

Shakespeare's Plays at the Royal Theatre in Athens in the Early 20th Century

Maria Kladaki and Konstantinos Mastrothanas

ABSTRACT

In the early 20th century, the idea of creating a state theatre in Greece matured, that was responsible for establishing the foundation of a national dramatic tradition, as well as of the art of histrionics which until that time was characterized by amateurism. The Royal Theatre opened its doors to the public in 1900 and was based on the model of German Court theatres. In other words, theatre was considered a superior form of art that had to be kept away from the lower social classes. The absence of a powerful urban class and the lack of cohesion between the urban class and the lower classes favored the role of the Court, which was influenced by Drama when it comes on shaping its public guise and consolidate its dominance, by ensuring that a specific theatre style, aesthetics and ideology were preserved. Shakespeare's performances in Greece were based on uncritical copying of practices applied in Europe in the light of the country's agonizing struggle to build a new national and urban class identity. The audience of the Royal Theatre was seeking its own identity within that phantasmagorical ambience; that is for points of convergence with the western model, so as to receive social recognition and feel self-justified, as participation in such events were classified as "cultured persons". The theatrical environment itself and the utilization of works of the English poet's works played a role in solidifying the idea in Greece that Shakespeare's plays are the exclusive privilege of the urban class.

Keywords: Greece, Royal Theatre, Shakespeare's plays, theatrical performances, 20th century.

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I. INTRODUCTION

It is a well-known fact that important developments at the economic, social, and cultural level as well as important historical events at the beginning of 20th century, contributed decisively to the formation of Greece as a modern state (Clogg, 2021, pp. 46–97). The year of 1897 constitutes a starting point for processes that brought numerous changes in the functioning of the Greek state, and in the Greek intellectual consciousness, as it ushered in a new era for thought, literature, and the arts in Greece. This period constitutes an overall period of transition from tradition to modernist art forms, which was manifested and thoroughly cultivated in the historical context of the eras that followed, namely as the Interwar period. The period in question is characterized by the search for a national point of reference in artistic form as well as the introduction of philosophical, sociocultural views and art trends from Europe that influenced in many ways the cultural and spiritual pursuits of the time (Couloumbis *et al.*, 2005; Zaroulia, 2014, p. 206). Essentially, European trends are transferred to Greece through adaptations and translations by scholars of the time (Grammatas, 2012, pp. 244–254, 375–390; Sideris, 1999).

From the early period of the modern Greek, historical works had been translated under the guidance of Korais, aiming at awakening and boosting the nation patriotic spirit. Subsequently, mainly after the state was established in Athens, the first attempts by Greek scholars and theatre people to "speak a national neo-Hellenic drama language and dialect" were recorded (Fotopoulos, 2000, p. 13). As a consequence, in the early 20th century, it appears that the idea of creating a state theatre matured, which was responsible for laying the foundation of a national dramaturgical tradition, as well as art of histrionics which until that time was characterized by amateurism and was largely based on empirical mutual teaching (allelodidactics) according to the opinion that the "Deck" (theatre stage) is the "School" of the art of Drama (Fotopoulos, 2000, p. 13).

At this request King George I responded and, after receiving a 10,000-pound sterling donation from Efstratios Rallis (a Diaspora Greek), decided to build a National Theatre (Georgiou, 2018, p. 283). In 1891, the foundation for the theatre was laid, which was built by Ernst Ziller, a German architect, well-known from other notable public buildings. In 1900, Angelos Vlachos was appointed as a general director of the Royal Theatre, and Thomas Oikonomou was appointed as a stage director. In 1901, the Drama School

commenced its operation with Thomas Oikonomou and Aristotelis Kourtidis teaching, while in November of that same year the Royal Theatre opened its doors to the public.

The “Royal Theatre” was the first such institution to receive a government grant. King George I was essentially its owner and financial manager and also handled all sponsorships. He was in control of the theatre and assumed a leading role both in repertoire selection and in the Royal Theatre’s overall mode of functionality (Sideris, 1999, pp. 148–149). A key example of the King’s attitude and his propensity for self-promotion as an authority was his decision to put on a play, he had written himself for the Royal Theatre’s grand opening, in an attempt to place himself in the pantheon of classical European dramatists while categorically refusing to stage works by modern Greek dramatists, considering them unworthy of the greatness of the Royal Theatre. Contrary to the Royal Court, the scholars of the time, loyal to the ideals of the Enlightenment concerning national theatres as an institution, believed the Royal Theatre should aim at creating national dramaturgy and enlightening the masses. However, this was a dispute won over by the Royal Court, resulting in the Royal Theatre being organized on the model of German Court theatres. In other words, theatre was considered a superior form of art that had to be kept away from the lower social classes.

