



THE CYPRIOT THEATRE IN THE MIDST OF GLOBAL  
CRISIS

*EL TEATRO CHIPRIOTA EN MEDIO DE LA CRISIS MUNDIAL*

**Marina Athanasiou-Taki**

[marina.athanasiou@yahoo.gr](mailto:marina.athanasiou@yahoo.gr)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5044-0501>



DOI: 10.32621/ACOTACIONES.2021.46.04

ISSN 2444-3948

**Abstract:** In the 21st century, the era of globalization, the technological advancement and the ongoing migration movements, the global community experiences a deep and multi-dimensional crisis (sociopolitical, financial, and cultural). This paper discusses the impact of these multiple aspects of the crisis in the theatre of Cyprus, especially during the second decade of the 21st century. The theatre in the time of crisis seems to suffocate within the traditional frames of dramatic theatre. As a result, a group of young directors, without hesitation, confront and keep up with the new trends observed internationally, thus introducing new theatre forms (devised theatre, site-specific theatre, happenings etc.) in the Cypriot theatrical landscape and seeking to develop a new way of dialogue with the audience. Cypriot theatre today uses methods and approaches (ideological and aesthetic) that renounce fundamental theatrical conventions of dramatic theatre. This fact allows us to talk about experimentation, as well as about presence of elements of post-dramatic theatre in the country. The making of theatre in the public sphere is now an act of social resistance to local and global events and the first step that may lead to political and social change.

**Key Words:** Cyprus, contemporary theatre, theatre directors, global crisis.

**Resumen:** En el siglo XXI, la era de la globalización, el avance tecnológico y los movimientos migratorios en curso, la comunidad global experimenta una crisis profunda y dimensional (sociopolítica, financiera y cultural). Este artículo analiza el impacto de estos múltiples aspectos de la crisis en el teatro de Chipre, especialmente durante la segunda década del siglo XXI. El teatro en época de crisis parece asfixiarse dentro de los marcos tradicionales del teatro dramático. En respuesta, un grupo de jóvenes directores está siguiendo las nuevas tendencias observadas internacionalmente, introduciendo nuevas formas teatrales (teatro de creación, site-specific theatre, happening, etc.) en el panorama teatral chipriota y buscando desarrollar vías diferentes de diálogo con la audiencia. El teatro chipriota actual utiliza métodos y enfoques (ideológicos y estéticos) que renuncian a las convenciones teatrales fundamentales del teatro dramático. Este hecho nos permite hablar de experimentación, así como de la presencia de elementos del teatro post-dramático en el país. Hacer teatro en la esfera pública es ahora un acto de resistencia social a los acontecimientos locales y globales y el primer paso que puede conducir al cambio político y social.

**Palabras Clave:** Chipre, teatro contemporáneo, directores de teatro, crisis global.

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MARINA ATHANASIOU-TAKI is a graduate of the Department of Classics and Philosophy of the University of Cyprus. She has a master degree in Educational Leadership, in Theatre Studies and PhD in Theatre Studies of the Open University of Cyprus. She has participated in several conferences and seminars and has published in journals on topics related to literature, educational leadership and theatre. She is the author of the monographs *Amateur theatre in Cyprus (1955-1974)* and *Directing in Cyprus during the first twenty years of the 21st century. Dramatic, post-dramatic, theatre and identity issues*. Also, she wrote two plays, awarded by association of theatre writers of Cyprus.



In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the era of globalization, technological advancement and the ongoing migration movements, the global community experiences a deep crisis (sociopolitical, financial, and cultural). As a result, the globalized theatre scene found it impossible not to be influenced by this crisis and had to adapt to this challenge. This phenomenon also influences the Cypriot theatre scene, with Cypriot artists “aestheticizing” the wounds by stating their own opinions and ideas as an answer, we might say, to the fundamental question “what kind of art could be inspired through to global crisis ?” This paper discusses the ways in which artists experience the various forms of crisis, especially during the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Cyprus, in this remote corner of the southeastern Mediterranean, and how they turn them into a theatre. Cyprus is the only divided country in the European Union, since 1974 due to the Turkish invasion, with 180,000 thousand refugees. From 2012 Cyprus passed into a new reality due to the financial crisis that broke out.

This paper discusses the various forms of crisis facing Cyprus, which seem to affect artists. For each of these forms of crisis, performances are selected and presented, which are the personal narratives of Cypriot artists and are a representative sample of the way in which they deal with each crisis. The methods and approaches (ideological and aesthetic) that the artists use and with which they seek to develop a new form of dialogue with the audience are presented. These approaches reassess fundamental representational strategies of dramatic theatre and allows us to now talk about experimentation, as well as the presence of elements of post-dramatic theatre in the country.

