

Contextualising Reception: Writing about Theatre and National Identity

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In October 1974, three months after the downfall of the colonels' dictatorship, Alan Ayckbourn's *Absurd Person Singular* (1972) opened in Athens. Reviewers deemed the play 'too English', irrelevant, alien. Indeed, when locating the play - a farce about English middle-class of the 1970s - in the period's theatrical context, defined by growing demands for politicisation and an emphasis on 'the Greek', the critics' response appears valid. But is this the only possible reading of the production, or can contextualisation open up new ways of interpreting it?

In December 1983, two years after Greece's accession to the European Community, the staging of *Top Girls* (1982) introduced Caryl Churchill's work to the Athenian audience. Since the early 1980s was marked by an upheaval of the women's movement in Greece, the selection of Churchill's play as the first production directed by a woman at the National Theatre comes as no surprise. However, some reviewers denied the play's feminist politics, suggesting instead that it is a play about 'all people'. How can contextualisation provide insight into this response?

In October 1990, almost a year after the demolition of the Berlin Wall, Edward Bond's *Summer* (1982) was staged. The production of the play - that explores the past and present relation of two women in a non-defined Communist country - was praised by Greek critics, for it was seen as capturing the period's momentum following the cataclysmic shifts at the end of the 1980s. But was the play's selection pertinent only due to these international reasons or was it in any way resonant for the Athenian audience? What is the significance of 'building contexts' for addressing such questions?

In December 2001, a month before Greece's entry in the European Monetary Union, Mark Ravenhill's *Some Explicit Polaroids* (1999) premièred. In a context of intensifying debates about globalisation and its impact on local and national identities, the play was considered a theatrical articulation of global issues. But does this imply that the play raised only global problems, thus effacing local concerns? Can the context challenge this reading of the play and production?

Each of the abovementioned productions-examples from my doctoral research coincided with a turning point in the history of post-colonels' Greece, a moment when debates about Greek national identity were intensified.¹ Following the development of new approaches to such vexed terms as the nation, nation-state, nationalism and national identity in other disciplines, the relation between theatre and nationhood has emerged as a key area of enquiry in theatre and performance studies.² A number of studies examine how theatre and performance as cultural practices might offer insight into notions of the nation and contest the established vision of national identity as a natural and stable condition. The editors of *Theatre, History and National Identities* recognise the theatre's pivotal role in the process of nation-building: 'From creating national ideologies to dividing audiences, and challenging national histories, the theatre can be seen in its ongoing role of sustaining and critiquing notions of national identity.'³

¹ The main aim of my research is to investigate the link between theatre and national identity, by exploring the staging and critical reception of certain post-1956 English texts in Athens in relation to the evolution of Greekness during the last thirty years.

² I am referring to current debates in the fields of social and political studies and new conceptualisations of nationhood as a construct, bound up with discourse and socio-political institutions. Among these theories, I regard Benedict Anderson's perceptive reading of the nation in his seminal *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1991) as the most relevant for an examination of theatre and the nation. Anderson disassociates the nation from the nation-state as a political entity, suggesting that 'nation-ness' is a 'cultural artefact', tied to and disseminated through a variety of cultural practices (4).

³ Makinen, Wilmer & Worthen, 2001: 14. Indicatively, other studies that offer divergent perspectives on the topic include: L. Kruger's *The National Stage* (1992), S.E. Wilmer's *Theatre, Society and the Nation: Staging American Identities* (2002), S.E. Wilmer (ed.) *Writing and Rewriting National Theatre Histories* (2004), J. Harvie's *Staging the UK* (2005).

In this article, I employ the abovementioned examples as a starting point for proposing a methodology for writing about theatre and national identity. My main argument is that a comprehensive analysis of the reception of non-national, foreign texts by means of building contexts and locating productions and reviews within them, can provide insight into the complexion of a nation's identity at a certain historical moment. In other words, contextualising the reception of 'the Other' might enhance the understanding of 'the self' - in the case of this research, 'the Greek'.

