

Triumph from tragedy: how Greece's theatre roared out of a national crisis

Michael Billington

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To kick off our critical tour of Europe's cultural hotspots, **Michael Billington** reports on thrilling theatre in a post-slump Greece- from a minimalist Doll's House to Beckett like he's never seen it before.

After a three-day visit, it would be presumptuous to sum up Athenian theatre. But in that short time, I saw five productions, met numerous artists and learned a lot. My immediate impression was that Athens is a hive of theatrical activity: some 1,500 productions a year covering everything from Aeschylus and Sophocles to Pinter and Albee. Interestingly, musicals are a relative rarity and new writing, although abundant, lacks the infrastructure to do it justice – Athens did once have its own equivalent of London's Royal Court, but the building is now a supermarket.[...]

Where does one start in such a hyperactive scene? My first port of call was the **Attis** theatre, where 10 years ago I saw an astonishing piece called *Alarme* about the correspondence between Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots. It was the work of director **Theodoros Terzopoulos**. On this visit I saw his adaptation of *A Doll's House*, called simply *Nora*. It is a mystery to me why this great 75-year-old auteur is acclaimed in Russia, China, Germany and the US but unknown in Britain.

When I inquired why his work had not come to the UK, he told me it was because he'd never been asked. If I had to describe his style, it would be one of ritualistic minimalism: influenced by the Bauhaus and having worked in Berlin, he conveys the essence of a text through speech and movement. In *Nora*, he reduces Ibsen's play to 70 minutes and three characters: the fraught heroine caught between two men, her husband, Torvald, and the blackmailing Krogstad.

Terzopoulos describes the play as a battle between "the frightened ego and the strangled true self", and that essential conflict was brilliantly embodied by

Sophia Hill, who acts with every fibre of her being. She even makes vivid use of a tumbling mane of hair. As Ibsen's doll-wife, she screamed in English, "Shampoo for me! Conditioner for me!" as a symbol of her materialism. At the end, she escaped from the male pincer movement of Torvald and Krogstad – who both at various stages clawed her body – by crawling to the front of stage and diving headfirst over its edge.

This was a Nora whose bourgeois surface concealed something feral and highly sexual. When I saw Hill play Elizabeth I in *Alarme*, she invested the character with a similar physicality, gliding over the stage as if she were a predatory serpent. On the strength of that and her Nora, I would say Hill is one of the world's great actors – imagine a feline Billie Whitelaw – who deserves to be known far beyond Greece.

You don't have to walk far in Athens to discover the influence of the Terzopoulos style. Across the road from his theatre is the tiny **Attis New Space**, where one of his former actors, **Savvas Stroubos**, invited me to watch a rehearsal of his new production of "**Happy Days**". I thought I had seen every possible variation on Beckett's play, but this was like nothing I had witnessed before: a mixture of musical performance and art installation, where Winnie was not buried in earth but seated on a white chair beneath an image of an overhanging pistol.



The words were still Beckett's, but they were sung as well as spoken by Aneza Papadopoulou as Winnie, accompanied by a visible alter ego in the shape of the violin-playing Ellie Iggiliz. This was Beckett hauntingly reimagined, but I was intrigued by the circumstances of the production. The director and actors had worked on it since September and the minimal budget was €18,000. It was theatre of dedicated perfectionism. [...]

Theatre in Athens clearly has to exist in a post-crisis world. But everywhere I went – accompanied by my invaluable guide, Ioanna Blatsou, founding member of the Hellenic Association of Theatre and Performing Arts Critics – I was impressed by the amount of creative energy that is generated on minimal resources.

Although Greece, where the average net income is thought to be around €800 a month, is still wrestling with economic hardship, theatre provides a relief, a recreation and, occasionally, a vehicle of protest. Athenian theatre, dominated by male producer-directors, may not be perfect, but it shows that minor miracles can be achieved on minuscule amounts of money and that Greek audiences still have an ungovernable appetite for theatre.