Since 2011, the first signs of crisis started appearing in the Cypriot economy, which was degraded by all the great evaluation financial institutions. Immediately Cyprus requested to join the European support mechanism and a series of austerity measures were imposed in order to rescue the ailing economy. The former prosperous Cyprus realities suddenly changed and phenomena such as unemployment, community markets, the shutting down of shops and people’s mistrust of the authorities and to the European partners, social confusion and upheaval, uncertainty, insecurity, etc., are now the daily realities. The theatre scene, as a social phenomenon supported by the social circumstances, was influenced variably by the financial difficulties which the country was facing; consequently, various artists naturally feel the pulse of society

and are driven to create performances inspired by the issues involved and using the city itself as a scene.

Then, performances are presented and analyzed that deal with the issue of the financial crisis. The theatre company Paravan Proactions<sup>1</sup> in 2013 performed *The Overcoat*, based on the short story by Nikolai Gogol, which was collaboratively<sup>2</sup> directed. The dramatization and the adaptation of non-theatrical texts on stage is an international trend, that Cypriot artists have also followed, in recent years, which is related to the inquiry of new theatrical ways of expression and a desire to promote the voice of classical works into a versatile means of expression. According to Savvas Patsalides, this phenomenon is related “to the dispute of the native characteristics of the kind, as well as the collapsed ideological differentiated parameters” (2000, pg. 94). The performance took place in a former popular café on Makarios Avenue in Nicosia – now an abandoned place, along with many others in the same street. The inspiration for the choice of the performance setting, was the financial crisis which Cyprus was in. The directing group, deliberately chose this particular place for this particular performance, in order to communicate the lost glory of an entire generation and to send its own clear message about the financial crisis in the island. According to Melita Kouta, one of the directors and co-founder of the group: “the café before the financial crisis used to be a place of showing off wealth, but now Gogol’s lost overcoat, depicted the lost glamour of the café” (2016). Moleski in her review says:

the choice of the play is ingenious at this setting and time of the production [...] a cosmopolitan centre, the symbol of wealth and social status, which has lost its own fake identity and substance, as it was now proven. Da Capo’s “emptiness” of Makarios Avenue, the centre of Nicosia, the (sudden) former era of our life has become the background of their performance (2013, pg. 6).<sup>3</sup>

This is a site-specific performance, as the audience is moving all around the café, indoors and outdoors, and even in the street. The idea was to revive memories and experiences from this place, as the audience was placed in the centre of the action, by continually interacting with the actors.



1. *The Overcoat*, Paravan Proactions, 2013

In the same year (2013), One/Off<sup>4</sup> theatre company performed the devised piece *W.C.* (Working-middle Class), in which the director Maria Kyriakou converses with social becoming. She raises fundamental questions about the Cypriot economic crisis, the European Union, but also charity. The project is a live research-route through personal experiences, historical facts, journalistic articles and literary texts. The title of the performance *W.C.* plays on the double meaning of toilet and the working-middle class. The setting, which was inspired by the prevailing social status (economic crisis), was symbolic: it was made of carton-boxes set up and removed during the whole performance, reminding one of the open markets food packaging which were set up all around Cyprus for the relief of the vulnerable groups of society, as a consequence of the financial crisis of the time. Kyriakou's performance has a political dimension. It is clear that she does not make "art for art's sake", but that she is influenced by social reality.



2. *W.C., One/Off*, 2013

Two years later (2015), Paravan Proactions created the performance *The Vaults-Impromptu* which could be classified as devised theatre, but at the same time as a happening, having been ideologically inspired by the financial crisis. The performance took place in an abandoned basement of a bank branch in Makarios Avenue. The artists' choice of the particular street is not random, taking into account that this is one of the capital's most important shopping streets, which was greatly affected by the crisis. The performance intensely criticizes the country's new financial situation as well as the European Union's response to it. The final scene, with the European Union's flag waving, inspired by the United States Marine Corps War Memorial (Iwo Jima Memorial),<sup>5</sup> a symbolically fraught image, functioned as a critique of everything that had been happening on the island in that particular period of time. The happening consisted of a series of autonomous actions, inviting a loose way of watching for the spectators, who had the opportunity to discover the space and what was happening in any order they wished.





