

Crisis, Ruptures and the Rapture of an Imperceptible Aesthetics

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**Crisis, Ruptures and the Rapture
of an Imperceptible Aesthetics:
A Recent History of the Hellenic Festival**

Eleftheria Ioannidou and Natascha Siouzouli

The focus of this article lies on the recent history of the Hellenic Festival, discussing the so-called new phase after 2006, when Giorgos Loukos took over as artistic director. While the Festival claimed an international profile promoting collaborations with major European festivals and theatre companies, its policies had to go through restructuring due to the raging economic crisis. The years from 2010 to the present marked a rupture with previous discourses and politics, turning the Festival into a *topos* of transformation and fluidity which seems to elude certain conditions of production and reception pertaining to its past history. The article presents an inquiry into the official policies as much as the artistic practices which constitute this *topos*, while also mapping out the emergent trends which produce its particular dynamic.

The year 2006 was celebrated as a turning point in the history of the Hellenic Festival, half a century after its official establishment in 1955.¹ Among the priorities of the new artistic director Giorgos Loukos was to enhance the international profile and appeal of the event, predominantly by promoting collaborations with large European festivals and world-renowned theatre companies. Along with several artists and intellectuals, Giorgos Veltsos welcomed the change in the Festival's policies, suggesting that the new director's choices signified a different reception of the dramatic text. In his words, the text was no longer viewed as a "corpse in an Engonopoulos-fashioned folk costume" [*Εγγονοπούλεια φουστανέλλα*] burdened with the "heritage of Rondiris" [*παρακαταθήκη Ροντήρη*] but as a body which is enlivened by mutilation (2008). By contrast, the engagement with the fragmentary aesthetics of postmodernism in several productions featuring in the programme were deemed to depart not just from Western philological tradition, but also from modernist imaginings of

1. The Hellenic Festival, also known as the Athens and Epidaurus Festival, developed from the Athens and Epidaurus Festivals, which were both founded in 1955.

an authentic Greekness. The image of bodily dismemberment invoked post-structuralist conceptualizations of the literary past, from the notions of *pastiche* and *bricolage* to Heiner Müller's metaphor that, in order to know the dead ancestors, one needs to devour them and regurgitate the living particles (Müller 43). In this context, classical culture itself could be conceptualized as an iconoclastic and transformable text-body, breaking with the antiquarian project of restoration as well as with the nostalgia that surrounds the impossibility of piecing together the fragments of the past.²

Although the Hellenic Festival, and especially performances at the ancient theatre of Epidaurus, play a key role in reproducing or challenging representations of Greek antiquity, it would be fair to question the policies introduced in the recent years as to their efficacy in refashioning established cultural discourses and practices in the performance of the ancient texts in Greece. Such a reevaluation of the Festival is all the more necessary in the light of the economic crisis that erupted in 2010. Whereas in the first years following Loukos' appointment the Festival funded high-budget productions, its policies had to go through revisions due to severe cuts to public spending. At the same time, the post-Olympic euphoria over the country's modernization gradually gave its place to widespread skepticism about the use and misuse of public funds, the questionable management of state organizations, alongside criticism over Greece's espousal of the neoliberal model. The Hellenic Festival found itself enmeshed in a similar debate, which often manifested itself in a critique of its ambitious reform agenda of the recent years.

The present article explores the effect of these tensions on the Hellenic Festival, while also discussing the various responses, reactions or proactions of contemporary performance makers to the country's rapidly decaying social and political landscape. The analysis that follows examines performance within the complex interrelationships between institutional challenges, cultural discourses, and the artistic practices currently in the making. The disruptions to large-scale international collaborations opened up a space for younger artists and theatre groups. Whilst the cultural repercussions of the crisis entailed the resurgence of traditionalist views of the classical past, the performances under examination here seem to escape precisely traditionalist conditions of production and reception. In this precarious moment, the move away from the "sacred" text can be seen as an emergence of a performative aesthetics, which further allows us to utilize the notion of performance in order to contemplate the experience of the crisis, in a broader sense.