The absence of a powerful urban class and the lack of cohesion between the lower classes favored the role of the Court, which used the influence of Drama to shape its public figure and consolidate its dominance, by ensuring that a specific theatre style, aesthetics and ideology were preserved (Patsalidis, 2000, pp. 127, 134). The Royal Court used the only “mass communication medium” of the time in order to promote itself as the ideal social and economic model, cultivating consciousnesses. Participants had the illusion of social progress as partakers of a spectacle largely directed by the Court. The King would declare the start of the play (Petras, 1980, p. 53) and inspect the audience from his box, taking notes on attendance (Andreadis, 1933, p. 18).

This practice of using theatre as a socialization mechanism that conveys the norms and values of the established order of a given society (Kladaki, 2009, 2010; Kladaki & Mastrothanas, 2022; Mastrothanas & Grammatas, 2022; Tsatsoulis, 1999, p. 14), had also been applied in the past in other European countries such as France and England (Wiggins, 1996, p. 26). Just like European theatres of the past, the Athens Royal Theatre presented creations of ‘high’ drama art -like Shakespeare’s works right next to concealed “ideological practices of production and reproduction of these texts as carriers of power and submission” (Drakakis, 1988, p. 25). In other words, Shakespeare’s plays offered an ideal framework for the Royal Court to achieve its goals (Findlay & Markidou, 2017; Georgiadi, 2015).

II. SHAKESPEARE IN THE GREEK ROYAL THEATRE

During the eight years of the Royal Theatre’s operation, six plays by Shakespeare were performed. This decision was by no means circumstantial; it was primarily due to personal choices by King George I, who followed the German model for the Royal Theatre (Georgiou, 2019). Shakespeare had a time-honored presence on the German stage and was so loved that some (Funda, 2018; Hauptmann, 1915; Hoenselaars & Calvo, 2007; Hortmann, 1998; Paulin, 2003; Stark, 2009) considered him as the country’s national poet (Hortmann, 1998, pp. 3, 4).

Apart from the King himself, another great admirer of Shakespeare’s works was the Royal Theatre’s German-educated director, Thomas Oikonomou (Georgiou, 2015; Glytzouris, 2010). He was born in Vienna, where he attended the Drama School and assimilated the teachings of the Saxe-Meiningen Company and played a role in the shaping of directing in Europe in the late 19th century (Fotopoulos, 2000, p. 14). From his experiences, he was influenced by the art trends that were established in the German scene with regard to Shakespeare’s plays (Georgiou, 2015).

Although some scholars of the time -predominantly French culture sympathizers- were of a different opinion, The love for Shakespeare was evident in the capital’s audience, mainly for two reasons: First, because the German model was widespread, while the French no longer enjoyed the appeal it had in the previous decade. (Georgiou, 2016, 2018; Puchner, 1997, p. 312); and secondly, due to the fact that in accordance with the spirit of the times but also with the studies connected with the Royal Theatre, the great classical playwrights of Europe were connected with the Greek nation through the ancient Greek dramatic tradition. Also in Europe, from the early 19th century, one can observe a turn to classical antiquity, with a tendency to idealize it (Senelick, 1991). The ancient Greek model was considered the cradle of European civilization, or the matrix for the creation of all western peoples (Patsalidis, 1997, p. 121). In order to emphasize this historical continuity with the glorious past and the link between Greece and the advanced countries of the West, the plays selected for the Royal Theatre were the ones that had been put on in European stages -notably those of Germany.

1902 was the first year that a play by Shakespeare was performed on the Royal Theatre’s stage. It was the “Midsummer Night’s Dream”, which would be the most played one, since it was put on eight times,

with only minor changes. In 1903, the Royal Theatre featured “The Winter’s Tale”, which was subsequently put on another two times on site and twice more on tour in Cairo and Alexandria. The following year, there was the “Twelfth Night; or, What You Will”. In 1905, the Royal Theatre features two of Shakespeare’s plays: “The Taming of the Shrew” and “Othello”. Both plays were put on later that same year in Alexandria during the Royals Theatre’s tour. In 1906 the first performance on the Royal Theatre’s stage of “The Merchant of Venice” is reported, a play that was performed again in 1908.

