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### The notion of the “foreigner” in contemporary Greek drama: “We” through the faces of the “others”

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## THE NOTION OF THE “FOREIGNER” IN CONTEMPORARY GREEK DRAMA: “WE” THROUGH THE FACES OF THE “OTHERS”

*Rea Grigoriou*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the dramaturgy of modern Greek playwrights, among others Vassilis Katsikonouris, Giannis Tsiros, Michalis Reppas, Thanasis Papathanasiou and Lena Kitsopoulou. It looks at how these dramatists approach the theme of “alterity” when in their dramatic productions it acquires the meaning of a different ethnic, religious, social and cultural element. It mainly reflects on the roles of the dramatic characters within the multiculturalist environment as it manifested in Greek society in the 1990s and at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The notion of “different” is also examined by drawing on political views of racist and nationalistic ideologies that emerge in the dramatic situations. The dramaturgical analysis is also comparatively combined with the way theatre reviewers and the audiences have received the productions, since the plays’ various interpretations by contemporary directors is considered of the utmost importance.

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At the turn of the twenty-first century, we can observe the development of a unique movement within modern Greek theatre; initially, it manifested itself in the local theatre system and mainly in the area of dramaturgy and then gradually in the field of stage writing. The production of plays focusing on reproducing unaltered scenes from the daily life of immigrants in Greece and the presence of the “other”, or the “foreigner”, as this term has been defined in reference to ethnic and mainly cultural alterity, composes a dramaturgical field where the notion of “diversity” acquires its appropriate interpretation. In reality, the whole endeavour achieved, up to a point, in differentiating itself from the established trends of social realism, since the creators of the movement did not ignore the codes introduced by the pioneers of the genre, such as Iakovos Kambanellis, Kostas Mourselas, Antonios Matesis and Loula Anagnostaki; yet, they did not restrict themselves in just superficially describing the living conditions of their dramatic characters. Heroes that carry the characteristics of their ethnic and cultural identity progressively replaced the lumpen heroes, such as those found in the dramaturgy of Yiorgos Dialekmenos in the earlier period of social realism. As this movement progressed, exhibiting a lesser or greater divergence between

the creators, the writers opted to finally work within a distinctive ethnography and a naturalistic representation of the realistic context.<sup>1</sup>

Concerning the presence of the “foreigner” in the dramaturgy of the 1990s and the identification of a historical landmark, we can locate it in Anagnostaki’s theatrical monologue *Ουρανός Κατακόκκινος* (*Deep Red Sky*), directed by Victor Ardittis in 1998 at the Experimental Stage of the National Theatre of Greece, and impeccably performed by Vera Zavitsanou in the context of an interesting dramaturgical composition entitled *Εμείς οι Άλλοι* (*We, The Others*). The composition included five “texts and pieces of music on contemporary disintegration”, as proclaimed in the subtitle of the performance.<sup>2</sup> The choice of the different works (Heiner Müller, Seamus Heaney, Oleg Bogayev, Bernard-Marie Koltès) was based on “the effort of the individual to define themselves in a world that is changing and to question their place, who they really are, and who else is inside this cosmogony”, as Ardittis points out in an interview in which he discusses the reasons behind the choice of the plays in that production.<sup>3</sup> The heroine, Sofia Apostolou, exhibits her inner personal agony by emotionally looking back on her life while, at the same time, attempting a mapping of the Greek landscape after the arrival of immigrants from former socialist countries. Mafia syndicates, prostitution and drug trafficking trap the young son of the heroine into a love affair with a “Romanian” immigrant; a relationship that proves to be tragically fatal for the life of the three characters presented in the monologue.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a historical overview of the 1990s, see Lina Rosi, “The Diverse Landscape of Contemporary Greek Playwriting”, *Gramma* 22/2 (2014), pp. 19–36; Platon Mavromoustakos, “Το θέατρο στην Ελλάδα 1940–2000: Μια επισκόπηση” [Theatre in Greece, 1940–2000: an overview], Athens: Kastaniotis, 2005; Mavromoustakos, “Προβλήματα υφολογικής κατάταξης της σύγχρονης ελληνικής δραματουργίας” [Contemporary Greek dramaturgy: problems in stylistic classification], in *Το ελληνικό θεατρικό έργο κατά τη δεκαετία του 1990* [Greek plays in the 1990s], ed. Dimitris Tsatsoulis, Athens: Ellinika Grammata, 2000, pp. 30–36; Mavromoustakos, “L’écriture grecque contemporaine à l’aube du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle: du collectif à l’intériorité”, in *Auteurs dramatiques grecs d’aujourd’hui: miroirs tragiques, fables modernes*, ed. Myrto Gondicas, Montreuil: Éditions Théâtrales, 2014, pp. 15–20.

<sup>2</sup> Concerning the political reflection and the critical insight that characterises the whole concept, see Platon Mavromoustakos, “Μόδα και πολιτική” [Fashion and politics], *Κυριακάτικη Ελευθεροτυπία*, 13 December 1998. The article is republished in Mavromoustakos, *Αντί κριτικής: Σημειώσεις ενός συστηματικού θεατή* [Anti-criticism: notes of a systematic viewer], Athens: Kastaniotis, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Vassilis Angelikopoulos, “Εικόνες του σήμερα” [Images of today], *Καθημερινή*, 20 June 1999.