3. *The Vaults-Improptu*, Paravan Proactions, 2015

One of the perennial wounds in Cyprus is the division of the island.<sup>6</sup> A powerful symbol of this division is the “Buffer Zone” which marks the physical boundary between the free and the occupied territories of the Cypriot Republic.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, at the same time, it is a cooperation place for the two communities (Greek Cypriot-Turkish Cypriot), who struggle for the rapprochement of their communities. The “Buffer Zone” was the stage for performances by artists who wanted, by transferring the theatre to the public sphere and aestheticizing the trauma that has been open for 46 years, to send their own messages on the issue of political conflict and of war.

In 2014, Rooftop Theatre Group<sup>8</sup> presented the performance *Shift*<sup>9</sup>, directed by the Turkish-Cypriot Gülgün Kayim, a result of a collaboration between Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot artists which was presented in the “Buffer Zone” at the Ledra Palace area in Nicosia. The performance was ideologically inspired by the “Buffer Zone” setting while thematically borrowing from Fernando Arrabal’s play, *A Picnic on the Battlefield*, which deals with the issue of the civil war in Spain as a statement to comment on the irrationality of war. Not only the topics but also the choice of location as the performance site suggest a mutual concern for Cyprus political problem on a part of artists from both communities. Doing art in a public place whether by having a performative form like “site specific theatre” or not obtains a political dimension (Wilkie, 2002, pg. 144; Haedicke, 2013, pg. 6). The artists do not necessarily do political art, but “do art in a political way” (Haedicke, 2013, pg. 6).



4. *Shift*, Rooftop Theatre Group, 2014

The performance of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*<sup>10</sup> (2017) by Fantastiko Teatro<sup>11</sup> was staged by Magdalena Zira in the area of the "Buffer Zone." The place is a meaningful ideological choice (a background is a wired wall, near a bombed house and opposite a row of houses), since the "Buffer Zone," as Moleski writes "has such a symbolism that could hardly have been achieved elsewhere. There, we have "parked" our own fleet, and the fair wind has forgotten us" (2017). Zira points out in an interview: "The main narration of the play completes the parallel narrations of our own story, our own feelings, and our own collective and personal memory, in relation to our home country" (2017). Zira's purpose has been achieved. Panayi wrote: "The performance has successfully created a means of communication between our own traumatic experience of '74 and of the Greek army, on the eve of the Trojan war" (2017). The director presented Euripides' play as a family and civil drama in modern terms, creating "distance" of the performing act from its literary status.



5. *Iphigenia in Aulis*, Fantastico Theatro, 2017

Another fundamental concern for the artists' world in the global crisis is the identity issue. The identity seems to preoccupy mostly the new generation of directors, since the beginning of the second decade of our century. Many artists express their engagement with the issue in two ways: either through the theme of the performances or through the use of the Greek Cypriot dialect as the language of the performance. Beyond anything else, the use of dialect is directly related to national and cultural identity and constitutes, as far as directors are concerned, a political statement. It is about an ideological approach to the issue of identity. There are two linguistic varieties of the Greek language in Cyprus: the modern Greek and the Greek Cypriot dialect. Both are used simultaneously by the Cypriots, but operate in a different context. Modern Greek is the official language of the state and the language of school education, while the Greek Cypriot dialect is the mother tongue of the Cypriots and is used in everyday communication. The use of dialect allows the oscillation of the cultural consciousness of artists to be seen, but at the same time the need to reconcile the two different "poles" of identity (Doyle, 2000, pg. 170). The interest in "identities" according to Tziovas:

is the result of the general shift observed in the last few decades from the 'being' to the 'becoming;' from monolithic certainties to fictional inventions; from uniqueness to diversity; and from the ontological to the imaginary. The identity demands a procedure, an action and a performance. In the past the logic of identity presupposed an inquiry into the

'real or original self.' Now we define identity as a procedure of identification and not as a process of discovery or awakening. The fact that identity today is not assessed in terms of truth or authenticity is also proven by the fact that, although all anticolonial struggles in the past were supported by such a perception of cultural identity, nowadays the emphasis is on diaspora which has promoted the hybridity of identity. (2011)

In 2010, One/Off theatre group presented the performance *Forget-me-not* directed by Maria Kyriakou. The script, a product of collaborative work, was based on excerpts from poems and prose by Kostas Montis, Kyriakos Karneras and Antonis Georgiou<sup>12</sup> but also on narratives by the group members, who were discussing and improvising on different thematic cores based on the identity issue. The performance deals with the issue of memory and was a search for the identity of the Cypriots (Cypriot-Greek-European) (Kyriakou, 2016). The performance alternated its linguistic code between the modern Greek and the Greek Cypriot dialect.<sup>13</sup> The stage action unfolded around a table, where the actors narrated their stories. The performance consisted of seemingly unrelated scenes, which were connected through an imaginary narrative line, starting from the family's memories, passing through the heroes and heroines' personal memories and ending in social reflections. The performance took place in the first Festival of the Experimental Theatre competition and was chosen to participate in the Avignon Off Festival 2011.