Looking closely at the Royal Theatre’s list of plays, both in the place itself (see Table I), and in the tours he organized (see Table II), it is easy to perceive the distinct fondness of both the theatre officials and the audience for “A Midsummer Night’s Dream”, as well as for “The Winter’s Tale”.

TABLE I: SHAKESPEARE’S PLAYS AT THE ROYAL THEATRE

Shakespeare’s Plays	Director	Year	Comments
A Midsummer Night’s Dream	Th. Oikonomou	1902	
A Midsummer Night’s Dream	Th. Oikonomou	1903	Repeat of the play with casting changes
The Winter’s Tale	Th. Oikonomou	1903	Adapted by F. Dingelstedt
Twelfth Night; or, What You Will	Th. Oikonomou	1904	
A Midsummer Night’s Dream	Th. Oikonomou	1904	Repeat of the 1903 performance with cast changes
The Winter’s Tale	Th. Oikonomou	1904	Repeat of the 1903 performance with cast changes
The Taming of the Shrew	Th. Oikonomou	1905	
Othello	Th. Oikonomou	1905	
A Midsummer Night’s Dream	Th. Oikonomou	1905	Starring: M. Kotopouli and E. Fürst
A Midsummer Night’s Dream	Th. Oikonomou	1905	Repeat of the 1903 performance with cast changes
The Winter’s Tale	Th. Oikonomou	1905	Repeat of the 1903 performance with cast changes
The Merchant of Venice	Th. Oikonomou	1906	
A Midsummer Night’s Dream	Th. Oikonomou	1906	Repeat of the 1902 performance with cast changes
A Midsummer Night’s Dream	Th. Oikonomou	1907	Repeat of the 1902 performance with cast changes
The Merchant of Venice	Th. Oikonomou	1908	Repeat of the 1906 performance with cast changes
A Midsummer Night’s Dream	Th. Oikonomou	1908	Repeat of the 1902 performance with cast changes

The two plays were characterised by a strong folk motif combined with elements from legends and popular beliefs (Georgiadi, 2015). As a result, this preference on behalf of the Royal Theatre for these plays can be interpreted as a return to the folk tradition, a trend prevailing in Europe at the time. Following this trend in Greece may not be interpreted as an opening to the popular classes, but simply as an element of the graphic phantasmagoria that was pleasing to the ownership of the Royal Theatre - in terms of spectacle.

TABLE II: THE ROYAL THEATRE PERFORMING SHAKESPEARE ON TOUR

Shakespeare’s Plays	Director	City	Year
The Winter’s Tale	Th. Oikonomou	Cairo	1904
The Winter’s Tale	Th. Oikonomou	Alexandria	1904
The Taming of the Shrew	Th. Oikonomou	Alexandria	1905
Othello	Th. Oikonomou	Alexandria	1905

Of course, Royal Theatre officials did try to combine what was traditionally Greek with all that was extremely European. It was under this scope that the performance of “The Taming of the Shrew”, reflected the model of a patriarchal society and close family ties, thereby appealing to the Greek patriarchal ideology. Moreover, the humorous depiction of the shrew was also something familiar in Greek ethnography. The intervention of the Royal Court in the presentation of this and other plays by Shakespeare was to emphasize the luxury. Printed matter of the time specifically mentions the stage luxuriousness and wardrobe choices with a propensity to idealize them (Sideris, 1964, p. 37).

The trend for absolute verisimilitude on stage was utilized by Nikolaos Poriotis (Shakespeare, 1938), who translated the play into the Demotic language. Although the first ever translation of this play into the simple vernacular added vividness to the stage performance and offered actors new possibilities of expression, it was not received positively by part of the press (“Acropolis” and “Empros”) that focused on translator linguistic slips (Sideris, 1964, p. 37). The view that the “katharevousa” should be the language of choice when translating Shakespeare’s played into Greek enjoyed avid supporters, including the then general director of the Royal Theatre, Angelos Vlachos (Shakespeare, 1905), who actually translated several works by Shakespeare into the “katharevousa”. “Katharevousa” is a conservative form of the Modern Greek language conceived in the late 18th century as both a literary language and a compromise between Ancient Greek and the contemporary vernacular, Demotic Greek (Skendi, 1975). As a matter of fact, he opted for his own translation when “Othello” was performed at the Royal Theatre in 1905. His views on using the katharevousa in Shakespeare’s plays were stoutly outlined in the preamble of his first translation of “Romeo and Juliet”. Therein, Vlachos maintains that the katharevousa is the most apposite

language for translating these plays, since it adheres to the rules of elegance, while the Demotic only satisfies the petty desires of the crowd (Shakespeare, 1905, pp. 5–24).