<sup>4</sup> For the dramaturgical analysis of the monologue, see Dio Kangelari, “Επίμετρο” [Addendum], in Loula Anagnostaki, *Θέατρο: Η νίκη. Ο ουρανός κατακόκκινος. Σ’εσάς που*

The dramaturgical motif of the foreign Russian dancer constitutes the main topic in Giannis Tsiros’ first play, titled *Αξύριστα Πηγούνια* (*Unshaved Chins*), which, written in 1996, was awarded the National Prize in 2004 for the best new theatrical writer organised by the Ministry of Culture. The play was a box office success from 2006 to 2008, when it was staged at the Stoa Theatre, directed by Thanasis Papageorgiou and in which actors Gerasimos Skiadaresis, Ieroklis Michailides and Odysseas Papaspiliopoulos exhibited spectacular interpretive skills.

The author himself points out that although his work is a naïve popular play, without exceptionally clever heroes, and that it “is about the society we have created in recent decades”,<sup>5</sup> its main topic focuses on the way female existence is treated by male nature, “especially when that existence is as vulnerable as an immigrant woman”.<sup>6</sup> Actually, what the play’s dramaturgical analysis reveals is the use of the anadiplosis technique: on a first level, the subject of the play is the suffering of the “foreigner”, of the “immigrant in our country”, but as the action unfolds what clearly emerges on stage is a number of additional subject motifs; the lack of tolerance, the search for casual sexual pleasure, male conceit and vanity, the lack of politeness and respect towards the different cultural element, the dependence on an economic eudaemonism, and finally the instinct of the

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με ακούτε [Theatre: Victory. Deep red sky. To you who listen], vol. 1, Athens: Kedros, 2007. “The distant, utopian and ironic heroine of *Ο Ουρανός κατακόκκινος* [*Deep Red Sky*] observes from above her own personal history and history at the turn of a century. In a post-dramatic era, through the contradictory pair of the dead communist husband and a son imprisoned in Korydallos, for his participation in a prostitution ring, what emerges again is another aspect of leaving one’s country, from the viewpoint of Greece this time, as a host country now, after the fall of the ‘real socialist’ countries” (p. 152). See also Chrysa Prokopaki, “Τα πρόσωπα της Λούλας Αναγνωστάκη” [The dramatic characters of Loula Anagnostaki], programme of the Nea Skini production, National Theatre, Athens, pp. 39–44.

<sup>5</sup> “Indeed, *Αξύριστα Πηγούνια* (*Unshaved Chins*) is a naïve popular work, without particularly clever heroes, who all, though, suffer from some sort of guilt. All three of them go to strip clubs. I need to add something here: when I imagine myself in such places, I feel that if I needed to do it, I would be really depressed and lack any sexual satisfaction and fulfilment. All three of them, working as shift nurses, have been ‘suitors’ to the dead foreign stripper whose nude body is lying in front of them. Now, while being on duty, it is about time they have to face up to their responsibilities. But which ones? And what is more naked? The nudity of the body or the nudity of the gaze? The dancing body or the eyes looking at it?” Giannis Tsiros, “Τα Αξύριστα Πηγούνια” [*Unshaved Chins*], interview by Iliana Dimadi, *Αθηνόραμα*, 2 July 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Vassilis Angelikopoulos, “Τέσσερις νέες φωνές για το θέατρο” [Four new voices for the theatre], *Καθημερινή*, 5 November 2006.

powerful as it expresses itself towards the vulnerable recipient, whether that person is a foreigner or the “weaker” sex.<sup>7</sup>

The poetic image portrayed in Kyriakos’ monologue at the end of the one-act play is indicative of the sensitive way the writer perceived the issue of Irina’s departure from her home country. To quote an extract from the play’s finale:

Kyriakos: She told me the name of her village, but I forgot it... Whatever, it doesn’t exist anymore. There is a lake now in its place. An artificial lake. The inhabitants were scattered in nearby cities. She was young when they left. What was left behind is water covering all the houses. They also dropped inside the lake a variety of fish for fishing. She said that a day before she was to leave for Greece, she went with her father to see her sunken village. They rented a boat and went far out into the lake. The waters were transparent... They were looking down, she said, following the central street... Where they used to take long walks... They floated along until they were over their old house... They saw it at the bottom... Fish were going in and out of the doors and windows... They stayed there staring at it until the sun moved and the water became a mirror...<sup>8</sup>

This specific narration is part of Irina’s recollection: a dead Russian dancer, whose corpse body is lying dead and remains unclaimed, or better among the “unidentified”, in the mortuary in the basement of a state hospital. The nude body of the stripper does not lay claim to any identity, be it in terms of a country or of origins. The autopsy is explicit: “Young female, a Jane Doe.” Kyriakos is one of the three dramatic characters who are implicated in the death of the young woman. All three have in a different way made Irina part of their lives, and this unique relationship with her is what they gradually reveal inside the macabre environment of a morgue. Kyriakos is the informal husband; the young Marinakis, the secret confessor; and Savvas Andreou, the typical Greek family man – but also a rapist. Irina suffers a fatal heart attack while working, after she finishes her dance routine on stage, probably as the result of alcohol and drug abuse. The coincidence seems rather simplistic: all three are public sector employees working at the morgue and they undertake the difficult task to receive the body and reestablish a moral relation with it; at the same time what emerges is guilt, insecurity, male conceit and also the stupidity of each character.

