

THE STAGE “TRADITION” OF ANCIENT GREEK TRAGEDY: THE
NATIONAL THEATRE OF GREECE AND THE ART THEATRE-KAROLOS
KOUN

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The paper examines the two different “schools” of approaches to the performances of ancient Greek tragedy, namely the one by the National Theatre the other by the Art Theatre (Theatro Technis), which prevail over the Greek stage tradition. The purpose is to codify the characteristics of the two approaches in order to highlight the distinctiveness of each.

The performances of ancient Greek tragedy in Greece during the years following the war of independence were amateur and didactic in the sense that they struggled to prove the cultural continuity of the newly established state. Accordingly, the first production of Greek tragedy of the Royal Theatre of Greece (founded in 1900) was concerned mainly with the prevalence of the demotic form of Greek tragedy over *katharevousa*.¹ Thomas Oikonomou, the first director of the Royal Theatre of Greece and the first professional director in Greece, was influenced by the productions of the Meiningen Company,² but never systematized his approach to Greek tragedy. However, in 1931, after the re-opening of the National theatre, Fotos Politis, from the position of the main director of the organization (1931-1934), undertook the task of presenting ancient Greek tragedy in a codified and systematic method which initiated a particular approach. Successively, Dimitris Rondiris established the National Theatre’s “tradition” in ancient Greek tragedy’s performances, based on the so-called academic approach. In the footsteps of Dimitris Rondiris, Alexis Minotis, the inspired actor and director, inherited from his predecessors the particular “method” of

¹ In 1903, two years after the official opening of the Royal Theatre of Greece, Thomas Oikonomou directed Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* in a translation by George Sotiriadis which followed the German adaptation by Schlenker (based on professor Wilamowitz’s translation of the trilogy). Mainly because of the supposed vernacular language of the translation, the performance resulted in fights and one person dead (“Oresteika”). The riots were organized by the University professor Georgios Mistrionis, a determined advocate of performing Greek tragedy in the language of the original, and his students. See, Yiannis Sideris (1976) 194-199 and Arvaniti (2010) 34-35.

² See Arvaniti (2010) 28-53.

approaching Greek tragedy but he also managed to enrich that “tradition”. Meanwhile, Takis Mouzenidis, the most prolific director of all, was hardly diversified his performances from the initiators of the particular approach. At the same time, Alexis Solomos, the director who established Aristophanes in Epidaurus, presented Greek tragedy in episodes in the same vein of his approach to Aristophanes. Contrary to the academic approach of the directors of the National Theatre, Karolos Koun, the founder of the Art Theatre (Theatro Technis) turned to so called “folk expressionism” pointing out the richness of Greek cultural tradition and seeking the original Greek expression freed from the Western European influences. Koun’s approach to Greek tragedy was influenced by his belief that theatre originated in primitive rituals. The two different lines of interpretation of Greek tragedy predominated in contemporary Greek stage until the last decades of the 20th century.

Fotos Politis was a learned man and a very important director. In his hands Greek tragedy became a theatrical genre which required a systematic and methodological approach. The director was influenced by the European developments in the field of theatre during his studies in Germany (1909-1912, 1931). Although it is not certain if he attended Max Reinhardt’s seminars,³ he was certainly aware of his directorial method. Moreover, Reinhardt’s approaches to ancient Greek tragedy influenced the productions of the Greek director. Fotos Politis chose to stage Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* (1932) for the official opening of the National Theatre. In 1933, he directed, for the second time, Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, based on the 26 pages directorial notes he used in the production of 1919.⁴ As it is known Max Reinhardt directed the most impressive *Oedipus Rex* (1910 – Musikfesthalle Munich) and a huge production of *Oresteia* (1911- Grosses Schauspielhaus). Reinhardt kept analytical notes on all his productions in his *Regiebuch*,⁵ a practice which seemed to have influenced Politis as well. Moreover, Fotos Politis in his productions of ancient Greek tragedies used Kleovoulos Klonis’ architectural, voluminous scenery, dominated by the use of stairs and altars in accordance with Ernst Stern’s scenery for

³ See Arvaniti (2010) 62-63.