The coexistence of scholarly and demotic language in the translations of Shakespeare's plays, combined with the presence of folktale motifs, myths, and popular beliefs in the selection of works, occasionally underlined a lack of coherence in the choices of the Royal Theatre officials. However, early experimentation did not prevent the use of Shakespeare's works to the benefit of the Royal Theatre's common audience that was struggling to establish itself by attending these performances and to solidify its identity by utilizing the authenticity of popular culture, while at the same time maintaining a clear distance from the people. The unbridled luxuriousness in the stage performance of Shakespearean plays was, in essence, an attempt to adapt classic theatre to those who were in power, by transforming these plays into a spectacle for a very specific social elite class, which was using theatre as a means to consolidate its social status (Sinfield, 1998, pp. 804–826; Žižek, 1998, pp. 312–325). The common audience of Athens was very fond of attending the Royal Theatre's performances, without realizing that drama -through its aesthetic components and the power of imagery can actually control the spectators and manipulate the audience (Styan, 1975, p. 4), or that it intrinsically constituted the Royal Court's means of power control.

It may be that the promotion of wealth and glamour through the luxuriousness of phantasmagorical sets and wardrobes was considered a key criterion in the success of a play (Sideris, 1999, p. 247), but what it actually served was the purposes of its ownership, the Royal Court, as it solidified the latter's economic supremacy over the common and the working classes, and underpinned the social struggle between the levels of urban class, by urging them to attend spectacles that would grant prestige upon them and confirm their very bourgeois identity (Georgiou, 2011). The audience identified itself through its participation in such performances, which are the mirror of the society that produces them (Hoenselaars & Calvo, 2007; Tsatsoulis, 1999, p. 14).

Even the architecture of the Royal Theatre emphasized social stratification and emphasized the prestige of the Royal Court. The pompous character of the building's exterior; its interior decoration with elaborate ceiling artwork and two velvet curtains with gold embroidery (Fessa-Emmanouil, 1994, pp. 309, 313); its capacity of about a thousand people; the clear seat/class distinction, all made it perfectly clear that there was no chance for its operation to be class-free. Besides, the Royal Court's unwritten rules only allowed a particular audience to attend the performances, thereby ensuring the King's favorites. More specifically, the specific repertoire that excluded plays by modern Greek playwrights, the highly expensive (for its time) ticket and the requirement for formal dress destroyed any possibility for people from lower or working classes to see the performances. The social composition and luxurious apparel of the Royal Theatre audience was commented on by newspapers of the time (Sideris, 1964, pp. 35–46), while at the same time extensively referring to the performances' stage grandeur and opulence.

Indeed, the country's first theatre stage was particularly favored, both in terms of luxury and material-technical support. The copious state subsidy allowed for extensive theatre maintenance and modernization expenses (Fessa-Emmanouil, 1994, p. 303). All stage and theatre equipment were ordered from abroad, as was the wardrobe. From contemporary sources ("Acropolis" newspaper) it was found that the costumes for "A Midsummer Night's Dream" were ordered in Vienna and cost one-third (1/3) of the total box office receipts for the year 1902–1903 (Sideris, 1964, pp. 26–37). These costumes that were originally made for the Imperial Theatre of Vienna, the lighting and the music score that was a direct reference to European choices, all certified the high level of stage organization and were all conducive to a false sense of proximity to the West.

The state-of-the-art mechanical stage equipment that was (also) ordered in Vienna was relevant to that used in the best German theatres. This equipment was first used in 1902, in the first performance of Shakespeare and played a decisive role in the luxurious and ingenious stage presentation of the play, earning them dithyrambic reviews (Xenopoulos, 1903, p. 2). The use of imported equipment, combined with the bonds of the Royal Theatre officials with Germany, created for the public the illusion of partaking in the practices of Europe and of being in direct contact with Western countries that served as points of reference on issues of national identity (Huang, 2013).

III. IMPACT OF SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS ON NATIONAL IDENTITY OF GREECE

Shakespeare's performances in Greece helped to build a new national and urban identity, which was based on copying the practices applied in Europe. The audience of the Royal Theatre was seeking its own identity within that phantasmagorical ambience; it was looking for points of convergence with the western model, so as to receive social recognition and feel self-justified, as participation in such events not only gave social status upon the partakers but also contributed in their being classified as "cultured persons" (Margolies, 1998, p. 51). The theatrical environment itself and the utilization of works by the English poet

in their entirety played their role in solidifying the idea in Greece that Shakespeare's plays are the exclusive privilege of the urban class.

