

FROM THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN: NOTES TOWARDS A POST-IMF GREEK  
DRAMATURGY

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Summary: The advance of global capitalism in Greece in the form of IMF and EU economic policies signals a new era in the country's history accompanied by a process of national introspection and new forms of self-identification. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's theory on minor literatures, I will discuss the emergence of a new national dramaturgy that reflects this transitional phase and is characterized by a "double consciousness"- national and international at once. I will argue that such drama can offer a new paradigm for European national dramaturgies that overcomes the tensions between nationhood and globality.

Keywords: Greece, IMF, globalization, drama, national identity, European drama

The writing of this paper coincides with one of the most transitional periods in Europe's modern history. The global financial crisis has raised the question of the viability of the European project itself as economic disparities between the European North and South reveal the absence of and need for greater political integration if a Union is to be achieved. It is therefore hard to think of a more relevant and crucial time to talk about the issue of border and borderlessness in European cultural production than this present deeply transitional time. What especially interests me in this paper is the question of national dramaturgies: at a time when the notion of the nation state itself is radically changing, what types of local dramaturgies can we envision? How are national dramaturgies changed and shaped presently reflecting the tension between locality and globality? In this paper I will explore the possibility of a dramaturgy with a “double consciousness”: local in the sense of reflecting the people and conditions that have shaped it, and at the same time international in engaging with the sensibilities of a globalized world.

My focus will be the dramaturgy of Greece at this present moment, the 'post-IMF' moment as I'd like to term it, when its relationships both with its own identity and with its European neighbors are at great strain. This crucial historical moment and the ensuing deep transition – social, political and economic- not only highlight the tensions between the local and the global in a European context but also produce new modes of self apprehension, new identities and ways of identification (i.e. notions of “Greek” and “European”) that can possibly, and hopefully, can lead to new cultural paradigms.

My broader theoretical perspective lies in the context of postcolonial discourse for two reasons: firstly, postcolonial discourse offers a tool to understand how cultural products reflect and represent the identities that are currently shaping<sup>1</sup>; secondly because, as many international economists and scholars of international law<sup>2</sup> increasingly agree, Europe is currently at the height of a neocolonial moment whereby, as Masao Miyoshi (1993) has brilliantly analyzed, the nation state (itself a product of the colonial era) is dissolving to give way to free market economy and the advance of an a-national global capitalism that does away with the nation state in all levels- culture, language, laws, economies, even people. Indeed as we have seen in the case of Greece which is asked for example to implement constitutional changes, or in the French-

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<sup>1</sup> I am adopting here the notion of postcolonialism as process, the process of post-colonizing, as formulated by A. Quayson in his book *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice, or Process?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000)

<sup>2</sup> See for example: Kouvelakis S. The Greek Cauldron, NLR 72 (Nov/Dec 2011) pp. 17-32. Also Douzinas C. and Papakonstantinou P. Greece is standing up to EU neo-colonialism. The Guardian, Monday, June 27, 2011.

German alliance of creating a super-European state of surveillance<sup>3</sup>, the present European crisis although of an economic nature, is focused around questions of globality versus national sovereignty and directly puts to question the notion and independence of the nation state. Hence we are becoming witnesses in Europe of a series of dramatic oxymora emanating precisely from a borderlessness versus nationhood dichotomy: the growth of multinational capital and the reemergence of nationalisms; a global multicultural elite and a global underclass; growing immigrant mobility and increased fear and demonization of immigrants; attack to national sovereignties and growing separatisms.

Greece was the first European country to feel the shock of the global economic meltdown and more importantly it was the first to experience the radical assault on its nationhood<sup>4</sup> and sense of national self with the advent of the IMF and the so called “troika”- the IMF, ECB and EU. If we are to consider nations as relative constructs shaped by relation to other nations and the global world defined often by what they are not by comparison to their neighbors (so that nationality and internationality are inextricably linked)<sup>5</sup> then in all accounts the international and relations by which the Greek nation had been defining itself (especially as a EU partner) have been so drastically shattered as to cause a radical re-thinking of what constitutes the nation and its identity and to signal a profound change in the country on all levels- social, political, economic and cultural. Against this general background I want, in the rest of this paper, to firstly to map out the general picture of contemporary Greek drama and theater; and secondly focus on a contemporary play, *City State*, which in my view represents a promising direction for national dramaturgy with a “double vision” - at once local and global. My analysis of the play will be significantly rooted in Deleuze and Guatarri's discussion of minor literatures.