⁴ The 1919 production of *Oedipus Tyrannus* of the Greek Theatre Association (Etaireia Ellinikou Theatrou) was considered the most important production of the interwar period. The play, translated and directed by Fotos Politis, was performed in Olympia Theatre. See Melas (1960) 131, Sideris (1976) 277, Arvaniti (2010) 59—83.

⁵ For the study of ancient Greek plays directed by Max Reinhardt it is of valuable contribution Robert Matejka’s unpublished thesis (1969) which is based on Reinhardt’s *Regiebuch*. See also Beacham (1987) 302-314.

Reinhardt's Greek productions. At the same time, both directors used historically accurate costumes but Politis never allowed the use of masks in his approaches.⁶ Besides, Politis, influenced by Reinhardt, used the light as major expressive element in order to achieve the revelation of tragic meaning. Eventually, Politis attempted to use crowd scenes, in a lesser extent than Reinhardt, in the form of assistants or followers of the main characters whose role was dictated by the directorial notes and not by the playwright's text. However, Fotos Politis valued the absolute sovereignty of tragic speech over the spectacle. He believed in Aristotle's diction that spectacle is the least integral of all to the poet's art and therefore, he was sharply differentiated from Max Reinhardt's directions which were based on the priority of spectacle. Politis' belief in the priority of speech was responsible for the introduction and establishment of National Theatre's tradition, according to which the performances of ancient Greek tragedy should be based on the faithful rendering of ancient Greek language and on the correct utterance of the tragic word. Additionally, Politis strongly believed to the value of Greek folk tradition through which modern Greeks could approach ancient Greek tragedy. Influenced by his father, Nikolaos Politis, the founder of folklore studies in Greece, he was convinced that folk songs convey the aesthetics of tragic poetry and thus, they could help to the understanding of classic style.⁷ Therefore, Fotos Politis established the approach to Greek tragedy through the elements of Greek folk tradition which would characterize, henceforward, the National Theatre's "tradition" towards the staging of Greek tragedy.

Dimitris Rondiris succeeded Politis as leading director of the National Theatre (1934-1941). He also served as director general of the National Theatre between the years 1946-1950 and 1953-1955.⁸ Besides having studied at the Drama School, established in 1919 by the Greek Theatre Association, Rondiris had studied with Max Reinhardt who invited him to participate in the Festival of Salzburg (1930) and after that to attend rehearsals at Deutsches Theater (October 1931).⁹ Accordingly, he, as well, was influenced by Reinhardt's approach to theatre as well as by his open-air productions.

⁶ See Arvaniti (2014) 258.

⁷ See Politis (1983) B: 9.

⁸ Rondiris, during his career at the National Theatre, directed all together three plays and a trilogy but in more than one productions and in many repetitions. Therefore, Sophocles' *Electra*, the milestone of his interpretation, was performed between 1936-1939 (first production), and between 1952-1953 (second production); Euripides' *Hippolytus* in 1937 and between 1953-1955; Aeschylus' *Persae* between in 1939 (1940) and between 1946-1955 and Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in 1949 and 1954.

⁹ See Rondiris (1999) 99.

Besides, Rondiris, under the inspirational administration of Kostis Bastias, opened the Week of Ancient Theatre at the Herod Atticus Odeon (October 1936) with Sophocles' *Electra*,¹⁰ revived the ancient theatre of Epidaurus with the same production (11.9.1938) and unofficially opened the Festival of Epidaurus (7.8.1954) with Euripides' *Hippolytus*.¹¹ It is worth mentioning that, like Reinhardt, Rondiris conducted long rehearsals with his actors and actresses in order to achieve the best results in performance. At the same time, during his career as a director at the National Theatre, Rondiris, like Politis, used the plastic, stylized scenery designed by Kleovoulos Klonis, which was influenced by the old, western European identification of the tragic with an imposing posture.¹² The neoclassical scenery was in accordance with the historical accurate costumes designed by Antonis Fokas. Both men, because of the permanency of their work at the National Theatre, dominated over each production of ancient Greek tragedy and they gravely contributed to the establishment of the National Theatre's "tradition" on the performances of Greek tragic plays. Furthermore, Rondiris was interested in bringing to light the unrivalled quality of tragic speech. In all his National Theatre's productions of ancient Greek tragedy, the director used Ioannis Gryparis' faithful translations of the plays except from from Euripides' *Hippolytus* which was based on Dimitris Sarros' translation, since Gryparis had not translated the particular play. However, Rondiris intervened in Sarros' text in order to adapt it to the requirements of the performance.¹³ Thus, the published text of the translation had included all the corrections made by the director. Even more, Rondiris struggled to teach his actors and actresses,¹⁴ through an integrated system of learning, to deliver, rightly, the words of the text. In order to achieve that, he recited the text of each role. Thus, the tragic speech acquired rhythm and melody and helped