Brian Singleton, in a discussion of interculturalism, has suggested that approaching foreign theatrical traditions 'can be described as "the pursuit of otherness for the investigation of self"' (94). Even though Singleton develops his argument in the context of a different scholarly debate, I read the reception of English drama in Athens as indicative of a similar process. The staging of English drama as 'the Other' can be perceived as a potential way of comprehending 'the self', 'the Greek', in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Locating the staging of 'the Other' in an historical context, offers evidence and paves the way for a reconstruction of, or an imaginative approach to, what it meant to be Greek in each period. This approach does not reduce 'the Greek' to a static condition but explores the dynamic dimension of national identity as a lived experience, shaped by and manifested in different aspects of public life.

The article begins with two ideas that stem from the analysis of the selected example and outlines the methodology of this research. The brief discussion of the four examples that follows, offers some reflections on the significance of contextualisation when addressing questions about theatre and national identity, mainly drawing on Tracy Davis' thorough and astute discussion of 'The Context Problem.' Davis' starting point is that 'the encounter with "gaps" is a major

conundrum of the discipline’ and her article, which compares methods of contextualisation with painting techniques, elucidates what kinds of ‘gaps’ theatre historians encounter and how ‘context’ might fill them in (203). ‘Gaps’ are usually equated with absences in documentary evidence and the process of contextualisation helps ‘to convey the immediacy of performances in the past, compensates for their perishability, and conveys their relevance to the past and the present’ (204). Davis also considers ‘gaps’ as corresponding to wider methodological issues in theatre historiography, acknowledging that one must always contest ‘what “context” accomplishes and what it does not’ (207).

I interpret ‘gaps’ as not only the missing primary evidence that render the use of context inescapable for reconstructing productions. I argue that contextualisation is instrumental for unveiling ‘gaps’, what remains hidden or not acknowledged even when there is plenty of documentary material at the historian’s disposal. In my research, contextualisation provided ‘explanatory mechanisms’, producing a complex picture where theatre-making and theatre-reviewing are bound up with socio-political and cultural networks and illuminate conceptions of the nation at a given historical moment.

‘The Other’ and the Image of ‘the Greek’

Researching the staging and critical reception of post-1956 English drama in Athens, I have identified a trope articulated mainly in reviews but also practitioners’ arguments: the development of a clear ‘border’, an opposition separating Athenian productions or audiences from English plays. In other words, English drama is considered as ‘Other’ when put on Athenian theatre stages and critics often assess the merit of a performance based on whether practitioners managed to render the play less ‘Other’

for the audience. Such critical positions subtly reiterate the fundamental element of Greek national identity, what I consider Greekness' 'ideological cornerstone', the clear dichotomy of 'Greek' and 'non-Greek', 'Other'.⁴ This conceptualisation of Greekness is bound up with an emphasis on 'the Other', located outside the Greek borders, and the critical reception of English drama enforces this image of the Greek nation, often regardless of the actual staging of the plays that might resist to this static dichotomy of 'Greek' and 'English Other'.

Contextualisation, or (Resisting to) the Image of 'the Greek'

By focusing on 'the Greek' rather than 'the Other', this approach to Greekness is destabilised. The notion of 'the Greek' as opposed to an imagined 'Other' is problematised by exploring productions within broader socio-political and cultural frameworks. In other words, instead of focusing on 'the imagined Other' outside, manifestations of 'the Greek' inside the country are investigated. As Susan Bennett has pointed out in her important *Theatre Audiences*, 'the relationship between production and reception, positioned within and against cultural values, remains largely uninvestigated' (86). Positioning the productions and reception of English drama against cultural values or notions of the Greek nation is pertinent for addressing wider issues about the link between theatre and national identity.