#### Contemporary Greek drama and theater: an overview

The first reaction of theater makers to the radical changes in the country has been a turn towards the staging of contemporary or older Greek plays; the creation of original performances; and a return to Greek literary traditions which are often adapted for the stage; and an interesting

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<sup>3</sup> “France and Germany have suggested a further clampdown on profligate states handing more power to EU institutions to police national budgets” . Collins, S. France and Germany agree on treaty changes. Europolitics, Monday December 5, 2011. <http://www.europolitics.info/economic-a-monetary-affairs/france-and-germany-agree-on-treaty-changes-art320267-31.html> (Accessed April 18, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> According to former Greek Prime Minister G. Papandreou after the country's submission to the IMF “In the manner we handled our financial affairs we lost a part of our national sovereignty” Ta Nea, 12/2/2010

<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the links between notions of nationality/internationality and literature see Casanova, P. Combative Literatures. New Left Review 72 (Nov/Dec 2011) pp. 123-134

resurgence, this year, of Greek medieval plays.

It is essential to understand this introversion for Greece as reflecting a general national soul-searching. It represents a really important phase in the country's cultural production that should not be confounded with nationalistic tendencies. Rather, it is a genuine need to reflect anew on the Greek language, Greek identity as a response to the national question of “who are we”. To understand the importance of this phase, one should take into account that for the last 20 years Greece has been constantly on the receiving end of Europe's theater production importing plays and performances and very rarely exporting. The opening up of the Greek borders to receive European productions which starts in the mid nineties to reach its peak in 2000's<sup>6</sup> was very welcomed back then after many years of relative isolation and focus on the international classical repertoire. However this opening up was not accompanied by any systematic effort to promote local playwriting and the development and production of new Greek dramaturgy, let alone any effort to support the circulation of Greek plays abroad. The Eurocentricism of what was being programmed, translated and produced is not unrelated to the the country's enormous effort to fashion itself as a European nation. By the same token, the indifference up to recently to the production of, for example, our immediate Mediterranean neighbors, attests to this process of envisioning a national self away from our Balkan and Middle Eastern past. That said, the present introversion, this digging into language, Greek texts old and new seems to be a necessary process of trying to redefine oneself at the national and international level.

This process of redefining national drama resonates greatly with what Deleuze and Guattari have defined as minor literatures, Kafka has termed as small literatures or Jameson as third world literatures: the common denominator in all these definitions is the very close link between literature and politics, the great stakes placed in literature for the affirmation of a collective existence and national identity. It is a literature “engaged in struggles for recognition which are both political and literary” (Casanova 2011, p.133). Whether it is, as in Jameson's definition, the literature of the postcolonial peoples, or, as in Deleuze and Guattari, the literature of any nation or community that seeks to affirm its existence in opposition to a master narrative, such 'minor' literature is revolutionary insofar as it envisions the possibility of a new community.

### City State

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<sup>6</sup> Two artistic directors had a very significant role in this opening up to European cultural production, German-trained director G. Houvardas who became artistic director of the National Greek theater in 2007 and France-trained Y. Loukos who took over as artistic director of the Athens Festival in 2006

From within this context I would like to focus the discussion on *City State*, a new play which, I argue, would not have emerged in a different time in Greece's history, as it is directly linked to this new process and the new modes of national self apprehension. In proposing to discuss a single country's national dramaturgy I maintain the vision of a "literary internationalism... which allows for nationalist belief both to be taken into account and to be superseded in a relational and universal conception of world literature" (Casanova, 2011, p. 134).

