

## Aristophanes through *Lysistrata*:

### The Ancient Greek Comedy on the Modern Greek stage

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Notwithstanding the unquestionable popularity of the hybrid and liminal *Plutus* for the survival and revival of Aristophanes in Greece and throughout the world,<sup>1</sup> it was another Aristophanic comedy that became associated with the most important and the most profound social, aesthetic and ideological turning points in the reception of Aristophanes by the modern Greek scene up to the present day. The play in question is *Lysistrata* of 411 BC, a typical “political comedy” of the classical era largely neglected in the scriptorial, publishing and theatrical tradition,<sup>2</sup> but also the one which has enjoyed the widest –and continuously increasing– international appeal since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as women’s emancipation has been constantly gaining ground in a world still ravaged by wars, civil or otherwise.<sup>3</sup> If in the politically correct *Plutus* Aristophanes “became the most productive and adaptable personality of the classical and recent Greek heritage”<sup>4</sup>, in the unorthodox *Lysistrata* –in which profanity, contemporary political satire, and gender relations and reversals abound– the comic poet tested the adaptability and resilience of his specific idiom in different historical and theatrical settings, inviting artists from every age to give their own answers –well-grounded or not, but always dynamic– to the challenging questions that recur in the treatment of his work and of its component parts.

#### Aristophanes’ exclusion and post-war total recall

Already in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the interest of critics and the broad audience was focused on the male-dominated performances of *Assembly women* in the Nea Skini (New Scene) of Constantinos Christomanos (August 1904) and of *Lysistrata* in the Municipal Theatre of Athens (January 1905), both translated by Polyvios Dimitrakopoulos. These performances pushed in new aesthetic and ideological directions the profanity and the convention of all-male casting which had been reintroduced to the theatrical stage in the name of “authenticity” and “fidelity” to the code of ancient comedy by *The Clouds* that were successfully staged in 1900, translated and directed by Georgios Souris.<sup>5</sup> Shortly afterwards, the Athenian and the wider Greek male audience would be increasingly attracted to these –“strictly unsuitable for married women and young ladies”– Aristophanic performances, always translated by the popular theatrical writer, novelist, publisher and journalist Polyvios Dimitrakopoulos. Since the start of the 1920s ancient comedy, centred almost

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<sup>1</sup> .For the survival and the revival of Aristophanes’ work through and thanks to *Plutus* see Süss 1911: 213, n. 22; Pluggé 1938: 2; Boas 1966: 16; Highet 1967: 121, 597, n. 25; Van Steen 2000: 50-63; Diamantakou-Agathou 2007; Pappas 2016: 99-103.

<sup>2</sup> Lord 1963: 104-105; Van Steen 2000: 77; eadem 2002: 409; Pappas 2016: 109.

<sup>3</sup> A simple navigation and search in the Productions Database of the Archive of Performances of Ancient Greek and Roman Drama (<http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/>), per play and per period of performance, prove the point.

<sup>4</sup> Van Steen 2000: 75.

<sup>5</sup> Van Steen 2000: 102-106; Mavrogeni 2006: 74-79 and 97-104.

exclusively around *Lysistrata* (nine performances from 1923 to 1934),<sup>6</sup> would reach new peaks of popularity thanks to the “mimics” or “transformers” (*metamorphotes*), a special category of male actors with feminine looks and an inclination to cross-dressing,<sup>7</sup> who did not just perpetuate the male-dominated settings of production for many years, but also advanced an eminently sexist and antifeminist discourse that reinforced gender stereotypes and combatted the nascent women’s movement in Greece in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup>