Based on the four selected examples, I want to suggest potential ways of using contextualisation in order to re-write these moments of Greek theatre history, unveiling 'gaps' - what I interpret as hidden or neglected - in their contemporaries'

⁴ Greekness is used here as a short term for Greek national identity and corresponds to the often-debated word *Hellenikoteta*, which is considered tantamount with the essential feature that defines the Greeks and emerges as a quality that can be traced in and enforced through culture. The political analyst, Constantine Tsoucalas, discussing notions of Greekness in the context of expanding Europe, historicises and explains the main connotations of *Hellenikoteta*: 'Greekness is mainly and explicitly an individual "quality", emanating not from a recognisable and conquerable system of thought or norms

critical reception. Ultimately, by contextualising these productions, a new approach to Greek national identity is developed: one that is no longer bound up with a process of imagining ‘the Other’ but instead focuses on the concrete, lived experience of Greekness in each historical moment and the ways in which theatre reflected, corresponded to, or ignored these present manifestations of ‘the Greek’.

a. ‘Binocular Rivalry’, or Juxtaposing Contexts

The negative reception of the production of *Absurd Person Singular* in 1974 can be read as a direct repercussion of the historical moment, since the play and the production did not seem to contribute to the theatre’s social and political purposes. However, taking into consideration the complexity of this transitional period from the dictatorship to democracy and the conflicting elements that shaped it, this response to the production can be challenged. In an alternative reading of the period, Ayckbourn’s play is no longer ‘the Other’ but, instead, corresponds to class relations in Greece during the dictatorship and the immediate post-colonels’ period.

The Greek translation of the play’s title as ‘The Bourgeoisie is Playing Jokes’ emphasises the play’s social critique.⁵ While the word ‘absurd’ in the play’s actual title can be read as raising general questions about human relations, absurdity and falsity, the term ‘bourgeoisie’ in the Greek translation makes an explicit statement about a particular social class. Ayckbourn associates absurdity with the individual, ‘the singular’, while Matessis’ translation hints at a social class. Research of socio-political events during the first year of the democracy (1974-5) showed that one of the major public demands expressed mainly in the form of marches was the need for ‘purging’ society from those classes who still supported or were associated with the

produced by man [sic], but from “something” that is already there preceding and transcending him.’ (1993: 70)

⁵ The actual Greek translation by Pavlos Matessis is *Η αστική τάξη αστειεύεται*; here I cite my translation of the title.

colonels' regime: the bourgeoisie and some parts of the petit-bourgeoisie.⁶ For the purposes of this article, a detailed analysis of class relations in the immediate post-colonels' period cannot be provided. Nonetheless, the significance of these developments for a more comprehensive analysis of the historical moment should be emphasised. Considering these elements, a new context can be built where Ayckbourn's play is no longer the farcical critique of the 'alien, English Other' but a subtle, dark critique of 'the Greek (petit) bourgeois'.

Davis argues that the context is inescapable, always present in any historiographical approach but the question of 'how it [i.e. a historical event in a context] is perceived and why' should always be addressed (209).⁷ Making an analogy between theatre historiography and neurology, she names cases of divergent or opposing perceptions of the same historical event - theatrical productions - 'binocular rivalry', suggesting that it is the individual's 'stimulus' that determines the perception of the event. In this paradigm, juxtaposing the 'contemporaries'' perception of the production with my reading does not only validate Davis' assertion about the partiality of any historiographical account of a theatrical event. It also indicates how reviewers have 'painted' a particular background in order to place the production; in so doing, they reiterate the 'ideological cornerstone of Greekness', the static dichotomy of Greek and 'alien, English Other'.

b. 'Blank Spots', or Producing Wider Contexts

When *Top Girls* opened in Athens, the production was promoted as the theatrical celebration of the growing feminist movement in Greece.⁸ However, a number of

⁶ Resources included the period's press and annual theatre journals – mainly *Xroniko* (Chronicle) – that published lists of significant political and theatrical events of each year following the transition to democracy.

⁷ Davis' emphasis.