*City State* was collectively written in 2011 by the young theater collective Kanigunda<sup>7</sup> and was presented first in the new Onassis Cultural Center in Athens in the spring of 2011 and then received a longer run in the fall of that year in Athens' famous Art Theater-Karolos Koun. The script is a collage of texts written by the actors, archival material from newspapers, political speeches, historical documents, testimonies from the inmates of Athens' biggest psychiatric clinic back in the 40s , interviews with Athenians, poetry and literary excerpts. The premise of the play is straightforward and complex at the same time- it is the history of Athens. One of the play's characters, The Sponsor, who acts as the play's Master of Ceremonies, states it early on in the play " The sky is about to fall on your heads. So let's set out to find out your history" (*City State*, 2011, p. 9) (The set also suggests that a giant concrete pillar is hanging over the audience's heads). With that point of departure the play's characters start meandering through history, from antiquity to present, with stops on key moments of the country's recent history: German occupation, civil war, dictatorship, the present.

There are no characters in the traditional sense but six main abstract personas: the Sponsor, the Prime Minister , the Woman in the Wrong Clothes, the Woman Carrying Earth, the Statesman of Times Past, and Myrtis, the resurrection of a young girl who died from the plague in 5<sup>th</sup> cent BC and whose statue was recently excavated in Athens. These personas rather than carrying individual characteristics they form "collective utterances"<sup>8</sup> of states of being, experiences of the Athenian collective through time. Hence the style is rarely dialogic and mostly narrative and testimonial, questions and answers, overlapping speeches, repetitions. Similarly, the structure of the play is not linear- the journey through history is organized in spatial rather than temporal terms- references to the land, the soil, the architecture of the city are abundant in the play as history takes a physical dimension and is inscribed on the streets, on the

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.kanigunda.gr/en/thiasos.html>

<sup>8</sup> "The literary machine functions as the relay for a future revolutionary machine-not at all for ideological reasons but because it provides a collective utterance missing everywhere else in this milieu: *literature is the affair of the people*" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, p. 17, italics in original)

buildings and the bodies in the city.

The Woman in Wrong Clothes: Every day the sun rises exactly at six when it starts from the kitchen and enters my throat and my ears the noise from Patision street and from the bedroom the noise from Tritis Septemvriou street [...] and I count in the night the heavy rings of the church bells on Eptanisou street (*City State* 2011, p. 24)

or

Myrtis: Medieval buildings, medieval buildings, medieval buildings, pigeons in the back alleys, bird shit, cats. The benefactor of Athens will be not he who builds but he who tears down, said Tsarouchis. (*City State* 2011, p. 8)

Historical and political facts are intertwined with the psychological responses to these facts and thus Athens features as simultaneously a historical, political and psychological space: feelings of stress and fear, primal needs<sup>9</sup> and agonies as the collective responds to history are particularly strong:

Myrtis: Will you give me some water? I am thirsty because in 430 BC a plague befell Athens. 50,000 of us died. The disaster was so big that Athenians did not know what to do, they were burying each other anywhere, in communal graves.

Sponsor: they buried each other anywhere but things were going great. Do not be scared.

Are you scared?

The women: We are scared.

The prime minister: Do not be scared. People were burying each other but things are going great.

Myrtis: Things are not going great. Many of us died in front of our houses, right by the water sources because the disease had the symptom of thirst. I died of thirst. What happened to the waters? I need water. (*City State* 2011, p. 18-19)

The intense presence of physical space and the equally intense language used to depict it, have been analyzed in detail by Deleuze and Guattari as one of the central characteristics of minor literature: “to any symbolic use of language [it] opposes a purely intensive use arriving at

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<sup>9</sup> “Terms that connote suffering” are characteristic of the language of minor literatures according to Deleuze and Guattari, a language so intense that moves from metaphor to metamorphosis, “ceases to be representative in order to stretch toward its extremes or its limits” (1983, p. 23)

a perfect and unformed expression- an intense, material expression” (1983, p.19) The result is what the writers term the 'deterritorializing' effect, the creation of a minor space within the master space and in direct opposition to it, whereby the oppressed of one language are set against the oppressors of that language (ibid. p. 27).

