

# Greek Chorus in 09

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The question of the chorus has been of special importance to twentieth-century theater. Plays like Toller's *Mass and Man*, O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, Kazantzakis' *Capodistria*, Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade*, and Heiner Müller's *Mauser* attempt to assemble people in a public setting of common interests and concerns. The quest for a viable chorus explores the possibility of a modern socio-political community. How can such a community be constituted and governed? How can it claim legitimacy? How can it define its space and its membership? If we assume that the ancient chorus represented the citizens of the polis, whom might a modern chorus represent? Recently Greek theater has offered some interesting experiments.

Among the several offerings of the Athens Festival in the Summer of 2008, two stood out in terms of both media coverage and audience response, the opening and the closing one. The opening show, *X skinis: Afta pou kapsan to sanidi* (*On Stage: Burning Down the House*), produced by composer Stamatis Kraounakis, was a review of twentieth-century Greek music for the stage. Its program moved mostly chronologically through famous songs from *epitheorisi*/variety show, operetta, ancient comedy and modern Greek and non-Greek plays. People of all generations packed the Odeon of Herodes Atticus to hear and sing along all-time favorites. The show that closed the Festival was a stage adaptation of Dimitris Dimitriadis's novella *Pethaino san chora* (*I am Dying as a Country*) (1978), produced by director Michael Marmarinos. In it, a foreign occupation has crushed a country's culture and thrown it into a state of advancing anarchy, sterility, and self-destruction. People packed "Peiraios 260," a furniture factory turned theater in an industrial part of Athens, to see a devastating commentary on twentieth-century Greek history.

The contrast between the celebration of the first show and the lament of the second could not be starker, in terms not only of content but also of dramatic style. For example, Kraounakis brought out the legendary 1960s singer Zozo Sapountzaki to recreate her old hit "Panayia mou, ena paidi" ("My God, what a guy"),<sup>1</sup> while Marmarinos brought out the legendary 1960s singer Beba Blanche to declare "I despise this country"

against a tape of her old hit “To karavi” (“The boat”).<sup>2</sup> Both singers stood outside history to declare, the first, its suspension (the ’60s never ended) and the other, its destruction (everything ended with the ’60s).

The two producers started with similar assumptions. In an interview he gave to the official newspaper of the Athens Festival on 19 June 2008, just days before the premiere, Kraounakis was asked about the future of creative artistic work in Greece. His response sounded like a quote from *I am Dying as a Country*: “I do not believe in Greece. At all. I do not believe it has any future. Everything is done so that they can cut the arms and legs of those of us who still manage to do what we feel or what we believe is our job.” And later in the same interview, when asked about the current phase of Athens, Kraounakis called it “post-decadent, as in ‘post-modern.’” Thus the two producers had remarkably similar general views of Greece. The radical difference lay in their treatment of these desperate views.

Kraounakis took over a Hellenistic amphitheater to present a three-hour extravaganza, giving 5000 people the transcendent opportunity to sing together and feel again unified and homogeneous. All divisions seemed overcome as operetta co-existed with Lorca and camp with Pirandello, the Weimar Republic with the Greek 1967 junta and the Balkan Wars with Irish anti-colonialism. With Greek quality popular music exhausted for years, and the CD practically dead, Kraounakis seemed to celebrate the era of the 78 and 45 records.

Marmarinos took over a big, empty industrial space and used very few scattered props. Divisions in Greek life were foregrounded—sexual, ethnic, linguistic, social and others. Nameless people walked in line or wandered around, unable to communicate with one another. A sense of desolation prevailed everywhere. At the end, a seven-minute scorching monologue on the empty stage denounced Greece and everything Greek.

The most interesting contrast between the two shows pertained to the use of the chorus. Kraounakis used as a chorus his own ten-member musical theater company called Speira Speira, and acted as their *koryfaios* (leader). The group offered choral accompaniment, acted out some songs, and in general, by singing and dancing together, established a comforting sense of belonging to a community of warm sentiment. Marmarinos used as his chorus 200 volunteers from many ethnic, professional, and age groups. They formed a long line that entered the stage from one end and exited from the other as their faces were projected on the back wall, creating a conflicting sense of intimacy and alienation. By walking mostly silently and, when speaking, never using a common

voice but only individuated monologues, they highlighted the absence of a shared language.<sup>3</sup>

In the summer of 2008, the two shows at the Athens Festival sought to assemble people in a modern Athenian chorus, inspired by different but equally desperate views of national identity and culture—one view recovering nostalgically traditional codes and symbols of community, and another denouncing all expressions of traditional community. Both projects registered the erosion of the indigenous, the authentic, the lived and shared; but they both failed to constitute a dramatically legitimate chorus because they took what we might call an anti-theatrical approach: ultimately they argued that the chorus was their audience itself. The chorus on stage was assumed to be the same as the people watching the show. Art and life merged, theater was abolished.