<sup>7</sup> The following dialogue shows the way the “foreigner” is treated as a special social group:

Savvas: I sometimes do not understand these foreign women.

Kyriakos: Fuck me, man! Which foreign women? You are getting on my nerves. She wasn’t a foreigner. She lived with me for three years.

Giannis Tsiros, *Θέατρο: Τα μάτια τέσσερα. Αξύριστα πιγούνια* [Theatre: Four eyes; Unshaved chins], Athens: Kedros, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 165–166.

Tsiros’ dramatic characters in *Unshaved Chins* do not express themselves poetically; quite the opposite. Their attitude is brutal and tough as they build their identity on a constant dialogue with the “different”. Irina not only represents the female gender, but the foreign ethnic and cultural element; despite being absent from the action, she constitutes part of their lives, is organically attached to it, even when she is rejected as foreign.

Reviews aptly pointed out that this was the first attempt in modern Greek dramaturgy to present both the “morally hot” issue of offending a foreign young woman, and the psychological portrait of the men who, although they have a different relation with her, are all guilty.<sup>9</sup> However, there were also objections, mainly concerning the “beatification” of the woman’s character and the constructed stereotypes Tsiros used in order to develop his dramatic characters, resulting in approaching the issue superficially and creating a “bad weepie”.<sup>10</sup>

Another representative example of the dramaturgy of the “foreigner” is Vassilis Katsikonouris’ *To Γάλα* (*Milk*), where the concept of the different

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<sup>9</sup> Giannis Varveris, “Bodies: O tempora, o (a)mores! Ευηπώληπτα κορμιά-κουρελάκια στον καντό άνεμο του νεοέλληνα” [Bodies: O tempora, o (a)mores! Respectable bodies–rags in the hot wind of modern Greek men], *Καθημερινή*, 22 April 2006. See also theatrical reviews of the performance: “Τι μετράνε οι άντρες μεταξύ τους;” [What do men measure among each other?], *Απογευματινή*, 12 February 2006; and Georgios Sarigiannis, “Αζήτητα γοβάκια” [Unclaimed high heels], *Τα Νέα*, 4 March 2006; Anastasia Paretzoglou, “Αξύριστα Πιγούνια” [Unshaved chins], *Down Town*, April 2006; Kostas Georgousopoulos, “Έργο σκληρό, με γλώσσα νυστέρι” [A tough play, with sharp language], *Τα Νέα*, 2 April 2006; Grigoris Ioannidis, “Αξύριστα Πιγούνια” [Unshaved chins], *Αντί*, 7 April 2006; Minas Christidis, “Αξύριστα Πιγούνια” [Unshaved chins] (Porta). *Motherland* (Bios): Από το νεκροτομείο στο μη θέατρο” [Unshaved chins and Motherland: From the morgue to the non-theatre], *Ελευθεροτυπία*, 15 April 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Stella Loizou was negative in her review: “Until the end of the night we had been completely persuaded. Every negative association, a product of prejudices, vanished. Irina is not what everybody thinks she is, what we all believe Russian immigrant strippers really do in our country. She is considerate, hardworking, loyal to the man she lives with – although he doesn’t propose to her, he is pathologically jealous of her and keeps slapping her – studious, generous, forgives even her rapist, suffers her hardships with dignity, silently endures humiliations and ridicule that in the end destroy her health; she finally chooses to die while working instead of not paying Kostopoulos’ car instalments – even though he was the one who made her have three abortions. A naïve approach and a bad weepie: a combination that can kill. Invert everything quickly and then the ‘hooker’ becomes a ‘saint’: one cliché after the other. The play, though, has heroes and dialogues that are nicely devised and function well, but the way and style of writing is really so old-fashioned and the depictions so blatant that you cannot decide what is worse: The social message against the bad treatment of these young sex workers? The device of the rapist–supervisor–buddy who realises the crime he had committed only too late? Or the young colleague and rival who reveals that he didn’t sleep

element operates on two levels: on the one hand, the alterity of the ethnic identity of the dramatic characters and, on the other, the unusual personality of the youngest son of the Georgian family, as it exhibits itself through his psychopathic behaviour. Eighteen-year-old Lefteris experiences three different worlds: the world he lives as an immigrant in Greek society; the world he would have liked to live, the one of his homeland, Tbilisi, with its impressive landscape; and the one of an invented reality as created by schizophrenia, the illness he suffers from.

The symptoms of the disorder are distinct: disorganised behaviour, ambivalence and aggression especially towards his mother, emotional instability, an obsession with a Russian footballer, Parastatov, and constant delusional behavioural expressions.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, for Lefteris, the term “homeland” has been lucidly deleted: it is an experiential understanding of familiarity: a familiar space of living, attaching memory to space, relationships of immediacy, language integration, and participation in experiential reality. He is the only one who cannot understand why they left Georgia to come to Greece, why his brother denies revisiting their childhood dreams, when they hadn’t felt any fear, fear of everyone and of everything; fear of being betrayed and stigmatised, and more importantly of being deported.

This feeling is constantly in conflict with the mother’s persistence to integrate as much as they can, even to the point of total assimilation:

Rina: What do you want with these foreigners? You should have only Greek friends at school. To be Greek, to become Greek, don’t you see what Antonis does?

Lefteris: Leave me alone, all these wankers.