⁸ The Library of the National Theatre in Athens holds a file of press cuttings where the production is presented as 'the female conquest of the stage.' (15 Dec. 1983)

critics argued that the play is not a feminist play but a play about 'all people'. This response could be mistaken as a claim for the play's universality but, in fact, implies a key element that defined notions of Greekness in the early 1980s. Following the election of the socialist government in 1981, discourses about the legitimate needs of 'the people' saturated the public sphere. In this political climate, the obscure term 'the people' was equated with 'the nation', 'the populist' with 'the national'.

Research on the development of the feminist movement in Greece after the fall of the colonels showed that most women's organisations were strongly affiliated to political parties and, gradually, women's issues were considered part of wider demands of 'the people'. However, Greek feminist scholars suggest that this equation of the feminist with 'the popular' and, I would add, 'the populist' led to the demise of the movement.⁹ Hence, the reviewers' argument that Churchill's play is about 'all people' resonates with the period's populist ambience that did not allow an autonomous expression of women's issues; instead, gender differences remained hidden behind the all-inclusive concept of 'the people'.

Davis refers to 'blank spots' in historiographic narratives, suggesting that in some cases contextualisation cannot construct a complete picture of the moment when the event took place, and historians must be aware of the limitations of theatre historiography as a medium.¹⁰ For the example of *Top Girls*, I approached contextualisation considering this notion of 'blank spots'. Scrutinising the link between feminism and the wider political ambience of populism led to unveiling a 'blank spot' in that historical moment. This 'blank spot' cannot be fully analysed

⁹ See Kyriazis (1995) for an elaboration of the issue.

¹⁰ Davis refers to the technique of *passage* - the use of 'white spaces of canvas amid pigment' - in some of Paul Cézanne's later paintings; through this method, 'the ideal', what the painter has in mind, has not yet found a way to be represented (204). A similar process can define theatre historiography, when the historian leaves 'blank spots', 'white absences' to correspond to 'the ideal' beyond 'explanations of time and culture' (205).

since it is hard to research actual experiences of Greek women at the time; at the same time, though, it can offer insight into the paradoxical reception of *Top Girls*, revealing that being 'Greek' in the early 1980s was synonymous with being one of 'the people'.

c. 'Rondeur', or when Context and Theatre Blur

The analysis of the reception of *Summer* is paradigmatic for further understanding and appreciating the method of contextualising reception. Even though the production was considered a pertinent reflection on the changing *status quo* following the downfall of the Eastern Bloc, research on Greek political events at the threshold of the 1990s provided further insight into the production. Due to political and economic scandals, the end of the 1980s was a turbulent time for Greece, a period of crisis of democracy, marked by trials of politicians and a wider public demand for justice. Considering that justice is a key issue in Bond's play and reading the director's interviews where he emphasises the need for a 'theatre of public service', it became obvious that the production aspired to constitute a theatrical intervention on Greek civil society rather than make a comment about the changing international order.

Davis borrows the term *rondeur* from Cézanne's painting techniques, suggesting that sometimes, when writing theatre history, the line separating event from context cannot be distinguished and the two are blurred. By means of an analysis of the staging of *Summer* and the development of a distinctive theatricality that corresponded to actual experiences in the public sphere, such a picture where theatre and context cannot be disassociated was created. In this way, the reviewers' response that focused on 'the European Other' was destabilised and a complex picture that resonated with concrete socio-political situations in the country emerged.

d. 'What do we miss?', or Contextualising 'the Local' in 'the Global'¹¹

When *Some Explicit Polaroids* was staged, reviewers recognised that Ravenhill's play constitutes an acerbic critique of global phenomena and lifestyles that are consequential of liberal, late capitalism. Nonetheless, many of them suggested that the play did not correspond to actual Greek experiences. It is interesting that almost thirty years after the production of *Absurd Person Singular*, the 'Greek/Other' dichotomy resurfaces in reviewers' discourse. However, by locating the production of *Some Explicit Polaroids* in the period's political and ideological framework, as well as debates about notions of 'Self' and 'Other' at the age of globalisation, a new reading that resisted the reviewers' responses, emerges. In other words, 'the global' operates as a catalyst that destabilises the static dichotomy of 'Greek' and 'English Other'.