But if the audience itself is the chorus, then the world is a stage and society a phantasmagoria. Modernist theater was still able to constitute an engaged chorus with a distinct collective identity—peasant women in Kazantzakis, townsfolk in O'Neill, proletariat in Toller, inmates in Weiss. But if the audience of the postmodern theater becomes part of the stage, how may a chorus with a distinct identity be assembled? Or is it time to abolish it altogether?

In the case of both shows, what invited the audience to spill onto the stage, as it were, was the abolition not just of the fourth wall but all four walls through a pronounced theatricality. From beginning to end, Kraounakis and Marmarinos made it abundantly clear that these were not mere stage works—they were theatrical occasions. The audience was not encouraged to identify emotionally with the show or to view it from a critical distance but to join it, to become part of it. In *Burning Down the House*, people were singing all their favorite songs together with the actors, as if they were all in a taverna. In *I am Dying as a Country*, it was as if people left the auditorium to join the line passing through the stage and then returned to their seats. In both cases, actors and audience became interchangeable, or rather everybody present could turn into a performer.

The question then becomes whether it is possible to have a chorus when everybody is a performer, in other words, whether it is possible to constitute a political community under conditions of total theatricality. How can citizens act together in a *theatrum mundi*? Must all politics turn performative? The two shows raised this question with great urgency and left it open. They dramatized the tension between modernist identity and postmodern performance, more specifically, between nation and theatricality. The possibility of a chorus became the focal point of this

tension. Until recently, Greeks could be represented by a chorus of national origin and resistance, as, for example, in the theater of Yiorgos Theotokas or Iakovos Kambanellis. In our global world, that indigenous chorus has disintegrated. Which theatrical device might replace it? What might be some alternatives to the traditional national community? What can assemble in public people living in a multicultural, decentered metropolis like Athens? How can a political community constitute itself today by acting together?

In addition to the disintegration of the national chorus, the two shows also pointed toward the bankruptcy of Greek theater as a national institution. It is interesting that neither Kraounakis nor Marmarinos chose a contemporary Greek play to produce since almost none seems to have grappled with the major socio-political issues that concerned them. (Of course Marmarinos could have chosen a play by Dimitriadis, instead of his novella, but Dimitriadis's plays are almost never performed in Greece because they are considered too radical.) In fact, in the second half of the twentieth century, playwrights have been the least interesting Greek artists. For example, in sharp contrast to Greek writers, painters, or composers, playwrights (with the single exception of Dimitris Dimitradis) are totally unknown beyond their country since they are very rarely translated and almost never reviewed or performed abroad. Though very popular in Greece and regularly produced, theater is the most insular of Greek arts, functioning as the only, and belated, inheritor of *ethographia*. Innovative directors are usually uninterested in it as it sounds like second-rate Arthur Miller or Harold Pinter. Its status exemplifies the decline of national art promoted by conservative modernism everywhere, an art that addressed a homogeneous audience with memories of and/or plans for liberation and fulfillment.

Thus several issues converge on the question of the chorus on the modern stage—the function of the theater, the public role of art, national identity, and political community. There is yet another issue, the relation with the past—namely, with ancient drama. For much of the twentieth century, Greek producers, in their search for the chorus, when not borrowing from German expressionism, were drawing on traditional rites and rituals such as the *panigyri* (local festival), the Christian liturgy, or the folk lament. In their choruses, they revived indigenous forms of worship, celebration, and commemoration, providing audiences with a reassuring mediation between antiquity and modernity. The most recent and successful example of this approach was the closing ceremony of the 2004 Olympics, a celebration of summer and the senses that brought a Dionysian chorus on a stage in the Panathenaic Stadium.

