

German-Greek Cultural Relations: Ancient Greece Meets Modern Germany

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Introduction

Aristophanes, Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides, Socrates. These are just a few of the names that made Greece and its culture known to the wider European and international audience many centuries ago. The above mentioned luminaries created dramas and comedies which writers later based their own works and plays on. If you are familiar with these names or have at least heard of them during your academic years, then this means that even today, the cultural exchange between countries meets no borders and boundaries. Although ancient Greek literature and mythology have been broadly known, there are some specific countries with which Greece created particular bonds. Germany is one of those.



Historical Background

Cultural ties between Germany and Greece have existed for more than three hundred years, since the first German philhellenes¹ provided assistance to the Greek struggle against the Ottoman rule in the early 1820s. In the following years and during the reign of the Bavarian King, *Otto von Wittelsbach* (1833-1862), many German scientists and administrators moved to Greece in order to work on the restoration and development of the country. The work of numerous German archaeologists and engineers, as well as the Greek legal

¹ The term comes from the ancient Greek and is a conjunction of the words “*philos*” which means “*friend*” and “*Hellen*” which means “*Greek*”. It has been used to describe people who were fond of Greek culture and supported the Greek movement towards its independence from the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, the term philhellenism means the love of Greek culture.

system, was inspired and based on the German system. This created strong bonds between the two countries which proved to be very important for their future relations. The Second World War that led to the invasion and occupation of Greece by the Germans (1941-1944) did not only break cultural but diplomatic relations but also cooperation between the two countries. However, as a result of the deep ties that already existed since the 19th century, especially in the academic sector, Germany and Greece managed to overcome the divisions caused by the war and restore their relations.

Cultural exchanges between these two countries are demonstrated by a series of co-operations between them, as well as many private initiatives from both sides. The first German move towards a cultural dialogue took place in 1874 thanks to the establishment of the first “*German Archaeological Institute*” (DAI) in Athens. This Institute has been and still is involved in many excavations in Ancient Olympia, Kerameikos (Athens), Kalapodi, Samos islands, Leukas and Ithaca and many more. Furthermore, the existence of the “*Goethe-Institut*” in Athens for more than 50 years (founded in 1952) is proof of the efforts being made to promote the German culture and language in Greece. With branches in Athens, Thessaloniki, Chania and Patras, the “*Goethe-Institut*” in Greece holds the more language examinations than anywhere else in the world (27,000 in 2006)². They also promote German culture throughout Greece by hosting many different events. In addition, since 2004 there is an information centre (DAAD) operating under the auspices of the “*Goethe-Institut*”, which provides advice on studying, researching and working in Germany.

On the other side, Greece has also been particularly active in promoting Greek culture in Germany over the last decades. Similar to the function of the “*Goethe-Institut*” and of other foreign institutes in Greece, in 1992 Greece established the “*Hellenic Foundation for Culture*” in Germany. Although at the beginning the Foundation was working under the auspices of the Ministry of

² Federal Foreign Office concerning Greece and the cultural relations between Germany and Greece: <http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/diplo/en/Laenderinformationen/01-Laender/Griechenland.html#t3>

Foreign Affairs, it soon became part of the Ministry of Culture in Greece. The main goal of the Foundation is to promote Greek culture and language throughout the world and for this reason it has offices in many European capitals including London, Vienna, Brussels, Berlin, Moscow. They also have offices outside Europe in cities such as Alexandria, Odessa, Washington D.C., Beijing and Melbourne.³ In 2008 the Foundation expanded its action by also establishing centres in Balkan cities such as Belgrade, Bucharest, Sofia, Tirana and Trieste. Its branch in Berlin was established in 1995 and has developed activities not only in Berlin but all over Germany and the German-speaking areas of Central Europe. The Foundation organises major events with the aim of promoting Greek language and culture. In order to achieve this, it is co-operating with local agencies, diplomatic authorities, and cultural institutions in other countries and similar organisations. More specifically, the work of the Foundation involves the organisation of different events like exhibitions, theatrical performances, lectures, discussions and screenings. Furthermore, it promotes the Greek language by offering courses at its branches and organising seminars. They also run initiatives at schools abroad in co-operation with local authorities. Apart from taking part in European and international cultural events, as well as theatrical, musical and cinema weeks, it highlights Greek cinema through regular screenings, film festivals and tributes. In addition, the Foundation publishes books and keeps up to date libraries which foreigners and Greek immigrants living abroad can access.

But even before the “*Hellenic Foundation for Culture*” was founded, another very important initiative, private this time, started in 1990 in Cologne - a German-Greek theatre, through which Greek culture and mythology is presented to the German public.

German-Greek Theatre in Cologne

³ Official Web-site of the Hellenic Foundation for Culture:
<http://www.hfc.gr>

The “*Deutsch-Griechisches Theater*” (GGT) in Cologne was founded in 1990 by the Greek director and theatrical writer Kostas Papakostopoulos. After studying Economics in the Economic University of Athens, Mr. Papakostopoulos moved to Germany and studied Theatrical Studies at the University of Cologne. He soon became very famous in Germany for his pioneering works of ancient drama performances, for investigating multiple options for the approach of drama and for promoting Greek Theatre in Germany in general. As a former co-worker of *Dimiter Gotscheff* in the “Schauspielhaus Köln” and of *Frank Castorf* at the “Volksbühne Berlin”, the director and founder of the theatre has managed not only to create a German-Greek theatrical cooperation but also to develop it further into a multinational cultural initiative. However, as he once said, the term “German-Greek” does not specifically refer to the nationality of the people involved, since it is not only these two nations that are involved. The name indicates more the general intention of such a theatre and the way his plays are selected. The main aim of the theatre is to create a bridge between Germany and Greece and also between the ancient and the modern



European theatre. As he stresses it was not within his intentions to create something purely and strictly Greek in order to just promote his country and its history. It was more of an effort to build a stable German-Greek co-operation



and a way to have a permanent cultural dialogue between the two countries. Furthermore, the founder of the “German-Greek Theatre” believes that Greek mythology and the ancient Greek drama are the foundations of the common European cultural heritage,⁴ a fact that inspires him on choosing the plays for the theatre.

