comedies), and closes with the discussion of another hot issue, the question of national theatre in relation to the question of identity and otherness.

A lengthy unit of the second volume is dedicated to melodrama and the melodramatic element frequently interwoven with *ethographia*. The author's penetrating look defines as melodramatic those elements that apply mainly to the outer rather than the inner world of the *dramatis personae* and have an appeal more on the spectators' emotions and less on their intellect. Regardless of its content (rural idyll or patriotic drama, history or labour drama, occupation and partisan drama or social *ethographia*), the melodramatic element, the author argues, follows the trajectory of local theatre's development to the present. Yet, what radically changes the route of Greek theatre, according to Grammatas, is the invasion of the theatre of the absurd that first made its presence felt in the late 60s when the country was still under a military regime. The poetics of absurdity with its elliptical discourse, hidden meanings and indirect allusions was a most suitable vehicle of writers like P. Matesis, L. Anagnostaki, V. Ziogas to go public with plays that touched upon social and controversial political issues not easily detectable. The list of writers will grow longer in the '70s with Y. Skourtis, K. Mourselas, Y. Maniotis, Y. Dialegmenos and dozens of others who create their own local version of "absurdity," less abstract than one encounters in Northern Europe and the U.S. and more society oriented. Although not over yet, the tradition carved by these writers is now challenged by a new generation of artists, writers, directors and actors, who are more inclined to seek for models in foreign traditions without of course abandoning their own. As Grammatas argues, foreign models function as raw material, a source of inspiration and artistic creation adjusted to the Greek reality which they express in a unique and identifiable way.

In Grammatas' detailed account we have a close analysis of plays by playwrights like Gr. Xenopoulos, P. Horn, N. Kazantzakis, Sp. Melas, D. Bogris, Ang. Terzakis, I. Kambanellis, P. Matesis, L. Anagnostaki, B. Ziogas, analysis of the work of directors such as K. Christomanos, Th. Economou, Ph. Politis, D. Rondiris, K. Koun, as well as many more recent ones and presentation of such leading theatrical figures as M. Kotopouli, Kyveli, E. Veakis, B. Argyropoulos, K. Paxinou, A. Minotis, A. Klonis, Y. Tsarouhis, Ph. Kontoglou, Sp. Vassiliou, and D. Fotopoulos.

The book's major drawback however, is its lack of a well-focused organizing principle to guide the reader through the intricate paths of Greek theatre's development. Although the writer's anxiety to ensure the reader's comprehension is obvious in the way he analyzes plays and presents complex ideas, he tends to become repetitive and in places even redundant.

Moreover, the fact that the greatest part of the book consists of previously

published articles creates extra problems of organization, in the sense that the constituent parts of this two-volume work do not always nicely fit with one another. Occasionally, they overlap or “zig-zag.” There is not always consistent follow-up to gradually build on a particular thesis or a cluster of problems. As individual units some of the essays look at their subjects from angles not previously conceived, some include ideas and objects we long to learn more about, some are new and exciting, yet there are those (not many) that are a bit blurry or travel a path that has already been well blazed. That collage of essays takes away from the book’s much desired compression and makes its reading occasionally tiresome and unnecessarily winding. Maybe Professor Grammatas should have found more solid frames for his assembly of facts and ideas.

However this is a book that invites a rethinking of relations. It is no doubt a rich resource and a stimulus for further investigations. A dynamic study of the history of modern Greek theatre that provides a broad overview of its development from the modernist late-nineteenth-century to the postmodern present and also offers a new understanding of the relationship between theory, theatre history and politics. It is a comprehensive reference book equally appropriate to a drama student and an aficionado of the theatre.

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