2. On performances which have drawn emphasis to the impossible task of restoring the wholeness of the ancient text as a means to contemplate the relationship with the classical past, see Erika Fischer-Lichte's discussion of Klaus Michael Grüber staging of Euripides' *The Bacchae* (1990) and, more recently, Fischer-Lichte (2014). Fischer-Lichte also uses the notions of *sparagmos* and *ómophageia* in order to analyse similar takes on the ancient texts.

Renewal Interrupted

In order to examine the transformations of the Hellenic Festival amidst the crisis, it would be useful to look at the ways in which theatre festivals relate to their social, cultural, and political contexts. As Matthias Warstat notes, festivals are defined through the “double dialectics of liminality and periodicity, on the one hand, and ceremoniousness and excessiveness on the other” (101). In the second half of the nineteenth century, theatre festivals emerged as an attempt to retrieve the authentic *Ur*-experience of the feast or the ritual that was thought of as irrevocably lost.³ This nostalgia of late modernity for the pre-modern accounts concerning the central place of ancient Greek theatre dominated a series of prominent events of that kind, ranging from Wagner’s Bayreuth Festival to festivals in ancient sites in the early twentieth century. These were envisaged as events allowing for an untrammelled celebration within which theatrical and other forms of performance could be experienced outside everyday time and space. Yet, to the extent that festivals operate within institutional frames, they are by definition celebrations that happen within a regulated space and time. In that regard, theatrical festivals are cultural processes that can decisively forge national and political communities.⁴ Establishing the place of celebration is vital in determining the context of sharing the aesthetic experience of performance as well as of the discursive and political implications that go along.⁵ In the case of Epidaurus, the experience of performance is conditioned through the symbolic power of the ancient site as well as by the specific institutional structures in place. This dynamic is reminiscent of Michel Foucault’s notion of *heterotopia* as a materially enacted utopia.⁶ From that perspective, the recent vicissitudes of the Epidaurus Festival can indeed help to unravel the various transformations of the national imaginings and discourses in and through performance.

From the beginning of his tenure as director, Loukos set out to reform the Hellenic Festival, implementing a number of drastic changes to the time span and the setting of the event. The period of the Festival was moved to early to mid-summer, while a series of theatres and other buildings in Athens added themselves to its official venues.⁷ The use of post-industrial spaces, such as an old warehouse on Piraeus Street, to present forms of contemporary performance

3. On the revival of rituals in festivals, see Siouzouli (2009).

4. For a discussion of Greek drama in European festivals, see Siouzouli (2014).

5. One could refer here, for instance, to the great emphasis given on the choice of space by Richard Wagner and Max Reinhardt, founders of the Bayreuther Festspiele (1871) and of the Salzburger Festspiele (1920) respectively.

6. Ioannidou (2011) uses Foucault’s theory to analyse the national and cultural implications of performing ancient drama in Epidaurus. Leontis (40-66) and Hamilakis (16-17) also refer to the notion of *heterotopia* to stress the material dimension of ancient ruins and its significance for European and Greek imagination, respectively.

7. Until 2005, the Hellenic Festival took place in the Odeion of Herodes Atticus and occasionally the theatre of Lucabettus in Athens, the ancient theatre of Epidaurus and the Small Odeion by the sea, at the site of the ancient town of Epidaurus.

should be seen as immediately related to the opening up of the Hellenic Festival to repertoire beyond Greek plays. In 2008, Pina Bausch's choreographed version of Gluck's *Orphée et Eurydice* in a production of the Paris Opera Ballet was shown in the ancient theatre of Epidaurus and, in the next year, the Athens venues hosted Romeo Castellucci's highly praised *Divina Commedia*, consisting of two performances and a live installation. At the same time, established groups such as Greek Art Theatre (Theatro Technis) or the Theatrical Organization of Cyprus (ΘΟΚ) were excluded from the Epidaurus Festival after two decades of continuous participation. Most significantly, twentieth-century drama made its way to Epidaurus for the first time in 2007 with Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days* in a production of the Royal National Theatre of Britain. Although both opera and dance and modern drama had been performed in the Epidaurus previously, after 2006 similar projects were promoted in a regular and programmatic basis, making a statement about the present and the future of the institution.⁸