Rina: Some even change their names to sound more Greek. They change them into... ancient ones! Euripides, Aristides, Archimedes...

Lefteris: And what should I change it into, *Testiclidis*?

Rina: What I want to say..., especially you... that your father comes from here.

Lefteris: Let him be, he doesn’t count.

Rina: And who counts? The mother? You should know that if I had had a choice, I would have liked to have been born here.

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with her every time she visited him at his house but used to teach her modern Greek?” Stella Loizou, “Σάντα Ιρίνα” [Saint Irina], review, *To Βήμα*, 24 November 2006.

<sup>11</sup> It has to be pointed out here that Katsikonouris also approached the issue of mental disorders in his first play, written in 1991, titled *Εντελώς αναξιοπρεπές* (*Totally Undignified*), which takes place inside a mental hospital. His heroes are the few survivors of a plane crash who, suffering from post-traumatic amnesia, are undergoing innovative medical treatment.

Lefteris: Why, mother? What has Russia done to you after all?

Rina: You are too young to remember.

Lefteris: But I do remember. I remember, it had many trees.

Rina: Birches, so what?

Lefteris: But here, dry land. It's like a desert, made out of cement. How did you call these trees?

Rina: Which trees?

The play, put on in 2006 at the Nea Skini of the National Theatre of Greece and directed by Nikos Mastorakis, became a box office success.<sup>12</sup> Critics were of the opinion that the direction enhanced the play, with some of them suitably commenting on the writing's lack of dramaturgical techniques: conventional symbolisms such as the mother who cannot breastfeed her own child, the homeland that cannot feed its own children, the stereotype of the poor and ambitious immigrant who marries the daughter of his boss in order to become the owner of the gas station, the attempted rape of the bride by the naïve but paranoid brother and, finally, the melodramatic finale of committing young Lefteris to a mental hospital after the death of his mother.<sup>13</sup> However, there are other reviews that present the play as having a "roughness, a cynicism that suits the subject, and poetic 'moments', whereas the writer exhibits a Chekhovian love for his characters since he accepts them as they are".

I consider these two plays typical examples of a dramaturgy where the concept of alterity is the dramatic focus from the beginning to the very end. *Milk* is balanced between a mental disorder and social pathology, while in *Unshaved Chins*, ethnic alterity clearly converses with social alterity, and it is this exact

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<sup>12</sup> The cast was Mania Papadimitriou (Rina), Konstandinos Papachronis (Lefteris), Giannos Perlengas (Antonis) and Maria Papastefanaki (Natassa).

<sup>13</sup> "The three main characters of the play are developed lucidly, we clearly see though not only their dilemmas and a yearning for life, but also their attraction to death. The text is well written; it approaches with sensitivity and tenderness those tortured beings that are floundering about in purgatory, hoping to enter a forbidden paradise that they will never succeed in doing. A text that achieves its goals on an emotional level but is lacking in the use of dramaturgical techniques: conventional symbolisms, the mother who cannot breastfeed her child, the motherland that cannot feed its children, but also many other clichés; Makis, the 'bad' influence who 'corrupts' the 'simple-minded' schizophrenic, the poor and ambitious immigrant who marries the daughter of the boss to get his hands on the gas station, the bride who is almost raped and the melodramatic finale, reminiscent of Blanche DuBois, where the brother, a good person at heart, has to betray the younger one and admit him to a mental hospital, and the "white hands" that belong to the heartless nurses, emit a feeling of something old, trivial, obsolete and predictable." Stella Loizou, "Εύφλεκτο υλικό" [Flammable material], review, *To Βήμα*, 19 March 2006.



differentiation from the “foreign” that empowers and bonds the lives of the three men. As Katsikonouris mentions in an interview with *Καθημερινή*: “I am interested in the issue of foreignness. To feel like a stranger. Not only in its literal meaning, as an immigrant or someone mentally ill, but stranger in general. The feeling of what is foreign in our lives.”<sup>14</sup>

Wording related to immigration, such as “foreigner”, “residence permit”, “papers”, “illegal residence”, or profanities in Bulgarian or Russian are ubiquitous throughout the action, while in Katsikonouris’ play the use of language constitutes a separate issue for study since the Russian dialogues take up a large part of the theatrical action. Besides being the title of the play, *Milk* refers to a Russian word that means “soft”, which the writer explains extensively.<sup>15</sup>

An interesting aspect in the way the two writers develop their stories is that whatever happens in the plots, their tragic outcome does not result from the character or the mentality of the protagonists. It has, rather, been determined by the experiences and the environment of where they had lived and is clearly formed by the presence of the “other”, the foreigner, the different, within the social fabric of our frequent domestic “phobism”.

At this point I would like to pose the following question in relation to our subject: to what degree do the two writers manage to transcend the realistic context in order to avoid having their works characterised as “easy” products and their classification in the genre of a realistic *ethnography*?<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Angelikopoulos, “Τέσσερις νέες φωνές για το θέατρο” [Four new voices for the theatre].