6. *Forget-me-not*, One/Off, 2010

*Happymeos* (2016) was another devised theatre performance of Paravan Proactions, directed by Melita Kouta and Harris Kafkarides. The dramaturgy team started working without a script, giving emphasis on the historical research, which was conducted through interviews, personal experiences, research archives, in libraries and documentary videos. The theme of the performance was the Cypriots' identity, their history, and personal experiences, topics which the directors/creators managed to relate even to global facts concerning the Space. The performance deals with the forgotten and for many unknown story of the moonstone<sup>14</sup> and connects two landmark moments of world and Cypriot history. The date July 20, 1969 is a milestone in the history of humankind. For the first time man set foot on the Moon and brings back to earth stones from the Mare Serenitatis. On July 20, 2016, in Cyprus, Alexis (character in performance) returns after 25 years, asking for answers about the importance of his own stone. Traveling in the past, reality is confused with memory. The two stories unfold simultaneously, as we follow at the same time the world events of the period 1969-1974 and the personal history of Alexis.



7. *Happymeos*, Paravan Proactions, 2016

The use of dialect in the Cypriot theatre until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was considered exclusively the playwright's choice. With the advent of the new millennium, just before the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a trend to make a conscious choice and to use the Cypriot dialect as the main language of the performance

is observed, mostly in the new generation of directors. That is, performances are created where the director chooses a) to present a play of modern Cypriot writers written entirely in the Greek Cypriot dialect, b) to translate plays from classical and contemporary dramaturgy entirely or in part into the Greek Cypriot dialect and c) to devise a performance in which the dialect is used in the entire performance or in select parts of it.

The first translation of a foreign play into the Greek Cypriot dialect was the Lexi theatre production of *Diary of a madman* by Nikolai Gogol (2007), directed by Spyros Charalambous. In the following years, the Cypriot dialect was used in a variety of performances as the main language. Euripides Dikaios has been established among the Cypriot audiences as a director of performances in the Greek Cypriot dialect, together with Paris Erotokritou, Maria Kyriakou, Evita Ioannou and others.

The choice of dialect in the theatre causes heated debates globally. According to Doyle, the dialect is a tool of connection. The ability of the dialect to create such connections by itself becomes a powerful tool for postcolonial writing. On stage, in particular, it enables the writer to be able to create intimacy with the local audience. Local performers and local audiences have the opportunity to form an acoustic bridge (2000, pg. 168).

We would say that the 21<sup>st</sup> century of total globalization creates the necessity to strengthen the use of dialect in the theatre, giving it a chance to prove its multifarious nature. Language is one of the most fundamental tools of the theatre, a fact that is strengthened by the use of one's dialect.<sup>15</sup> It is obvious that the use of Greek Cypriot dialect in the theatre since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and forth can be considered an action of resistance in the frame of globalization, a means through which the artists can address the realities of the world in an effort to maintain their own cultural identity. The critic Moleski, referring to the tendency to increasingly use dialect as the language of the performance, talks about a "new wave" for "an increased local dependency" of the Cypriot theatre and it is a recognition of the need of the Cypriot society to use the theatre as a means of collective self-knowledge" (2016). According to Constantinou, this new trend presents another dimension of the maturity procedure of the Cypriot stage as far as the shaping of its modern new identity goes (Moyses, 2019).

In conclusion, we could argue that Cypriot theatre seems to move away from mainstream frames of dramatic theatre, in this intense transitional period and this era of multiple forms of crisis (sociopolitical, financial, and cultural), where the future seems uncertain. As a result, a group of new directors use methods and approaches (ideological and aesthetic) which reassess fundamental representational strategies of dramatic theatre. The new generation chooses to use new forms of staging, such as “devised theatre,” “site specific theatre” and “happenings,” seeking to unfurl a new way of communication with the audience where issues of global crisis, such as financial crisis, political conflict, war, as well as the identity issue, are brought to the fore. The fact that devised theatre performances are created by each group in an immediate and radical function in response to the attitudes and the concerns of the era to which they belong, has resulted in the topics, the form and the content of the devised script following closely the cultural and social changes that take place from era to era, changes directly connected with the time of their production. Performances of site specific theatre are trying to retrieve memories and sensations from the local audience, since the main goal is for the audience to experience a connection with them through the new meaning of the scripts. Through the observation and participation of a public artistic act the audience becomes socially active, interacting and experiencing the urban way of life in a totally different way. The experience of the urban theatrical space, the emotional experiences and also the experience of social interaction are of key importance. The creation of the theatre in the public sphere is an act of social resistance against both local and global events, and the first step that could hopefully lead to political and social change. Finally, the use of the Greek Cypriot dialect as the main language of a performance is the director’s ideological comment on the issue of identity and a means in which artists face the realities of the global world while struggling to maintain their cultural identity.