Indeed the entire play unfolds as a contest over territoriality, a constant dialectic between the political power and the city's inhabitants over the question of who owns the space, who decides for the space, who lives in it and how. Starting its digging into Athenian history from a political standpoint (Myrtis opens the play listing the characteristics of a sovereign state, namely independence, sovereignty and self-sufficiency) the play sets in opposition a transhistorical collective- immigrants and petty bourgeois, urban and rural citizens, men and women- with the ruling class- from the multinational capital, to local corrupt leaders, sell-out intellectuals and scientists. The former group reemerges again and again throughout history trying to affirm their presence, their right to exist, their rights to the land, carve their identity on the city's streets and neighborhoods.

The Woman Carrying Earth: I was walking on the street on the intersection of Panepistimou and Patision street and as I was crossing something incredible happened, I felt my feet sticking on the tar, and they were tearing it apart and destroying it, it was tearing and below I could see the earth, the earth was coming out and as soon as I stepped on the earth the weight was lifted, the weight was lifted with the earth I started getting lighter and lighter [...] (*City State*, 2011, p.28)<sup>10</sup>

While the collective is rooted in the city -Myrtis' persona literally excavated from the Athenian soil- the ruling class is stateless, they are literally the 'money with no country'. The sponsor's lite-motif is “before the play is over I will have fled” and the last time he speaks to the audience, towards the end of the play, is to reveal the intricate relations between the local and international corrupt elites. Interestingly however the play does not end with him. It ends with the woman carrying earth- throughout the play she is the 'other', the outsider who has arrived in the city:

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<sup>10</sup> This excerpt is I think one of the most characteristic in the play of what Deleuze and Guattari have described as a move of language from symbolism to “arriv[ing] at a perfect and unformed expression- an intense, *material* expression” (1983, p. 19, my italics)

The Woman Carrying Earth: When I first entered the city, from Achileos street, smoke entered my lungs and a strong sun hugged me. Some people were sleeping, sweaty, on the sidewalks. I was thinking how would it be if I had been born here. If I had been raised here. In the afternoon I went up on Lycabetus Hill. I saw Athens from above. The heat was terrible. [...] *She speaks then she sets to leave and suddenly she stops.* But sometimes Athens has this sunlight....So beautiful. (*City State* 2011, p. 59)

The last words of the play belong to those who live in the city, and the city belongs to them.

What I am arguing is the *City State* is an example of a minor literature as it stages a contest for power by means of language and structure and by the layering of the antagonistic forces- the community, the political power of the nation state, the a-national economic power. Such a type of drama could not have been created outside the current political conditions that have brought the Greek nation in opposition to itself and created minor spaces of resistance to the dominant global politics and ideology.

How can this type of national minor dramaturgy illuminate for us a way to overcome impasses or paradoxes between border and borderlessness, nationality and internationality? This literary construct of one being “a stranger in one's own language” (1983, p. 26), as Deleuze and Guattari have put it, is, I believe, the literary equivalent of what theorists in other fields of postcolonial studies have discussed with regards to one's ethical standpoint in the face of the injustices produced by global capitalism. M. Miyoshi (1993) and S. Zizek (1997) in particular suggest that to overcome the dichotomy between a cosmopolitanism for the multinational elites and the shrinkage of national identities and reactionary regionalisms, the ethical standpoint of the critic, the artist, the citizen, is to identify with the immigrant, with the dispossessed, with the underclass of global capitalism, with “*the point of inherent abjection/exclusion, the 'abject', of the concrete positive order, as the only point of true universality*” (Zizek 1997, p. 50, italics in original). In adopting this vantage point we, as artists and intellectuals, can overcome the conundrums of Europe's present historical crisis and envision new forms of solidarity, exchange and coexistence. And I hope that this will be a unique opportunity for theater to go forward and for new dramaturgical models to emerge and express these new sensibilities.

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