Apart from a few mixed-gender attempts (on both the stage and the auditorium) for an artistic and moral rehabilitation of Aristophanes, whose appeal was far more limited than that of the contemporary “cross-dressed” performances, Aristophanes would remain –precisely due to the above-mentioned highly popular performances– banished from the official literary and theatrical “canon” throughout the interwar period until the Greek recovery after the Second World War and the project of Europeanisation that began after the Truman Doctrine of 1947 and the Marshal Plan. The two monumental –both literally and metaphorically– theatrical venues and institutions that were activated in the 1950s, the Festival of Ancient Drama in the Epidaurus Ancient Theatre and the Athens International Festival in the Odeon of Herodes Atticus, would be inextricably associated with Aristophanes and with Alexis Solomos. The latter directed the *Assembly women* in the Athens Festival of 1956 (the first performance of an ancient comedy by the National Theatre in an open-air ancient site) and *Lysistrata* in the Athens Festival of the following year (the first performance of an ancient comedy in the Epidaurus ancient theatre), both in polished translations free from profanity by Thasyvoulos Stavros. These two acts of “consecration” cleared the way for an enduring revival of ancient Attic comedy and henceforth defined the comic “canon” of the National Theatre<sup>9</sup> which aspired to a new use of Aristophanic comedy for popular consumption and entertainment, combining the old, indispensable ideology of “Hellenism” with the more recently forged ideology of the “European identity” of modern Greeks.<sup>10</sup>

At exactly the same time as the first performance of *Lysistrata* by the National Theatre, Karolos Koun, after fifteen years of work in the Art Theatre, turned his attention to Aristophanes for the first time in his “professional” theatrical career and staged *Plutus*,<sup>11</sup> officially articulating the principles of his aesthetic approach to ancient drama: a minimally representational and heterogeneous conjunction of traditional, folk and ethnic (figurative, musical, vocal, choreographic and dramatic) elements, “beyond extinct forms, historiographical illustrations and classicist calligraphies”, enacted with a view to “restoring ancient comedy as integral theatre” that is capable of communicating with the contemporary audience.<sup>12</sup> If the *Plutus* of

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<sup>6</sup> Karanastasis 1994: 160-166.

<sup>7</sup> Van Steen 2000: 76-123; Μαυρογένη 2006: 118-126.

<sup>8</sup> Van Steen 2000: 80.

<sup>9</sup> A comic canon which was absolutely based on the directorial vision of Alexis Solomos, who directed (and sometimes translated), in the frame of the National Theatre of Greece, the ten of the eleven extant Aristophanic comedies.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Tsatsoulis’ reasoning and argumentation 2015: 309-311.

<sup>11</sup> Karolos Koun had also staged *Plutus* in the educational frame of Athens American College as well as in the semi-professional frame of the Popular Scene, in 1936. See Mavromoustakos 2008: 52; Georgopoulou 2008, 203-204.

<sup>12</sup> Varopoulou 2011: 294-295. Cf. Mavromoustakos 2008: 28-29.

1957 established the “popular-expressionist” Aristophanic idiom of the Art Theatre, the choice of *Lysistrata* in 1969<sup>13</sup> succeeded in amplifying and expanding the divergence between the “Koun school” and the “Solomos school”.<sup>14</sup> More specifically, the *Lysistrata* of 1969 initiated a second period of preoccupation with Aristophanes by Karolos Koun<sup>15</sup> during which he went on to increasingly experiment with the conventions of the ancient dramatic art. His objective was not, of course, an “historico-archaeological” rehabilitation of these conventions but a deeper aesthetic, visual and acoustic transplantation into modern popular forms that would be familiar to the contemporary audience,<sup>16</sup> such as the traditional Greek shadow puppet theatre which was incorporated in a very dynamic manner after a certain point (in the diptych *The Acharnians* and *Peace* in 1976 and 1977 respectively).

Furthermore, in the “tragicomic and politically symbolic” *Lysistrata* of 1969 – the only new production of Aristophanic comedy by the Art Theatre during the junta years, which used the translation in demotic, spoken Greek by the leftist poet Costas Varnalis– the moderation of the grotesque comic elements in view of the ideologically “serious” need to highlight the pacifist nature of the play within the dark national and international political context of that period, offers further evidence of the acute aesthetic and ideological contrast between this particular performance and the broader artistic mindset of the Art Theatre, on the one hand, and “the happy, innocent mode of the 1957 *Lysistrata* of the National Theatre, which was performed nearly every summer during the junta’s rule”, on the other<sup>17</sup>.