<sup>15</sup> See the programme of the Nea Skini–Theatre Chora production, National Theatre, Athens, Winter 2005–2006, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> On the dramaturgy of the “foreigner” and the realistic writing of Tsiros, see Savas Patsalidis, “Ο αποκαλυπτικός ρεαλισμός του Γιάννη Τσίρου” [The revealing realism of Giannis Tsiros], *Greek Play Project*, accessed 24 November 2019, <http://www.greek-theatre.gr/public/gr/greekplay/index/reviewview/21>: “We might say that the diasporic circumstances of the last decades have benefited the dynamic appearance of the notion of the ‘other’ in the international theatre, it is the Greek theatre though that firstly showed the way. Is there a more overwhelming example from the *Persians* and *The Trojan Women*? Who doesn’t know Hecuba, Andromache, Darius, Xerxes and the formidable Medea in the tragedy of the same title? Having such heritage, it is not surprising that more and more modern playwrights, showing concern and apprehension, attempt to deal with sensitive matters that directly penetrate the multifaceted body of contemporary Greek society, provoking as such various reactions and social restructuring. Of course I’m not referring to Loula Anagnostaki or Petros Markaris, both of whom have written important works on the issue of the ‘other’, but to newer artists. Among them I discern the talented Giannis Tsiros, who, drawing ideas from the pool of that large theatrical family, turns them into

Besides, both writers express their fears about the way people interpret naturalism in their plays, as they do not consider their plays to be “purely realistic”. As Katsikonouris told *Καθημερινή*:

Fortunately my fears that my play, especially if it fell into the wrong hands, could be perceived as one hundred per cent realistic or naturalistic were not confirmed. Although on a superficial level it can be seen as such, yet beneath the surface there are many other meanings and interpretations for a shrewd director. It was only when I heard that Nikos Mastorakis was going to direct it that I felt relieved. And it is true that he managed to bring forth what it is beneath that surface.<sup>17</sup>

I also cite Tsiros’ view, as expressed in the same article: “In general, as I’m writing, I’m trying to visualise my story inside a natural space – that is to say that I am interested in having a realistic base, but not the details that typify naturalism. I would like to have a realistic tone on which everyone can then build.”<sup>18</sup>

However we should make it clear that construing alterity as meaning something “foreign” is not uniform in contemporary Greek dramaturgy. In 2001 Panagiotis Mentis won third prize in the Onassis Foundation International Competition for his play *Ξένοι* (*Foreigners*), “without an article” as he clarifies, emphasising the fact that “alienation in a foreign land concerns everyone – Greeks, Albanians, Kurds, all of us”.<sup>19</sup> In this play, the Greek Foreigner is placed in the American continent, searching to fulfil the dream of the Promised Land across the Atlantic, as economic migrants have traditionally tried to do there for centuries. Mentis himself believes that the subject of this play differs fundamentally from his previous work and constitutes a “dramatic epopoeia” of Greek immigrants in America, in which a widowed mother is trying, within a “diverse” and “centrifugal” world, to offer a traditional but, at the same time, dynamic motherly devotion to her children, as

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short spectacles indicative of our neoliberal era. He was born in Messinia, grew up in Athens and studied design, photography and music. He became famous to theatrephiles in 2004 when he was awarded by the Ministry of Culture for his play *Αξύριστα πηγούνια* [*Unshaved Chins*], a simple but truthful popular work whose protagonists are three male nurses who often visit strip shows in their free time. Their lives are turned upside down when, at the hospital where they all work, the body of a young Russian stripper with whom they all had, at times, some kind of a relationship, is brought in. Facing that body they had once exploited, they are now being asked to look back and draw their own personal ‘report’. Can they do it, though?”

<sup>17</sup> Angelikopoulos, “Τέσσερις νέες φωνές για το θέατρο” [Four new voices for the theatre]. See also the dramaturgical analysis of Evanthia Stivanaki, “Δίχως Γάλα” [Without milk], programme of the Nea Skini production, National Theatre, pp. 13–15.

<sup>18</sup> Angelikopoulos, “Τέσσερις νέες φωνές για το θέατρο” [Four new voices for the theatre].

<sup>19</sup> See Vassilis Angelikopoulos, “Έγραψα θέατρο για να πάρω εκδίκηση” [I wrote plays to take revenge], interview with Panagiotis Mentis, *Καθημερινή*, 9 December 2001.

Walter Puchner wrote in the jury decision for the Onassis Prize.<sup>20</sup> The plot of the story unfolds again around the “axis” of the Russian immigrant, her love affair with the Greek son and the hostile attitude of both the close and broader family environments, the moral stance of the mother and her supportive and tenacious attitude within the drama. Mentis mainly draws his inspiration from the social and political events that form the background, where women coming from former real socialist countries were exploited by prostitution and illegal human trafficking rings in Europe and the US.<sup>21</sup>

The play was staged in 2002 at the Nea Skini of the National Theatre, directed by Kostas Bakas; Betty Valassi played the role of the Greek mother and Alexandra Sakelaropoulou the role of the Russian daughter-in-law, Katia. The reviews of that period identify the weak points in the dramaturgy of *Foreigners*. They locate the “logical lapses” (Grigoris Ioannidis) and the discontinuities in the plot, its boring and dull atmosphere, a kind of writing that follows the techniques of “television serials” (Kostas Georgousopoulos), and the excessive use of flashback narration. The impression that a contemporary researcher draws from reviews of and other publications about *Foreigners* is that it reaches only “the middle of its development”, “does not have a climax” and does not realise its dramaturgical intention. Considerable doubts have also been expressed concerning the objectivity of the selection criteria applied by the members of the Onassis Prizes Committee that awarded *Foreigners* as the best play of that year.<sup>22</sup>

Two more playwrights, Thanasis Papathanasiou and Michalis Reppas, who intentionally place the subject of the “foreigner” at the centre of their writing interest, have elaborated on the subject of the immigrant as a dramatic

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<sup>20</sup> For the dramaturgical analysis of the play, see Giorgos Pefanis, “Ξένοι: Ταυτότητες και διαφορές” [Foreigners: identities and differences], programme of the National Theatre production, Athens, 8 March–28 April 2002.