Although the so-called "Loukos' era" arguably brought about a crucial shift in long-established practices in the history of Epidaurus, the discussion about the sacredness of the space, the authority of the ancient text, and the Greek ownership of antiquity never ceased to abound in the discourses surrounding the Festival.⁹ Nor did similar views ever lose their power to interfere with audience reception and to condition responses to the productions presented in Epidaurus. Anatoly Vasiliev's 2008 *Medea* with the Municipal Theatre of Patras and Dimiter Gotscheff's *The Persians* in 2009 in a production of the National Theatre of Greece gave rise to much controversy in the Greek press and media and provide the most recent examples of stagings which were, according to some commentators, profane encroachments on the ancient monument.¹⁰ What is more striking, however, is the occurrence of an idealized view of ancient drama in the official discourse of the post-2006 Festival. The phantasmal relationship between ancient drama and contemporary performance was invoked by Loukos himself in response to the criticism that he had prioritized Athens over Epidaurus:

The critique . . . was that Epidaurus has allegedly forfeited its national profile. I find these views narrow-minded. As if Beckett's *Happy Days* with Deborah Warner, Pina Bausch's *Orphée et Eurydice* or Shakespeare's *Othello* by Thomas Ostermeier were not the natural continuity of Aeschylus and the other great ancient authors! (Dimitropoulos 2013)

Even though the quoted passage seeks to challenge the deep-rooted conviction that Epidaurus should be used exclusively for productions of Greek drama, it nonetheless reiterates an appropriation of the classical past as a means to legit-

8. Bellini's *Norma* and Cherubini's *Medea* were staged in Epidaurus in 1960 and 1961, respectively. Productions of non-ancient drama in the ancient theatre include Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Tempest* directed by Peter Hall in 1988 and, more recently, Peter Stein's staging of Kleist's *Penthesilea* in 2002.

9. On the sacredness of the ancient theatre of Epidaurus, see Siouzouli (2009).

10. On Gotscheff's production, see Ioannidou (2010).

imize cultural practices of the present. Ironically enough, Loukos' statement agrees with the earlier responses to profane productions in that they both link aesthetic value to a sense of respect to the ancient site: the respect due to Epidaurus is used to determine the aesthetic value of modern performance and, in a similar way, certain theatrical performances can make a claim to Epidaurus through their equal standing to the works of classical antiquity.¹¹

From Listed to Ruptured Texts

Amidst the crisis, the reverent ancient text, which has to be protected against the violation of performance, faces further challenges as part of a larger cultural economy which is put in question. The idea of "listed texts" [*κείμενα διατηρητέα*],¹² which was coined to advocate the integrity of the classical texts, seems to lose its validity. In an urban landscape of derelict listed buildings, ruined public spaces, and vandalized monuments, the listed text fails to find its architectural counterpart. On the other hand, as the country goes deeper into social, political, and economic decline, nationalist feelings and rhetoric infiltrate the public sphere, not least the official agenda of the various coalition governments that have ruled in the country. In 2013, the political controversy surrounding the management of the Hellenic Festival entailed calls to restore the Epidaurus Festival to its function as an event dedicated to the performance of ancient drama. The underlying purpose was to create a clear-cut separation from the Athens Festival, which is focused on contemporary theatre practice. Even though the whole issue was resolved with the confirmation of Loukos' appointment, the Ministry of Culture had already publicized long-term plans to organize an ancient drama festival in Epidaurus (Tzeveleku 2013). It is telling that the person proposed to act as its artistic director was Kostas Georgousopoulos, the critic and translator who coined the term "listed texts." A further suggestion was that the future festival would address foreign and Greek theatre companies as well as educational organizations and universities that share an interest in ancient drama and even invite a competition among the participating groups. Apart from the obvious attempt to simulate theatre performances in antiquity, the future event would establish links with other European ancient drama festivals. As the then Associate Minister Kostas Tzavaras explained, the event would be modeled upon the Festival of Syracuse, in which theatre groups are subsidized by the permanent organization of ancient drama INDA. There is a notable parallel between this plan and the initial plans to establish ancient drama festivals in the inter-war period. In 1936, the critic Kostis Bastias proposed to the Royal Theatre¹³ the use of the Odeion of Herodes Atticus for an ancient drama festival. Bastias made a strong case of the performance of ancient drama in the open air, referring to the example of Syracuse Festival (64).