It is worth noticing, however, that at this moment in time we are also confronted by another huge crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, during which the theatrical activity has been forced to a halt, not only in Cyprus but globally. All the cultural sectors, including the theatre, have been seriously injured and there is no clear indication whether and under what conditions theatrical production will resume according to a (new) normality. The artistic world is once again forced to survive,

be inspired, evolve and find new ways to create an open and fruitful dialogue with its audience.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Paravan Proactions group, founded in 2006 by Harris Kafkarides and Melita Kouta, is very active in the field of experimental theatre based in Nicosia.
- <sup>2</sup> Direction team: Melita Kouta, Diomedes Koufteros, Fotis Nikolaou, Harris Kafkarides, Nektarios Theodorou, Marios Mettis, Eleni Sidera.
- <sup>3</sup> All the quotes in the text are translated by the author of the article.
- <sup>4</sup> One/Off theatre group was founded in 2006 by Maria Kyriakou and Maria Kafkaridou. Its main goal is experimentation with the theatrical form and the development of non-mainstream artistic creation using methods of devised theatre.
- <sup>5</sup> The war memorial was inspired by the iconic 1945 photograph of six Marines raising a U.S. flag atop Mount Suribachi during the Battle of Iwo Jima in World War II.
- <sup>6</sup> The 37% of the Cypriot territory is illegally occupied by Turkey due to the Turkish invasion of 1974, resulting in 180.000 refugees. Negotiations for the solution of the Cyprus problem have been fruitless so far.
- <sup>7</sup> Like all the territories of the island, the territories within the “Buffer Zone” belong to the Republic of Cyprus. It was first created in 1963 due to the bi-communal riots between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots and existed only in Nicosia, while since the Turkish invasion in 1974 it has spread throughout the island and separates the south from the north of the island, where an unrecognized state has been installed. Its custody has been assigned to the UN.
- <sup>8</sup> Rooftop Theatre Group was founded in 2004 by Ellada Evangelou and Costas Konstantinides, on the occasion of the opening of the roadblocks. The company is based in Nicosia, a multicultural group that aims to create dialogue and address cultural differences, not only in Cyprus but also globally, several on issues that humanity is facing today.
- <sup>9</sup> Performance’s video: <https://youtu.be/L0sCexOfk4o>, <https://youtu.be/OvNBdwRFmSc>
- <sup>10</sup> Performance’s video: <https://youtu.be/WpBYUMIYnVY>



- <sup>11</sup> Fantastico Theatro was founded in 2012 by a group of artists (Magdalena Zira, Dimitris Alithinos, George Tsangaris, Elena Katsouri), who share the same vision about the critical importance of theatre in society.
- <sup>12</sup> They are Cypriot writers. Kostas Montis and Kyriakos KARNERAS belong to the older generation of poets, while Antonis Georgiou to modern generation.
- <sup>13</sup> See Leontaris, Yannis (2020). “‘Forget me not.’ A performance that did not meet its audience.” In A. H. Constantinou, K. Diamantakou & L. Galazis (eds.), *The theatre in modern and contemporary Cyprus*. Athens: Herodotus-Theatrical Museum of Cyprus, 433-446.
- <sup>14</sup> Moonstones are the pieces of stone that were transported to earth after two American missions to the moon in 1969. A stone was divided into very small pieces which were donated by US President Nixon to all the states of the world. Two moonstones were destined for Cyprus but for various reasons did not reach their destination. One, in fact, is ignored.
- <sup>15</sup> See Patsalidis, Savvas (2018). “Contemporary theatre in a new Europe.” In A. Altouva & K. Diamantakou (eds.), *E’ Panhellenic Theatrical Conference Theatre and Democracy*, vol.b, NKUA Department of Theatrical Studies, Athens, 5-8 November 2014, 331-344.
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