### **The Third Way in the post-junta era**

Between the modernist, grotesque and semantically prosperous approach of Karolos Koun and the neoclassicist, entertainment-oriented and family-friendly approach of Alexis Solomos, which were the two distinct and prevailing tendencies in approaching Aristophanes at least up to the first years of the post-junta era, a synthesis would be attempted by the young artist Spyros Evangelatos. After the much-discussed “pop art,” sui generis rendition of *Assembly women* that Evangelatos directed in the framework of the National Theatre of Northern Greece in 1969,<sup>18</sup> encapsulating all the “European avant-gardist innovations of the 1950s” through a loose combination of any spectacle that could serve the “creative exploration of the older and current performance potential of comedy at large, Greek as well as international”<sup>19</sup>, the *Lysistrata* of “Amphi-Theatron” in 1976 (one year after the foundation of that institution) paved a “third way” which strived to highlight the lively “urban popularity” of Aristophanic comedy and to eliminate any trace of idyll, folklore or exoticism that might have been lurking behind the insistence on the “continuity” and

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<sup>13</sup> Which succeeds the thoroughly lyric *Birds* of 1959 and 1962 and the thoroughly ritual *Frogs* of 1966.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Grammatas 2002, 39-41; idem 2004: 109-110; Mavromoustakos 2008, 26-29; Arvaniti 2011: 276-278; Chatzipantazis 2014, 517-525.

<sup>15</sup> Which included *Acharnians* 1976, *Peace* 1977 and *Women at the Thesmophoria* 1985.

<sup>16</sup> Mavrogeni 2006: 260-265

<sup>17</sup> Van Steen 2000: 139-140.

<sup>18</sup> Evangelatos 2012: 130.

<sup>19</sup> Van Steen 2000: 216.

“authenticity” of either the “popular-rural” or the “bourgeois-Westernised” Greek tradition.<sup>20</sup>

Without disregarding other important innovations in the *Lysistrata* of 1976 (a pronounced intertextuality, a strongly marked meta-theatricality coupled with an effective use of the metaphor of the world-as-stage, a generous admission of verbal and visual profanity, and a dialectical treatment of the comic element in Aristophanes),<sup>21</sup> the most powerful shock and subversion in the hitherto prevailing expectations came through the use of an exclusively all-male casting that became the focus of anxious anticipation and bafflement by the journalists of the time and was widely discussed in the critical response to the play and in interviews with the director.<sup>22</sup> Using the presumed performance of *Lysistrata* by a crowd of male actors (“transformers,” see *ultra*) in the second decade of the twentieth century as a moral and aesthetic pretext, the convention of all-male casting and the attendant exploration of gender relations and reversals made a vigorous comeback in the post-junta era –an era marked by a much higher level of tolerance and theatrical sophistication than the interwar years–, generating surprise, enthusiasm, occasionally anger and indignation, and especially controversy over the appropriateness of the reintroduction of this particular theatrical convention in the case of ancient comedy.<sup>23</sup> Even if Spyros Evangelatos himself did not repeat the use of all-male casting in any of the subsequent performances of Aristophanes’ plays in “Amphi-Theatron”,<sup>24</sup> the path that he opened with his alternative *Lysistrata* of 1976 in the symbolically sanctioned Odeon of Herodes Atticus would be followed by other devotees of Aristophanes and of *Lysistrata* in very different ways in the following decades.

### **With a view to the future: Aristophanes reloaded**

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Aristophanic field was already saturated with excessive vulgarity, the use of clichés, the facile deployment of cross-dressing and whimsical references to current affairs in the multitude of Aristophanic plays that are performed every summer in the local or national drama festivals.<sup>25</sup> This saturation would inevitably bring a healthy reaction on behalf of an artistic sphere of producers and spectators who have been already accustomed and receptive to experimentation on ancient drama, especially since the shift in the orientation of theatrical production towards global modernism that was systematically promoted by Giorgos Loukos, the director of the Athens Festival from

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<sup>20</sup> On Evangelatos’ continuous concern to locate the Aristophanic action in an urban milieu and to disconnect the notion of “popular” from the notion of “rural” see Mavrogeni 2006: 289-298.