11. On festivals and the construction of tradition, see Siouzouli (2010).

12. Coined by Kostas Georgousopoulos (2004).

13. Official name of the National Theatre of Greece at the time.

The adherence to the lineage of the Epidaurus Festival in the context of the crisis should be understood as a reinvention of a cultural tradition that seeks to ascribe sense to the present. The performance of ancient drama serves not just as the usual celebration of continuity with antiquity but also as an affirmation of the country's modern institutions and cultural practices. The dialectics between past and present is not unknown in similar cultural events and by no means is it limited to Epidaurus. The majority of European theatre festivals were founded in the wake of the nineteenth-century national wars and the two World Wars in the twentieth century, providing an aesthetic response to political and cultural crises. Performance became a communal experience which could help to heal collective traumas by means of demonstrating commonalities among people and cultures. In several instances, the means for dealing with the various crises were sought in the alleged origin of Western drama, namely Greek tragedy.

As organized events with a set cultural agenda as well as wider national and political function, festivals have consistently provided an appropriate ground to determine what constitutes "classic" drama and how it should be staged. The rather vexed debate on the relationship between text and performance¹⁴ has enjoyed a particular popularity within theatre festivals. The old concept of *Werktreue* is conjured up to criticize directorial approaches or even to demarcate the scope and limits of theatre festivals. A notable recent example is the case of the 2005 Festival d'Avignon. The choice of the avant-garde artist Jan Fabre, who stepped in as associated artist to create a varied programme, triggered an unprecedented debate on the "fall of (dramatic) theatre" in Avignon and nostalgic calls for a "theatre of words" [*le théâtre des paroles*] (Banu and Tackels 2005). The symbolically charged name given to the controversy speaks to the classical connotations ascribed to the idea of the dramatic text: what had taken place in Avignon was a new "*querelle des anciens et des modernes*" (Banu and Tackels 2005).

In the Epidaurus Festival, the primacy of the dramatic text is inextricably linked to the respect due to the ancient past. The use of an ancient theatre as a performance space is instrumental in reproducing the logocentric logic that permeates Greece's relationship with the classical past. Within the narrative of continuity with antiquity the text is indispensable not as part of a commonly shared and respected canon, not because of the aesthetic, ethical, or cultural values it represents for the community, but predominantly as a focal point endowing contemporary culture with meaning. The text reifies the abstract idea of the origin it predicates and it is, thus, impossible to depose without causing the whole construct of the Greek cultural legitimacy to fall apart. The contemporary performance aesthetics in large-scale projects and international collaborations, which

14. This oppositional relationship between text and performance came to the fore in German scholarship at the early twentieth-century, leading to the development of the discipline of Theatre Studies (Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance* 29-37, and *Dionysus Resurrected*).

were promoted by the Festival after 2006, could not destabilize this logic to the extent that it remained tied to an established avant-garde.

After two years under austerity in Greece in 2012, budget shortages faced by the Festival seemed to impede planning for the summer. The director conceded that the uncertainty around the funding of the event made theatre companies from outside Greece reticent about their payment, putting international collaborations at risk. After 2006, the policy of selecting productions was described as a thorough process based on aesthetic criteria, often excluding those companies which had previously enjoyed the privilege of a secure place in the programme. However, the crisis marked the comeback of these companies on the stage of Epidaurus.