¹⁰ Sophocles' *Electra* of 1936-1939 was an historic production for the additional reason of its famous contributors. Among others, Ioannis Gryparis translated the play, Dimitris Mitropoulos composed its music while Katina Paxinou and Eleni Papadaki had the roles of Electra and Clytemnestra respectively.

¹¹ Rondiris believed that Greek plays should be performed in open air theatres in contrast with Fotos Politis who had the opposite view mainly because of the sanctity of the ancient theatres and in order to be protected against the ravages of time (Politis [1964] 226-228).

¹² See Fessa-Emmanouil (1999) 43. The production of Euripides' *Hippolytus* was based on Dimitris Sarros' translation and Dimitris Mitropoulos' musical composition. The role of Hippolytus was held by Alekos Alexandrakis.

¹³ See Arvaniti (2010) 219.

¹⁴ Rondiris was really concerned about Greek language and he did not hesitate to teach his actors and actresses grammar and syntax.

the actor or the actress to master the dominant emotion of the role.¹⁵ As follows, he used the text as musical score and he devised his own semiology, noting prosodies, pauses, pitches, tonalities, discovering the relationship between speech and human voice.¹⁶ Besides, the music composed to accompany the performances of tragic plays was mostly supportive to the musical delivering of the speech.¹⁷ The other major component of style in Rondiris' approach to Greek tragedy was the use of Greek folk songs and of Byzantine music for rendering the lyric element of tragedy. But, Rondiris' main concern in his approaches to Greek tragedy was the use of Chorus. In his productions of tragic plays, Chorus, divided in two, speaks in unison, the so called *Sprechchor*, according to the German tradition. In the above treatment of the Chorus, Rondiris differed from Politis whose Choruses rarely spoke in unison while their words were divided among three or more leaders.¹⁸ Rondiris' "method" of approaching ancient Greek tragedy, though, gave the impression of "bombastic" diction.

Takis Mouzenidis was also one of the directors who contributed to the spread of the so-called "tradition" of the National Theatre in the performances of ancient Greek tragedy, mainly because he directed nineteen tragedies altogether, during his residence in Agiou Konstantinou street (1938-1942, 1960-1975),¹⁹ and also because of the numerous restagings of past years' productions especially during the seven years of dictatorship when Mouzenidis had become the leading director of the institution.²⁰ He belonged to the scholarly tradition of the National Theatre and he studied theatre direction in Hamburg and Berlin (1935-1938). He was influenced by Rondiris in his approach to Greek tragedy although in the last two plays of his *Oresteia* (1972) managed to limit *Sprechchor* and, to distribute part of the lines to the

¹⁵ After conceiving the essence of every single role, Rondiris proceeded to analyse it from an emotional point of view. See Bakopoulou-Halls (1987) 272.

¹⁶ According to Aliko Bacopoulou Halls ([1987] 270), Rondiris was "hierophant of speech and style".

¹⁷ Critics' comments about music emphasised its supportive character. According to N. Mamalis ([2005] 209), the music of D. Mitropoulos for Sophocles' *Electra* was considered "historical" mainly because of the musical and rhythmical interpretation of the play. In addition, M. Kalomoiris pointed out that the music of Menelaos Pallandios for the production of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* had "submissive and decorative role" (*Ethnos* 9.9.1949).

¹⁸ See Arvaniti (2010) 196.

¹⁹ He directed twelve plays by Euripides, four by Sophocles as well as Aeschylus' *Persae* (1971), *Oresteia* (1972) and *Prometheus Bound* (1972).