Athens was not alone in using Shakespeare's works to help pass messages of a certain social or political ideology (Hawkes, 2018; Kapitanianak & Sakowska, 2019). The great English poet's plays contributed to the formation of national and literary traditions in many European countries (Senelick, 1991; Shurbanov & Sokolova, 2001, p. 13). Particularly in Greece, the efforts of the Royal Theatre's officials as well as of scholars of the time, were focused on the attempt to create a new national literary identity, one that would be directly linked to the country's historical past (Grammatas, 2002, p. 199). However, the difficult economic situation and the lack of ideological coherence in Greece at the beginning of the 20th century did not favor the association with the country's famous past. Consequently, the choices made by the officials of the Royal Theatre were in the context of their attempt to make their artistic presence felt in European circles by convincing themselves and others that they can indeed be worthy continuers of a glorious past.

The Royal Theatre was considered the symbol of not just the creation of a new urban class, but also of the evolution of Greece from being a small nation, subjugated for centuries by the Ottoman Empire, to a geographically and socially new state that adopted Western practices and Eastern trends. The very presence of the English poet gave prestige to the official stage of the country, as well as to the audience that attended its performances. However, this neo-bourgeois audience could not understand that simply copying a foreign model—let alone a high-cost one—alienates rather than helps its self-definition. And this was indeed the case, as the historical and social conditions in Greece at the time were entirely different to those in Europe, resulting in the imported drama practices not being adapted by Greece within the framework of a cultural exchange that would enrich the original cultural elements. On the contrary, these practices emerged as an externally imposed new ideal that in effect ostracized the local theatrical tradition. Gourgouris (2021) aptly describes this phenomenon as the colonization of the ideal' in an attempt to state that Greece became trapped in the model that the West imposed on her. As a matter of fact, he compares the history of Greece to that of India, saying that (Gourgouris, 2021, p. 6):

There is a point where the story of India and the story of Greece coincide. Both are burdened with a classical past, a similar trap for the nationalist phantasm: modern malaise to be overcome and ancient glory to be regained... And in both cases, though in decidedly different ways, the trap is fed by Europe's own self-serving and autoscopic investment—self-serving because autoscopic.

The Royal Court also played the role of the torchbearer of Western theatrical practices to Greece, regardless of whether such innovations would be assimilated and spur the revival of Greek dramaturgy. On the contrary, they used theatre to highlight social stratification by addressing purely a small group that constituted a social 'elite', which followed the ideology of the Royal family, maintaining that Shakespeare represents high drama art, which in turn is distant from everyday life and its problems, and symbolizes a spectacle that not all are capable of understanding and observing, -only the few chosen ones (Patsalidis, 1997, pp. 225–226).

However, the Royal Theatre's hegemonic character and the deliberately luxurious performances of Shakespeare trapped the urban class as well, just as it was beginning to take shape in Greece. The common people, in their attempt to remain participants in the events of the Royal Theater and to gain the favor of the King, assumed the role of passive receivers, missing the opportunity to make their presence felt and to claim substantial power in the political activities of Athenian society. In other words, each spectator would see their participation in all that was theatrical as a means to promote themselves, thereby dissipating any and all possibility for a collective reaction (Patsalidis, 1997, p. 222).

The Royal Theatre suspended its operation indefinitely in 1908, after seven years. It was replaced -much later by the 'Greek National Theatre', which was established in 1930 (Helias, 2011). There is no doubt that the Royal Theatre not only made the work of the great English poet in Greece known, but it was the first official state entity to put on technically and artistically impeccable performances of Shakespeare, contributing decisively to the course of his plays and greatly influencing the way in which these plays were presented and received in Greece from the early 20th century onwards.

Of course, the ruling class of the time did not leave Shakespeare's work divorced from the political and socio-economic components of the period. Instead, it attached to this work a purely political message in favor of the undisputed superiority of the royal family, as well as a class message in favor of the established class. Moreover, its transfer from the West without the slightest intention on the part of the officials and leadership of the royal theatres to assimilate it further facilitated the leadership's goal of keeping the theatre away from the lower social classes. In this way, a system of values was built, which served as the foundation on which Shakespeare subsequent stage presence was largely based (Georgopoulou, 2018; Semple & Vyroubalová, 2018).

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