Dimitris Papaioannou, the highly acclaimed producer of that ceremony, made headlines once again in Fall 2009. On 14 October, the beautiful neoclassical building of the National Theater in downtown Athens, which was built by the German architect Ernst Ziller in the 1890s, reopened after a ten-year total renovation. It did not open with an ancient play, a heroic nineteenth-century one (as it first did in 1901), a classicizing or a modernist one. It did not open with a play at all. Instead, choreographer Papaioannou was commissioned to produce a brand-new, site-specific work. He came up with a 30-minute piece for 26 performers called *Pouthena* (*Nowhere*), which remained in repertoire for a few weeks.

Though site-specific, the piece completely ignored the ornate neoclassical interior that painstaking restorative work brought back to view after many decades. It was totally uninterested in the national, classical, and theatrical history of the building. Instead, it took place on an empty stage and drew on the theater's exposed brand-new machinery. Without any historical references, without any theatrical conventions, without even a prepared script, the production started literally from scratch. According to Papaioannou's press interviews, the work wrote itself as it created its own narrative. Its subject was theatrical space, one that is both multiple and atopic—a space measuring the stage with bodies and bodies with stage mechanisms. Papaioannou hoped to open up space to new possibilities and multiple uses. However, although he mentioned the group dynamic between performers and audience, he called the work “an existential search.”

The problem is that the title *Nowhere* denied the work all specificity. The renovated National Theater re-opened with a performance that presumably cannot be repeated anywhere else. But if the performance is nowhere, it cannot be presented even at the National Theater. The group of 26 performers was asked to constitute a utopian community not existing anywhere. The title “Nowhere” had yet another, unintended meaning: people could hardly attend the show. In June 2009, as soon as tickets for the grand re-opening on 14 October went on sale, the Artistic Director of the National Theater, Yiannis Chouvardas, sent a personal appeal to Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis, asking him to intervene directly and guarantee the safety of those planning to attend the premiere. The reason was that the neoclassical building stands in what is commonly perceived as one of the most dangerous areas downtown. Crime, violence, prostitution, drugs, gangs have all made attending a performance quite challenging. Thus the National Theater itself operates in the middle of nowhere, even though it stands in the center of

Athens. The center of Athens has become, for its disoriented inhabitants, the middle of nowhere. Papaioannou did not acknowledge this in his interviews but the National, the Classical, the Theatrical—all notions cardinal to the ancient and capital city—have been rendered impotent by the globalized Athens of the twenty-first century. The only chorus they can still create belongs nowhere.

Thus we are left with the open question of the chorus, where issues of artistic and political representation converge. The chorus may not be an indispensable part of theater, not even of tragic theater. But at a time of great interest in theatricality and performativity, when history repeats itself as farce, the need for new forms of civic community that reject dominant forms of representation is often felt (hence the allusion of my title to Richard Schechner's landmark production *Dionysus in 69*, which has been captured in Brian de Palma's film by the same name).

The two shows that opened and closed the 2008 Festival failed to establish a chorus on the stage, while the 2009 show that opened the new National Theater placed its chorus nowhere. The inability of these projects to constitute a viable chorus can stimulate general reflection on the place of art and politics in a globalized metropolis and transnational world. What kind of chorus is possible when traditional forms of collective agency do not function any longer? For example, it is interesting that no Greek director, producer or choreographer has drawn inspiration from assemblies that are neither folk nor religious but are instead civic, whether voluntary or involuntary—from the concentration camp, the political prisoners, the strike, the demonstration, the party mobilization, the gay pride celebration, the immigrant gathering. What would happen if a new chorus was based on ways in which people today join forces in public? It has not been tried yet, so we do not know.

What we do know is that a few months after the Athens Festival, for two weeks in December 2008, thousands of people who did not feel represented took their protest to the streets of many Greek cities in an attempt to constitute themselves in alternative political ways. Protest and theatricality, politics and art, merged in an unprecedented performance of revolt. It was not a complete revolutionary event but it was a full rehearsal. The streets that are only mentioned but never seen in plays like Grass's *The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising* and Genet's *The Balcony* became the true stage of revolt as citizens took them over, rehearsing the chorus and searching for their place in the theater of democratic politics.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Video available on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nStYTLt0RVY&translated=1>.

<sup>2</sup>Video available on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9zbJlHxsRm4>.

<sup>3</sup>Video excerpts from a 2008 rehearsal in Vienna available on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhWDWb1amuQ>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yEFIZNF4ZQ>.