<sup>21</sup> In an interview, Mentis confirms the realistic background of the plot: “I read a publication about offices in Russia that sprung up like mushrooms, supposedly transporting brides to the countries of the West, educated young women, possessing degrees and knowledge, who end up becoming prostitutes. It upset me. Then when my wife told me about something similar that had happened to a family we know in the US, I felt that I had to write about all this. It was the trigger I needed.” Angelikopoulos, “Τέσσερις νέες φωνές για το θέατρο” [Four new voices for the theatre].

<sup>22</sup> For reviews of the performance at the Nea Skini, National Theatre, see Grigoris Ioannides, “Οι Ξένοι” [The foreigners], *Αντί*, 14 June 2002; Kalliopi Rapanaki, “Ξένοι” [Foreigners], *Η Νίκη*, 31 March 2002; Kostas Georgousopoulos, “Δράματα μεταναστών” [Tragedies of immigrants], *Τα Νέα*, 8 April 2002; Matina Kaltaki, “Γιατί οι Ξένοι έχασαν το στοίχημα...” [The reason foreigners lost the bet...], *Επενδυτής*, 13 April 2002; Thymeli, “Ξένο και ελληνικό ρεπερτόριο” [Foreign and Greek repertoire], *Ριζοσπάστης*, 23 April 2002.

character in a variety of comedies and dramas. In their first play, *Μπαμπάδες με ρούμι* (*Baba Rum*, 1996), a black comedy containing bold comic elements, the “Bulgarian” house cleaner of the family marries the grandfather she looks after and, as such, plays an important role in the rising action and unfolding of the plot.<sup>23</sup>

What Reppas and Papathanasiou do in two plays, *Έβρος απέναντι* (*Opposite the Evros*) and *Πατρίδες* (*Homelands*), where they compile real narrations of immigrants and which was put on in 2012 at the Nikos Kourkoulos Stage of the National Theatre, is to aptly declare the multiplicity of the term “alterity”. To cite an extract from the introduction to the programme of the 2012 performance at the Nikos Kourkoulos Stage of the National Theatre:

It is the third time we address the subject of the foreigner. In 1999 with *Έβρος απέναντι* [*Opposite the Evros*] we tried to touch on these fractures in Greek society that allow violent behaviours to surface. In 2008 in *Συμπέθεροι απ’τα Τίρανα* [*The Parents-in-law from Tirana*] we tried to create a popular fair where the foreign element could be destigmatised and accepted. It is the third time this year that we’ve dealt with this subject but in a completely different way. The previous two attempts did not really touch on the concept of the foreigner. They approached him/her as a catalyst that brings out “familiar troubles”. The invasion of the foreigner in both plays instigates a series of reactions where what is being slowly revealed is the personality of the people who receive the foreigners and not the character of the immigrants. In *Πατρίδες* [*Homelands*] we tried to actually attend to the matter of the immigrant. Not immigrants as we perceive them, but as they perceive themselves.<sup>24</sup>

In *Homelands* the two co-authors consider immigration to be an “existential experience”. They collected authentic material from various sources and then compiled it in a documentary-play in which they did not insert even a word of their own, as they point out in the programme. It is essentially a collage of

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<sup>23</sup> For the place of the specific play in modern Greek dramaturgy, see Rea Grigoriou, “Η επίδραση της τηλεοπτικής αισθητικής στο νεοελληνικό θέατρο” [The influence of television aesthetics on modern Greek theatre], in *Από τη χώρα των κειμένων στο βασίλειο της σκηνής* [From the country of texts to the kingdom of the stage], ed. Gogo Varzelioti, Athens: Department of Theatre Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, 2014, pp. 515–525. For the televisual character of *Έβρος απέναντι* (*Opposite the Evros*), see Savas Patsalidis, “Όταν πρωταγωνιστούν οι ηθοποιοί” [When the actors are the protagonists], review of Moni Lazariston performance, Thessaloniki, *Αγγελιοφόρος της Κυριακής*, 5 January 2014.

<sup>24</sup> Thanasis Papathanasiou and Michalis Reppas, “Πρόλογος” [Introduction], programme of the National Theatre production, Athens, 22 February–13 May 2012, p. 4.

narrations and testimonies composing a biography. What lies beneath the surface of the unpredictable and adventurous conditions of the immigrants' journey is a journey back to childhood, to the period where everyone's experiences originate and where they feel at home. The notion of expatriation acquires a different context. It is to depart from the safe and steady world of our childhood and to move to the unstable and blurred world of adulthood.<sup>25</sup> The poetic, rather romantic and penetrating gaze of the writers turns everyone into "the other", foreigners who have forgotten their place of origin. The motto of the performance is indicative of that philosophical quest for the cradle of human existence.

The world we left was another  
The world we lived was another  
The world we found again is another.

All the heterogeneous pieces that the nine actors of the theatre group (three Greek actors and six foreigners) perform basically compose the story of a deracinated person. The performance, directed by the playwrights, was considered to be an important milestone in the dramaturgy of the genre under examination.