When asked to comment on the criteria in place for the selection of productions, Loukos candidly replied that this year his criteria were “not to spend money” (Dioskouridis 2013). The financial shortages were directly linked to a further shift in the selection process and the decision to offer more support to young theatre groups working on low-cost projects. Performance pieces by young groups featured in the 2012 and 2013 Festival programmes, yet, in their majority, they were presented in the Athens venues; and, although the 2014 Epidaurus Festival opened with a production of Euripides’s *Helen* by a young ensemble, the respect to the classical tradition was relished by the press.¹⁵ Nonetheless, we would like to propose viewing the opening of the Festival to young artists as a destabilizing new dynamic which challenges the existing institutional and cultural practices in a more radical way than the international collaborations of the preceding years. Whilst the large scale productions departed from usual representations of the classics, they were still operating within a principle of artistic and cultural legitimacy. By contract, young artists are invited to present their precarious performances at a moment of a larger political, social, and cultural rupture. This is potentially the moment of a post-modern explosion of the “sacred timeless text” to face up to its political possibilities through a symbiosis with contemporary cultural texts, which do not solely challenge its status but, in fact, cause a disruption to the symbolic and cultural order it represents.

Precarious Performances

One instance which encapsulates the break with the narratives of the Festival was the production by Anestis Azas and Prodromos Tsinikoris *Epidaurus: A Documentary* staged at the Small Odeion of Epidaurus in the summer of 2012. This was a performance piece recounting the history of the Epidaurus Festival since

15. One recent example is the article of the well-known critic Antigoni Karali in the newspaper *Ethnos*, commenting on the opening of the 2014 Festival: “Dimitris Karantzas, the director who at the age of 26 ‘conquered’ Epidaurus, gave his first credentials: he respected the space and the text. The orchestra was empty, it was breathing. Euripides’s [sic] word was heard pure through the exceptional translation by Dimitris Dimitriadis.”

the initial use of the space in the late 1930s. The dramaturgy integrated archival material in the shape of photographs and original footage from landmark productions, accounts of famous actors who have participated in the performances, and memories from the Festival shared by the local people. The text, developed drawing on various materials, was delivered in the performance by the professional actors Reni Pittaki and Nikos Karathanos, as well as by members of the local community, while a theatre scholar¹⁶ was displaying boards which presented a full record of the productions of ancient drama that have taken place in the ancient theatre. At some point the theatre scholar made a statement questioning the very foundations of the institution:

This whole Epidaurus project has a minor flaw: there is not the slightest evidence—textual or other—which can testify to performances of Greek tragedy or comedy having taken place in the ancient theatre of Epidaurus. There are some testimonies of music and dramatic competitions, but nowhere are performances of tragic drama or Aristophanes attested to. This is no secret, but a sacred oblivion plays an important role in serving the constitution of the collective national imagination.¹⁷

This example is of particular interest not because of its explicit comment on the national politics of the Festival or its emphasis on the archeological landscape and its significance for the local community (one of the local participants was the inhabitant of a house next to the Small Odeion, who experienced the discovery of the theatre), but as an example of *performed* history. The history of the Festival in its various forms was enacted in the present time. The performance itself became a gesture of interrogation of historiography by opposing live presence to the textual representation of past experience.

A history in performance opposes itself to the patterns of linearity, continuity, and progress represented by the written text. In *Epidaurus: A Documentary*, the interaction of the “many theatrical energies,” as Freddie Rokem puts it (187–207), broke with authorship identified with a single writing subject. The explosion of individual memory produced stories which were impossible to synthesize into a coherent whole. Thus, the history of the Epidaurus Festival was not subjected to a master narrative, but involved the plurality of stances, attitudes, and perspectives. The notions of a unified identity, tradition, and national community were given up in favor of disparate cultural voices and materials. The function of professional actors in the show was reminiscent of Rokem’s idea of the actor as a witness and hyper-historian (Rokem *op.cit.*, 202). These were actors who had appeared in Epidaurus on a frequent basis and were involved in landmark productions. In the context of the documentary on the Festival, their presence offered an embodiment of its history, while also rewriting it in performance.¹⁸