²⁰ See Arvaniti (2015) 355-371.

Chorus' leaders.²¹ Alexis Minotis was on the lead of the National Theatre the years between 1964- 1967, as the artistic director together with the author Ilias Venezis who was the administrative director, and 1974-1981, as general director. He worked as an actor with both, Politis and Rondiris and therefore, he inherited their concern in transmitting the word, the poetry in each ancient tragedy to their audiences. His career as director was affected by his conviction that acting had been his inspiration in directing.²² And, to the exception of *Antigone*, in all other tragedies, he directed himself and Katina Paxinou in the leading roles.²³ All the tragedies he directed had a number of restagings with *Oedipus at Colonus* being the most prominent case, in which play Minotis directed himself in the leading role fourteen times.²⁴ In his approaches Minotis, insisted on the use of historically accurate costumes in order to safeguard the mythical character of Greek tragedy. At the same time, he separated the dramatic, dialogical element, which had the usual tone of speech, from the lyrical element which was expressed by the Chorus, musically.²⁵ Additionally, Minotis broke the Chorus up individualizing each actor as a member of a group, with the exception of his *Phoenissae* in which the Chorus sang in unison in Mikis Theodorakis' music.²⁶ His approaches to Greek tragedies were characterized by scenic realism.

Alexis Solomos, student of Karolos Koun and of Dimitris Rontiris, joined the National Theatre as a director in 1950 but, he directed ancient Greek tragedy for the first time in 1964 (Aeschylus' *Suppliants*). Until then he had directed seven of Aristophanes' comedies for the summer festival of Epidaurus.²⁷ During his career at

²¹ See Thylos (1980) 448 and Georgousopoulos (1982) 32.

²² The title of his book *The Actor Alexis Minotis* (Athens 1985) is indicative of his conviction.

²³ Minotis directed Anna Synodinou in *Antigone* in 1956. The following years, the production had a number of restagings (1957, 1959, 1962).

²⁴ Minotis directed four plays by Sophocles: *Oedipus Tyrannus* (1951, 1952, 1955, 1958, 1960, 1965, 1966), *Oedipus at Colonus* (1958, 1959, 1961, 1962, 1964, 1966, 1967, 1975-1979, 1982, 1989), *Philoctetes* (1967, 1977, 1980, 1981), *Antigone* (1956, 1957, 1959, 1962), four by Euripides: *Hecuba* (1955, 1957, 1960, 1962-1967), *Medea* (1956-1958), *Phoinissae* (1960-1962, 1965, 1978-1981, 1988), *Bacchae* (1962), and two by Aeschylus: *Prometheus Bound* (1963, 1979-1981), *Agamemnon* (1965-1968).

²⁵ See Arvaniti (2011) 275.

²⁶ See Georgousopoulos (1993) 112.

²⁷ Aimilios Chourmouzos, as general director of the National Theatre (1955-1964), introduced Aristophanes first, in 1956, to the Festival of Athens at the Herod Attikus Odeon (*Ecclesiazusae*), and then, in 1957, to the Festival of Epidaurus (*Lysistrata*). Both performances were directed by Alexis Solomos, based on the translations of Thrasyvoulos Staurou. The sets and the costumes were designed by Giorgos Vakalo. The music of the pieces was composed by Manos Chatzidakis and their choreography was by Tatiana Varouti. In 1958 Alexis Solomos directed *Thesmophoriazusai* and in 1959 *The Frogs* with the

the National Theatre (1950-1964, 1968-1972, 1974-1980, 1990), he directed nine tragedies.²⁸ Solomos presented Greek tragedy in episodes having been influenced by his own approaches to Aristophanes. His choruses sung in unison, *Sprechchor*, modelled on Rondiris' choruses and thus, he was criticized for the declamatory style of diction.²⁹ At the same time, his innovation was to cooperate with artists (Giannis Pappas, Giorgos Vakalo and Nikos Nikolaou) who designed the new simple and functional scenery for his approaches to Greek tragedy. Even more, Kleovoulos Klonis who designed the scenery for five out of nine of his productions of ancient Greek tragedy abandoned the massive scenery and used only few architectural shapes.