In May 2018 the National Theatre's Young People's Stage (Mikro Ethniko) was inaugurated with a performance of the metonymic title *To Taξίδι* (*The Journey*). The play belongs to the genre of documentary theatre and is based on authentic migration stories of adolescent immigrants. It describes the journey of departing from their homeland, from a familiar way of life, childhood experiences, recollections, language, religion, games and, mainly, from their beloved parents. It is during that long journey that they irreversibly detach themselves from the first notion of identity. The dramatic characters in the visual performance were real heroes: refugees aged from 14 to 19, from five different countries, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Pakistan. Together with Greek professional actors, they attempted on an earthen-made scenery to reveal the only theatrical truth: that aesthetics is the quintessence of human morality. In any case, the theatrical *The Journey* of refugees reveals the beauty of the quest, adventure and adaptation to the new and the unexpected that every new experience offers. The theatrical experience was a shared one, without primary or secondary roles. All the elements of the performance (music, movement, dance, dramatisation) contributed to creating on stage a meaning that exceeded the boundaries of locality and disclosed a moral reflection on human pain. Moreover, the performance managed to activate the audience's imagination by abolishing classical forms. Sofia Vgenopoulou, artistic director of the Mikro Ethniko, directed these authentic

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<sup>25</sup> See the programme of the National Theatre production, 22 February–13 May 2012, p. 5.

stories by looking into the real relation of adolescents with the experience of separation, fear, desperation, the denial of dreams and, finally, the hope cultivated within the reality of the new country.

The body language, gestures, laughter and the screams of the young people being woken up by their nightmares comprise the common language of the dramatic characters. The apt language of the scripts of Artemis Manou and Vangelis Kyriakos is always metonymic since the heroes talk without really saying anything, talk as if they are dancing, carrying out linguistic pirouettes in the void. The homelands in *The Journey* at Young People’s Stage were based fully on improvisation and the way they were staged differed from Reppas and Papathanasiou’s *Homelands*; yet, they were similar in the way they conceived the idea of a person’s departure from childhood and motherland where one’s experiences originate from.

The comic artist Arkas holds a special place in our overview of the matter as a satirical writer of the 2011 play *Βιολογικός μετανάστης* (*Biological Immigrant*), an allegory that can be seen as an extension of his first play, *Εχθροί εξ αίματος* (*Blood Enemies*, 2007). He received rave reviews for his first effort and his success in creating dramatic characters that differed from the stereotypes used by other dramatists. The author, indeed, presenting us with a pig suffering from the Oedipus complex and a mouse exhibiting an incredible acidic and ironic sense of humour, examined in the second play the phenomenon of hospitality inside the human organism and captured as a biologist-cartoonist-playwright what is “inside” as a miniature of the “outside”. He captivated the audience with his surreal ingenuity and created a “black masterpiece”, a “macabre” and “shiny comedy”, which Vangelis Theodoropoulos, respecting the origins of the play from the genre of comic books, directed with consistency and simplicity.<sup>26</sup>

In *Biological Immigrant*, Arkas also reveals his intention to culturally broaden Greek dramaturgy, to dispel xenophobia and to highlight the need of Greek society to organically assimilate diversity within its fabric. Experienced in the comic distortion of dramatic elements, he immerses the spectator in the bowels of the human body and analyses the natural tendency of people to reject the different. The roles emerge metonymically as the protagonists are the human organs: the liver, the spleen and the bladder. All three fight about the fate of a fourth organ, a foreigner, the kidney that has just been transplanted to the body.

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<sup>26</sup> For the aesthetics of *Εχθροί εξ αίματος* [*Blood enemies*], see Louisa Arkoumanea, “Ο Χοντρός, ο Λιγνός και ο Νεφρός” [The fat, the slim and the kidney], review of Neos Kosmos Theatre performance, Athens, *Το Βήμα*, 8 March 2009, and Katerina Diakoumopoulou, “Μία ζοφερή κωμωδία” [A dark comedy], review of Studio Vis Motrix performance, Thessaloniki, *Αυγή*, 5 November 2010.

The confrontations are really intense, and the dramatic climax is achieved when the lowest vital organs prefer to die rather than to integrate the kidney, which is a superior organ for the functioning of the system. The following excerpt is indicative of the dismissive tactics of the other organs:

The spleen: We are relaxed because they have brought us to our knees with immunosuppressants. But soon we will regroup and start the attack.

The liver: To attack whom?

The spleen: The foreigner.

The liver: Why???

The spleen: Because he is a foreigner.

The liver: Wait a minute; we don't want to go totally crazy, that is... It is the task of the immune system to attack the noxious foreigners. The kidney is a beneficial foreigner. Why do we want to attack it???

The spleen: A foreigner is always a foreigner...

The liver: So, you want to tell me that you prefer a machine to clean our blood rather than to have a proper kidney?