16. In the performance, this part was played by the co-author of this article Natascha Siouzouli.

17. Text recited in the performance.

18. On the entanglement between individual and collective memory in performance, see also Siegmund (2007).

It would be possible to view performance as an act that causes the dominant discourse to enter a state of crisis, where it breaks, faces its discontinuities, and falls into pieces. Another example that explored similar ideas was Dimitris Papaioannou's dance-theatre piece *Primal Matter* [*Πρώτη Ύλη*] that was presented in the Athens Festival in 2013.¹⁹ Here, two male dancers experimented with various forms of bodily contact in an ever-failing process of supplementing and completing each other. The visual contrast between the naked body—mainly resembling ancient torsos and broken statues—and a performer dressed in black highlighted the fragmentation of parts and members. The impossibility of wholeness in the show became a questioning of identity as a solid construct. At the same time, a series of repetitive acts offered a self-referential comment on performance as a *possibility in crisis*. Both *Epidaurus: A Documentary* and *Primal Matter* represent the emergence of a performative aesthetics which disrupts the totalizing narratives within which the Festival has operated. What is important to emphasize at this point is that such a disruption is not made possible merely through the (postmodern) crisis of the medium, be it the text or the performance itself; rather, it happens in the precarious moment in which institutions, narratives, and bodies are pushed to reach their limits.²⁰

Imperceptible Aesthetics

The economic crisis and its impact on the Hellenic have destabilized Festival destabilize the institutional contexts of production, generating diffracted performances which unsettle long-established official policies and narratives. The system of exclusions that defined access to the theatre of Epidaurus across time, from the monopoly of the National Theatre to the acceptance of established Greek groups and, more recently, of acclaimed international productions, seems to wane. The canon, be it the classical or the canonized avant-garde of the big theatre festivals and institutions, does not sit well with the reality of contemporary Greece. This condition seems to signify a performative or indeed a “postdramatic” turn in the history of the Hellenic Festival. The emphasis here lies on the open-ended, contingent, and dissipative character of performance as opposed to traditional theatre. The “precarious performance,” as described here, brings forward the unsecured and exposes its contingency in order to propose alternative possibilities.²¹

There are certain parallels between the precarious performances, as understood here, and the forms of social and political interaction currently in the making. The social thinkers Dimitris Papadopoulos, Niamh Stephenson, and Vassilis Tsianos coined the idea of “imperceptible politics” (83-94) which refers to post-

19. For a documentation of the project, see the website of Dimitris Papaioannou at: <http://www.dimitrispapaioannou.com/en/current/primal-matter>.

20. On fragmentation and performance, see Primavesi (2009).

21. On the different notions of precariousness/precarity and its correspondences with theatre, see Lorey (13-29).

liberal modes of being outside the representable power relations and regimes of control:

Imperceptible politics does not refer to something which is invisible, but to social forces which are outside of existing regulation and outside policing. Imperceptible politics is first and foremost a question of deploying a new perceptual strategy; the senses are honed less to reflection and more to diffraction—i.e., now perception involves tracing disturbance and intrusion instead of mirroring existing conditions. (112)

The shift of perception suggested in the above passage seems to resonate with the strong entanglement between politics and aesthetics in the recent history of the Hellenic Festival. Indeed, the new ways of doing aesthetics in a condition of crisis could be viewed as one such imperceptible mode; changes in institutional intent and the imponderability of the unstable economic situation leave space to an imperceptible interplay with the discursive and aesthetic norms. Here, as well as in the social and political realm, the precarious presence of the body escapes the order of representation and “writes/performs back,” destabilizing and unsettling. In these performances, cultural practices commonly associated with post-modernism, such as non-representability, presentness, fluidity, and fragmentation, can claim their full political potential.

Epilogue

At a time when calculations try the validity of rescue plans and economic models, national as well as European projects are put in question, mass movements emerge and dissolve, theories will inevitably proliferate but often fail to come to grips with a fluid wider landscape. Performance can indeed be viewed as an effective way to respond to as well as to elude current socio-political exigencies. It offers a strategic way to perceive resistance through the possibility of turning the inherent contingency of the performance, which *per definitionem* eludes planning and control, to an imperceptible practice, or, in other words, to a tactics of subtle and maybe unruly change. Performance should be understood no longer as a repetition, which reinforces identities and communities, but as the precarious act of the body whose future is not easy to pin down, let alone to prescribe.

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