Karolos Koun, the founder and the main director of Art Theatre established his own "school" of approaching ancient Greek tragedy which influenced a great number of actors, actresses and directors in Greece and abroad. He taught many actors and actresses his "method" of approaching Greek tragedy because of the drama school he attached to the company. He was brought up in Constantinople, in a cosmopolitan society of multi-orientated people and he began his career as a director staging Aristophanes with his students at Hellenic-American College.³⁰ Then, he established, together with Yiannis Tsarouchis and Dionysios Devaris, the semiprofessional People's Theatre (Laiki Skene) searching for the way to combine modernity with tradition. Influenced by Fotis Kondoglou, he tried with passionate zeal to show that the ordinary people's plain language was the live sequence of Byzantine tradition.³¹ However, at the same time, he acknowledged other, non- Greek influences. As he himself put it, when he formed the Laiki Skene he felt there were "the same influences: the tradition passed on by ancient Greece and Byzantium, the imprints felt by foreign conquerors, Turks, Venetians, Franks –and, finally, modern Greece placed against a European social, political, moral and philosophical background".³² Koun's first approaches to theatre were driven by the aesthetic element which was

same contributors with the exception of the *Frogs* which was based on the translation of Apostolos Melachrinou. Then, until 1964, Solomos directed *The Acharnians* (1961), *The Wasps* (1963) and *Peace* (1964).

²⁸ Solomos directed two plays by Aeschylus: *Suppliants* (1964) and *Seven against Thebes* (1968), two plays by Sophocles: *Trachiniae* (1970) and *Antigone* (1974) and five by Euripides: *Bacchae* (1969), *Orestes* (1971), *Trojan Women* (1975), *Medea* (1976) and *Helen* (1977).

²⁹ See Arvaniti (2011) 274.

³⁰ He directed his students on *Wealth, Frogs and Birds*.

³¹ See Dio Kangelari (2010) 117-118.

³² See Koun (1981) 62. The extract was translated by Aliko Bacopoulou-Halls (1987) 280.

expressionistic and connected with Greek popular folklore material. And, in order to achieve his aims he found and educated actors and actresses from the “lower class”.³³ The Art theatre of Greece was founded in 1942, in the midst of German occupation, and in 1954 acquired its own theatrical space.³⁴ The underground building, beneath Orpheus cinema with the semi-circular scene reflected and, still does the atmosphere, of intimacy. It also favored the dynamic relationship between the actors/actresses and the spectators.

In the field of ancient Greek theatre, Karolos Koun, directed plays from Greek tragedy and comedy alike. On the contrary, the leading directors of the National Theatre, with the notable exception of Alexis Solomos, never directed Aristophanes. Besides, Minotis had noted that ancient Greek comedy “relieves” but it does not “cure” and most importantly, it does not lead to *Katharsis* (purgation).³⁵ From ancient Greek tragedy, Koun directed six out of the seven Aeschylean tragedies: *Persai* (1965), *Seven against Thebes* (1975), *Oresteia* (1980-1982) and *Prometheus Bound* (1983); two of the surviving plays of Sophocles: *Oedipus Tyrannus* (1969, 1978) and *Electra* (1984) and two of the surviving Euripidean plays: *Bacchae* (1977) and *Trojan Women* (1979). The director believed that Aeschylus and Aristophanes could not be characterized as conservative authors.³⁶ Aeschylus’ *Persai*, the first tragedy he directed for the Art Theatre was a great success based on the treatment of the Chorus and the music of Yiannis Christou.³⁷ Karolos Koun and his Art Theatre was the first, together with the State Theatre of Northern Greece, to participate to the summer festival of Epidaurus which, until 1975, had been the exclusive privilege of the National Theatre.

Karolos Koun’s aesthetic principles affected the treatment of ancient Greek tragedy. He was influenced himself by the strong element of Greek folk tradition and of the

³³ See Koun (1981) 23.

³⁴ In 1945 the Art Theatre was forced to suspend its performances and, despite Koun’s effort to breathe new life into his company, it ceased its activities for financial reasons in the years 1946-1949. In 1950 he was working at the National Theatre, where he remained until 195. However, during that period but he still directed the Art Theatre’s drama school.