The spleen: Naturally. Because the machine is clean!! Sterilised!! Impersonal!! It does its work, and is it over??? That kidney, do you know where it comes from and what problems may cause us... what diseases does it carry??? How can a foreigner be compatible with us??? It is foreign blood... foreign DNA! What business has it got in our organism??<sup>27</sup>

Also in 2011, *Ξένος* (*Foreigner*) was staged at Vryssaki theatre. It follows the logic of the one-act plays *Αόρατη Όλγα* (*Invisible Olga*) by Tsiros and *Αουστρας ή η Αγγιάδα* (*Aoustras or the Hardness*) by Lena Kitsopoulou. The dramaturgical focus is not only the sufferings of foreigners within Greek society but mainly the pathology of this society in the way it interprets the notion of diversity, whether this concerns an immigrant of Bulgarian origin or a Western European tourist.

Greek dramatists sensitise the audience to identify with the sufferings of the “other” even if the person is Western European, as in *Aoustras* or the *Hardness*, and by approaching the matter in such a way they enhance Greek national self-consciousness. A gang of young boys, dead bored and feeling stranded, ends up committing a cold-blooded crime just because the victim is not Greek and has

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<sup>27</sup> Arkas, *Βιολογικός Μετανάστης* [Biological immigrant], Athens: Grammata, 2011, pp. 19–20.



not been initiated into the fascination of ancient Greek civilisation.<sup>28</sup> Since the playwright has revealed that she is an admirer of Michael Haneke, we should point out the distant relation of the play with the theme and plot of the Austrian director’s film *Funny Games*. In that film too, two young men, who consider killing to be their hobby, keep a family of three hostage, subjecting them to sadistic torture on the pretext of philosophical practice.<sup>29</sup>

Tsiros’ *Invisible Olga* is another example of the dramaturgy under examination, as its plot bluntly encompasses the inhuman dimension of the behaviour of “we” against the others.<sup>30</sup> It presents accurately the motif of impunity from the judicial system, the forced prostitution of the foreigner and the contempt for human dignity by the same institutions that profess to protect it.

This time the immigrant is an 18-year-old Bulgarian, kept for 14 months in a room, without her homeland, without dreams, without any hope of escaping from this situation, a young woman present as a protagonist of the dramatic motifs throughout the action; utilising abstraction techniques, the playwright is critical of his themes and explores the psychological traits of her personality.

In the finale of the play, a doctor – an accomplice in the crime of prostitution and the enforced detention of the young woman in the illegal brothel – after he diagnoses her to be “used to lying shamelessly”, ignoring her responsibilities and considering herself to be the victim of deception, gently advises her to keep quiet and accept her fate of an illegal immigrant:

Doctor: Shush... For you silence is helpful, my little one, didn’t we say so? And now that you are leaving, you’d better be careful out there... Life won’t be easy for you... For the men you will be prey, for their women a nightmare... Nobody will want to help you... Believe me... You don’t have a homeland... You don’t have papers, name... nobody will believe you... they can’t see you... you are invisible.

Similarly, Tsiros works on the subject of the foreigner in a 2013 play he titles, metaphorically, *Άγριος Σπόρος* (*Wild Seed*). This time though, as in Kitsopoulou’s

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<sup>28</sup> For the dramaturgy of Kitsopoulou, see Rosi, “The Diverse Landscape”.

<sup>29</sup> “I believe in nature, people, the mechanisms of the Universe. In deities such as the wave, the sea... Not in religion, not in astrological signs. God is Alexandros Papadiamandis, Michael Haneke, a piece of music by Bach, by Beethoven, it is there where God exists, in an unknown person stuck in a corner, who might as well be a nice guy.” Kitsopoulou, interview by Mariza Koutsoupa, *Art Magazine*, 20 January 2012.

<sup>30</sup> I would like to sincerely thank Giannis Tsiros for his contribution to the writing of this article and for giving me the unpublished play *Αόρατη Όλγα* (*Invisible Olga*) in order to assist me in its dramaturgical analysis.



play *Aoustras or the Hardness*, the different ethnic identity that presents a threat to the national coherence of modern Greeks is a young Western European man, a German. The tourist, who disappears in an anonymous seaside of a Greek village, is absent from the theatrical action, described only as a dramatic character by a German group that comes to Greece to find what happened to him.<sup>31</sup>

The playwright's favourite motifs, recognisable from his previous works, recur: the interrogation, the mystery of legitimising illegal actions, judicial power, the citizen's helplessness against the power of the state, the powerful character of the law against "weak" citizens, the fictitious feeling that all citizens are the same and the invasion of the "foreigner" giving legitimacy to domestic racist phenomena. The device of the German identity is obviously not accidental for a country in the midst of a serious and long-lasting financial crisis. The performance, which has been running since 8 November 2015 at Epi Kolono theatre, is staged by the Nama Group and directed by Eleni Skoti.

In conclusion, Greek dramaturgy exploited as a background the way a receiving society treats immigrants and, as such, brought to the fore the inability of society to assimilate the different element within the domestic ethnic and cultural experience. It analysed the "troubles" of the foreigners in the country in an ironic, acerbic, comic or dramatic way, as well as our own pathogenesis and immaturity to handle the phenomenon of the arrival of "foreigners". However, it promoted our inherent desire to discover the "we" through the dramatic characters of the "others".

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<sup>31</sup> For the dramaturgical analysis of *Άγριος Σπόρος* (*Wild Seed*), see Savas Patsalidis, in the Nea Skini-Theatre Chora production, National Theatre. "Confronting for one more time the foreigner, as 'mutual fear', Tsiros, using well-controlled manoeuvres, triggers small but intense conflicts that progressively increase in number, revealing in their interior infinite carcinomas that continue to metastasise ceaselessly."