<sup>21</sup> See extensively Van Steen 2000: 215-218

<sup>22</sup> Indicative journalistic titles: «A *Lysistrata* different from the others» (*I Vradini* 8.6.1976)· «And the women will become men» (*Tachidromos* 3.6.1976)· «Men will incarnate women in *Lysistrata*» (*Ethnikos Kirix* 14.5.1976)· «*Lysistrata* with a ... beard!» (*Gynaika* 21.7.1976)· «Popular comédiens of 1919 stage *Lysistrata*. A revolutionary performance, tomorrow in Odeon of Herodus Atticus, by the Amphi-Theatron» (*To Vima* 2.6.1976).

<sup>23</sup> On the short- and long-term influence of that performance see Diamantakou-Agathou 2016.

<sup>24</sup> *Frogs* 1977, *Plutus* 1978, *Peace* 1984, *Clouds* 1989, *Assembly Women* 1998, *Wasps* 2006. Nonetheless, Spyros Evangelatos would re-activate the all-male casting in his staging of Euripides’ *Medea* in 2013.

<sup>25</sup> See, by way of example, two of the recurrent critical observations of Patsalidis 2010 and 2016.

2005 until December 2015. Thus, the second decade of the new millennium already exhibits some critical “disruptions” in the reception of Aristophanes that have created new active areas for contemporary interchange and for future reflection on the theatrical potential of his work.

In 2010 *Lysistrata* marked the first collaboration in ancient drama between the National Theatre and Yannis Kakleas, an experimental director of the 1980s and 1990s. After a “rock” version of *The Birds* that he directed in 1991 with the Municipal and Regional Theatre of Kalamata,<sup>26</sup> Yannis Kakleas returned to Aristophanes “carrying in his luggage that famous style of controlled rebellion that had made him a legend several years ago among the young”<sup>27</sup>. In the following years Kakleas would stick to Aristophanes with three new performances of comedies,<sup>28</sup> developing his own specific approach –interventionist with regard to the original text, richly intertextual, figurative and allegorical– which strives to highlight the “deeply poetic nature of Aristophanes’ writing” through a theatrical “text that marries social commentary with comedy and drama with satire”<sup>29</sup>.

Theatre critics recognised in Yannis Kakleas a “seriousness quite removed from the cheap style of variety shows –due also to translations full of liberties taken under the pretext of modernisation– peddled by competing commercial groups or even by some serious directors”<sup>30</sup>. The same seriousness would be more recently displayed by Michael Marmarinos who adapted it for his own, completely unmistakable theatrical idiom. In his first attempt as director of ancient comedy<sup>31</sup> Michael Marmarinos engaged with *Lysistrata* for the National Theatre and the Athens Festival 2016, accompanied by the poet and writer Dimitris Dimitriadis who also embarked on his first attempt as translator of ancient comic drama.<sup>32</sup> Being a lifelong experimental director with a polyphonic aesthetic style and an international orientation, a distinctive use of irony, parody and humor as well as a special concentration on the “poetic” entelechy of theatrical texts<sup>33</sup> Marmarinos commissioned and followed a philologically faithful and poetically beautiful translation that took no modernizing liberties and exhibited an equal regard for both the “vulgar” and the “sublime”. His performance intentionally vacillated between the poetry of the translated text and the contribution of para-textuality, between fiction and reality, between the dramatic and the post-dramatic, between the modern and the post-modern,<sup>34</sup> “between the clothed and the naked, the whole and the part, the prototype and the adaptation, the original and the simulacrum, the face and the mask,

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<sup>26</sup> Kakleas 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Ioannidis 2010.