³⁵ See Alexis Minotis (1988) 168.

³⁶ Cf. Koun (1981) 65: “For me if their theatre is not a revolutionary theatre, with concrete messages for the world we live in today, I do not know what else it could be”.

³⁷ In 1934, Karolos Koun directed Euripides’ *Alcestis* for the People’s Theatre. In 1939, he directed Sophocles’ *Electra* for Marika Kotopouli’s Theatre and in 1945, he directed Aeschylus’ *Coephoroi* in Aliki’s Theatre.

Greek environment.³⁸ At the same time, he admitted that in his interpretation of each tragic play many foreign influences, contemporary events and ideas from outside Greece intruded on his thought but altogether were transplanted into the Greek environment.³⁹ Brecht's epic theatre also influenced Koun's approach to Greek tragedy.⁴⁰ His epic theatre was considered by Koun as necessary equipment for the new understanding of the classical texts and his productions of ancient Greek tragedy had the conception of a tale told without having to observe the unities of time and place, free from the restrictions of the realistic conventions of the well-made play. The extensive use of half masks in each of his productions of Greek tragedy served the same purpose while, at the same time it accorded with his view that the mask helped the roles to keep their impersonal character.⁴¹ Moreover, masks were related to Koun's deeply rooted belief that theatre was born from primitive religious feasts and rituals.⁴² The ritualistic character of Koun's approaches to Greek tragedy was also apparent in the use of the appropriate costumes, not formalistic (as was the case in the National Theatre's productions) but simple, plain with eastern influences. For the setting Koun's performances of tragedy was mostly wooden, simple, functional and created the necessary and appropriate environment for the ancient story to unfold. For that purpose he cooperated with painters, Yiannis Tsarouchis (*Persae*), Yiannis Moralis (*Oedipus Tyrannus* of 1969) and with the leading scenographer and costume designer Dionysis Fotopoulos who designed all his other productions of Greek tragedy apart from *Seven against Thebes* (Ioanna Papantoniou). The other key element of Koun's approach to tragedy which differentiated him from the directors of the National Theatre was the articulation of speech by his actors and actresses who spoke softly, clearly and in a low voice, especially when they performed to the "underground" building of Art-Theatre.

Karolos Koun not only respected the role of the Chorus in Greek tragic theatre, but he also considered the dramatic Chorus "as a factor of the utmost importance for the ancient drama" because it illuminated "the heroes in a spiritual and oratorical way,

³⁸ Koun (1992) 33.

³⁹ Koun (1992) 52.

⁴⁰ "Brecht's epic theatre helped us to find elements and theatrical analogies with ancient theatre" Koun (1992) 63.

⁴¹ See Koun (1992) 165.

⁴² See Koun (1992) 113.

with its sound and music, its movement and stylization”.⁴³ The chorus also created the atmosphere of the play. In his performances each member of the Chorus expressed himself and all the others. He was an individual and, at the same time, a member of an entity. Koun’s choruses called up “the memory of a religious theater or ritual where the actor was not the reciter or the elocutionist of choral speeches but an initiate, a member of a company that suffered, acted physically, expressed himself within a group”.⁴⁴ The chorus of *Persai* was the most characteristic of all: their long eastern costumes (see figure) together with their long beards and half masks, accompanied by the slow, well-considered movements alluded to ritual. Also, the spinning movement of the Chorus during Darius’ scene referred to whirling dervishes.

To sum up, two major performing lines of ancient Greek tragedy dominated the Greek scene during the 20th century: the National Theatre’s approach which was, mainly, based, on the right articulation of speech in a bombastic, more or less, intonation, the seemingly archaic costumes and the massive scenery and Karolos Koun’s (Art-Theatre) approach which was mainly, characterized by its ritualistic elements based on the use of half-masks and on the imposing, eurhythmic movements of the chorus who created an atmosphere of religious theatre.

⁴³ See Koun (1992) 68.

⁴⁴ Eleni Varopoulou, «A Vision for the Chorus” *To Vima* 13.4.1986. The extract was translated by Bakopoulou-Halls (1987) 282.

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