Due to the fact that the theatre does not have its own house, every play is at different theatres and stages. Mr. Papakostopoulos has already worked with

⁴ Taken from the official web-site of the German-Greek Theatre: <http://www.dgt-koeln.de>

many famous German theatres such as the National Theatres of Cologne, Düsseldorf, Aachen, Ludwigshafen, Oberhausen and more. Although the GGT receives partial financial support from various foundations and ministries, like the Ministry of Culture and the Cultural Foundation of Nordrhein-Westfalen, the Cultural Office of Cologne and the Greek Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the GGT does not possess its own home theatre due to a lack of funds. However, this has its positive aspects.

It provides the director and the actors with the freedom to experience the power of a different scene and to adjust each play to the appropriate hall. Furthermore, because the GGT co-operates with so many different theatrical scenes it has helped to promote its reputation and increased the institute's popularity not only in Cologne but throughout Germany. Inspired mostly by ancient dramas, the plays Mr. Papakostopoulos selects to direct could be divided under three pillars. First of all, there are the works of ancient classical Greek authors such as Aristophanes, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Secondly, there are works by modern Greek authors in German translations (Kechaidis, Dimitriadis and Zioghas). And finally there are works by European writers such as Heiner Müller, William Shakespeare and Dea Loher. These writers were inspired by ancient Greek myths and culture.



Through his work Mr. Papakostopoulos is trying to combine the old with the new, and folklore tradition with today's reality. All of the theatrical plays are performed in the German language, but this does not mean that they are strictly German translations of the ancient Greek plays. The hard task of the director involves editing the texts, adding his own aesthetic view on the plays and of course adjusting them and transferring the authors' deepest meanings as he conceives it, into today's reality.

During the nineteen years since it was established, the German-Greek Theatre has presented 22 plays altogether. The performances include famous

works like “Plutos” and Aristophanes’ “The Frogs”; Euripides’ “Medea”; Aeschylus’ “The Persians”; and Sophocles’ “King Oedipus” and also plays like Kechaidis’ “To Tavli” or “The Comedy of the Flies” by Zioghas, and others written by European authors like “Timon from Athens” by William Shakespeare and “Heracles 5” by Heiner Müller.

One of the most interesting plays performed by the Theatre was written and directed by Mr. Papakostopoulos. The “Choir of the Migrants”, which was performed both in Germany (Cologne and Aachen) and in Greece at the “Dimitria 2008 Festival”, was written to honour the completion of 20 years of friendship between the cities of Cologne and Thessaloniki. The creation of this play was a procedure that lasted for many years, since Mr. Papakostopoulos himself interviewed many economic immigrants of first and second generation, in co-operation with the department of “Ethnology of the University of Cologne”. The people interviewed had lived in Germany for most of their lives but came from different countries, such as Italy, Greece, and Turkey originally. During the interviews, people described their experiences, dreams, stereotypes and prejudices, as well as the disappointments they faced in the new country. Having these “oral histories” and material from different kinds of sources as his base, the director created the “Choir of Immigrants”, which is mainly a collage of interviews, testimonies, documentaries and poetic texts. Besides the desire for a harmonic multicultural society, the direction of the play is trying to take an impartial and unprejudiced look at the lives and thoughts of those people. Sometimes through the use of bitter humour or harsh language the play reveals what the immigrants think about the Germans and their experiences in dealing with them, building a narrative open to different interpretations.

As far as the troupe is concerned, there is a mixture of nationalities, combining people not only from Germany and Greece, as one would have expected. Of course there is always a core, which consists of two Greek and two German actors but there are also actors from Italy and Turkey and other European countries. The accompanist of the GGT is well known German musician Mr. Herbert Mitschke, who has been working together with Mr.

Papakostopoulos since the Theatre was founded. Having already worked for many years in the theatrical industry and having won prizes for his work, Mr. Mitschke was motivated to work on a German-Greek initiative, not only because of his great love for theatre in general and his personal friendship with Mr. Papakostopoulos, but also because he loves and admires the Greek culture, history and mythology.

The impact and the success of the GGT on the audience is clear when considering the fact that the Theatre organises around 10-15 plays every year which draw audiences of at least 100 – 150. Clear proof of the cultural exchange is the fact that the biggest part of the audience are not Greek – in fact it has been estimated that only 30% of the visitors are Greek, while



around 70% of audience members are Germans or other immigrants in Germany. This fact reaffirms that the initiative by the Greek director has indeed been very successful in promoting Greek ancient drama and Greek culture in Germany. For example,

the play “The Birds” by Aristophanes that was performed in October 2008 was so successful that it will be performed another four times in March 2009.

Conclusion

To sum up, the German-Greek Theatre is a great example that demonstrates how cultural diplomacy between two countries can lead to great results and co-operation. Counting already more than 19 years of success, the initiative by Mr. *Papakostopoulos* has created a permanent cultural dialogue not only between two countries but also on a multinational level and has successfully promoted both ancient and modern Greek culture abroad.

Sources

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Goethe Institut in Greece – <http://www.goethe.de/ins/gr/ath/deindex.htm>