<sup>28</sup> *Birds*, Municipal and Regional Theatre of Kalamata 2012; *Frogs*, National Theatre 2014; *Acharnians*, Society «Philotheaton» - Festival of Athens 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Kakleas 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Tsatsoulis 2014.

<sup>31</sup> On Marmarinos’ directorial approach to ancient Greek tragedy see Tsatsoulis 2007: 71-70; Ioannidou 2011: 121-145; Arvaniti 2011: 295-296; Manteli, 2014: 67-84.

<sup>32</sup> On Dimitriadis’ contribution to the translation of ancient Greek tragedy see Diamantakou-Agathou 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Manteli, 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Sidiropoulou 2016: 123. Cf. Arfara 2010.

the past and the present”<sup>35</sup>. It was a project of “counter-revival” that broke away from both “the bankrupt, made-to-order logic of hitherto established practice”<sup>36</sup> and the “monumentalized revival of traditional scenic approaches to ancient comedy and ancient drama in general, converting its heterochronism and its heterotopology into the material of its presentation”<sup>37</sup>.

The artistic project and “theoretical reflection” of *Lysistrata* by M. Marmarinos<sup>38</sup> coincided with the widely discussed first participation of the Onassis Cultural Centre in the Epidaurus Festival through *The Birds* directed by Nikos Karathanos, a performance rich in innovations and audiovisual lyricism, structurally adapted and centered primarily around the notions of “utopia” and “otherness.” Notwithstanding any reservations for this or that particular performance, in the final assessment it has to be acknowledged that, at the very least, “this year’s harvest in Aristophanes was particularly rich and could become the starting point for a new substantial proposition in the future”<sup>39</sup>. In a more optimistic note, things look even more hopeful: “This year Epidaurus set a standard that will impact on us in the future. This is not just because we saw a different *Lysistrata* or a different *Pisthetaerus* in that theatre, but also because it became clear that their new impression, language, voice, and disposition were received with so much seriousness, thoughtfulness, appreciation, and with a warm applause”<sup>40</sup>.

At the onset of the new millennium, we seem to be experiencing a new beginning in our dialogue with ancient comedy as well as in our dialogue with ancient drama, with ancient culture, and with culture at large. After a long period of cross-fertilization between different directors with wide-ranging theatrical perspectives and with multiple national and international influences conducted mainly under the framework of the central theatrical institutions, Aristophanes is now handed down by a generation of well-established, middle-age directors to a younger generation who may still have a lot to process, to discover and to contribute in the theatrical scene of the future.

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35 Patsalidis 2016

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Documentary "Monogram: Karolos Koun", second part (production: ERT 1982, directed by Kostas Aristopoulos)

<http://www.ert-archives.gr/V3/public/main/page-assetview.aspx?tid=0000007302&tsz=0&autostart=0>

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Documentary "*Paraskinio: Aristophanes in Art Theatre στο Θέατρο Τέχνης*" (production: ERT 2004, directed by George Skevas)

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Filmed performance of *Lysistrata*, National Theatre - Epidaurus Festival in 1972, directed by Alexis Solomos

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4e7Pfdl8muw>

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Film "*Lysistrata*" (1972), directed by Giorgos Zervoulakos

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzicctpGK7M>

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Filmed performance of *Lysistrata*, directed by Thymios Karakatsanis

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m31wmpptNIc>

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Performance of *Lysistrata*, National Theatre - Epidaurus Festival in 2010, directed by Yannis Kakleas

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Trailer of the performance of Lysistrata, 2014 (production: Giorgos Lykiardopoulos - Highway Productions, directed by Tsezaris Gkraouzinis)

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Performance of Lysistrata, 2016, National Theatre - Athens Festival, directed by Mihalis Marmarinos

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Od\\_qaVcohHI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Od_qaVcohHI)

Backstage of Lysistrata, National Theatre 2016

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3h29mcTwx2o>

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Filmed performance of The Birds, 2016, Onassis Cultural Center - Athens Festival, directed by Nikos Karathanou.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0iWAcxchF3M>