During the late 1990s, Greek political and public life was defined by a movement for modernisation and convergence with other Western countries-members of the European Union. This impetus was manifested in concrete reforms introduced by the government but also permeated other aspects of public life, including theatre. Such aspects of public life can be interpreted as the country's attempts at responding to global orientations and developments. Indeed, in some respects - for example, considering that the late 1990s was a time of avalanche of English plays on Athenian theatre stages - the production of Ravenhill's play can be interpreted as a theatrical manifestation of this impetus for Europeanisation.

However, the juxtaposition of some aspects of the play - significantly the nostalgia for greater political causes - with particular, Greek memories and conditions, such as the disillusionment with the generation of young radicals of the 1970s that was considered compromised, paved the way for a re-reading of the staging and

¹¹ Here, I refer to Davis' intriguing question 'what might the unseekable be?' when writing theatre history (208).

reception of *Some Explicit Polaroids*. This process of contextualising reception proved that if the production is approached only as a manifestation of how 'the Greek' becomes part of 'the global', 'we miss something', something remains 'unseekable'. Instead, when recognising that local, Greek experiences can be traced within a 'global' condition of disillusionment with politics, new potential open up for comprehending the shifting complexion of Greekness at the dawn of the third millennium.

As demonstrated through these indicative examples, contextualisation reveals 'gaps in reception' or how theatre reviewing operates as an apparatus that often maintains ideological constructions of national identity. Building contexts introduces alternative readings of reception, resisting static notions of Greekness.

However, as Davis acknowledges, context should not be perceived as a panacea for the historian. It can always be questioned and new contexts can replace existing ones and new readings of the same historical event can be introduced. Contexts are built based on precise research questions and there is always an element of incompleteness in any historiographical narrative. However, as Erika Fischer-Lichte has argued, this element of incompleteness or, in her terms, 'partiality' is necessary for writing theatre history. In 'Some Critical Remarks on Theatre Historiography,' she argues:

A partial perspective is a condition of the possibility of a history of theatre. Everyone must delimit the subject area of their theatre history in accordance with their specific epistemological interests and competence, select the events that are likely to be productive in terms of the questions they are asking, and construct their history from their examination of the documents related to these events. (3)

My methodology of contextualising reception is informed by Fischer-Lichte's perspective since the subject area - the reception of English drama - is defined with

respect to questions of national identity and the material discussed is selected based on these theoretical criteria. Indeed, my reading of the reception of examples of post-1956 English drama in Athens is partial, hence subject to revision and contestation; yet this partiality is necessary for writing national theatre histories. If, for example, multiple paradigms about the link between Greekness, theatre and reception are introduced, a comprehensive image of Greek theatre history might emerge. Most importantly, though, such a process of writing national theatre histories by locating theatre events in multiple or even contradictory historical contexts can indicate how national identity is not a stable condition but a lived experience, subject to change.

Finally, this methodology emanates from identifying the ‘Greek/Other’ dichotomy as the cornerstone of Greekness. However, the ‘Self/Other’ opposition as a key element in the construction of national identities is not a particular Greek phenomenon.¹² The analysis of the reception of ‘Others’ in divergent national contexts can lead to the crystallisation of a wider methodology for writing national theatre histories by means of contextualising ‘the Other’s’ reception in order to imagine ‘the self’. It would be interesting to compare the findings of research conducted in this field, in order to unveil potential similarities in constructions of ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ through paradigms of reception in different parts of the world.¹³

¹² Jen Harvie makes similar observations about the complexion of British national identity through difference and opposition from other European countries. See Harvie, 2005, chapter 5.

¹³ This final suggestion resonates with discussions about ‘borders’ and ‘border-crossing’ in the field. Reinelt’s ‘Staging the Nation on Nation States’ (1999) is exemplary of this perspective; I believe that her observation that ‘the staging of other nations’ narratives and texts redeploys “foreign” national images and tropes for local purposes’ (126), exemplifies key issues when writing about theatre, reception and national identity and begs further critical attention.

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