

DIONYSIS ROMAS AND THE THEATER

Dionysis Romas felt very strongly about the Ionian Islands and their culture. He has come down in the history of Modern Greek literature not just as the most authentic representative of the Modern Heptanese School but also as one of the last representatives of its spirit; the kind of spirit very rarely found anymore in any form of intellectual production. He was an intellectual attached to the past of Zakynthos, often removed from daily concerns, who preferred to live exclusively in his own world. His favourite poets were Baudelaire and Mallarme, whom he felt very strongly about; more so than any other poet. He would explain that there could be no other way, "since I have the attitude of a decadent. All the elements of fatigue and illness found in these two French poets I feel myself. Of course, it is not my fault. Therefore, I do not asphyxiate or begrudge with this mentality that I have been gifted by atavism" (from an interview of his to Georgios Roussos, published in *Athinaika Nea* newspaper in April 1939, on the occasion of his awarding of the State Prize). However, he produced a notable, multifaceted and varied oeuvre, well structured and important in terms of history and folklore.

Descending from one of the most important families of Zakynthos, with a significant contribution to Modern Hellenism, Romas was born in Athens on 17 October 1906 and passed away in Zakynthos on 10 November 1981. His studies in literature and art history in Athens, Switzerland and Germany enhanced his humanitarian and aesthetic principles, forming the foundation of his inquisitive mind that would expand in various fields of scientific knowledge.

His rare erudition was bordering on knowledge of everything. He comprehended everything, but not in an amateur or superficially encyclopaedic way. His understanding would emerge as a result of tireless study and search throughout libraries, an incessant interest for knowledge harmonizing uniquely with his inherent gift of memory. In his column under the title "Μνημοτεχνική", published in *Eleftheria* newspaper in 1962, he would note: "Many friends of mine believe that I have a notable memory. They are wrong. I find it impossible to memorize the shortest poem. In other words, my memory of texts is nonexistent. On the contrary, I can remember with the greatest ease and vividness the contents of a book I may have read 20 years ago; not only this, but, if necessary, I also know in what page or section is printed what would of interest to me...". Romas possessed the main attribute of certain Renaissance scholars who would receive knowledge in a creative way, finding inspiration in their erudition without becoming scholastic. He was fully aware of the past, and his ease in writing allowed him to reconstruct events in a convincing and genuine way, displaying a broadness of mind.

The main and most significant aspects of his intellectual production appeared rather late. This, however, did not prohibit him from surpassing the constraints of his era, contributing to Greek letters as a newspaper columnist (a genre he served in a peculiar way by moving from historical notes to anecdotes and humorous stories), as well as a historical novelist with his 10-volume novel *Περίπλους* [*Circumnavigation*] (an imaginary chronicle in three trilogies) which he failed to complete; and, of course, as a dramatist.

In the field of prose, *Periplous* became an unfinished life work for Romas. In an effort to reconstruct Greek historical reality over three centuries he demonstrated extreme historical consistency achieving a balance between the

genres of historiography and novel. Using real events and persons, he created living literary heroes while at the same time preserving history's leading role in people's lives as well as a notable structure in the sequence of narration.

Romas involved himself with many forms of literary speech. His poetry follows the traditions of the Heptanese School that influenced him significantly. The same is also true of his theatre plays that follow the lines of psychological novel of manners, as drawn by Demetrios Gouzelis, Antonios Matesis and subsequently Gregorios Xenopoulos.

Romas' scenic creations have managed to primarily bring us in contact with a world that no longer exists. His world had the privilege of discussing the ideas of Voltaire and Rousseau in stately homes; reciting poems by Monti; demonstrating in everyday terms its love for opera; possessing the social, mental and psychological skills to copy the ways of life of neighbouring European lands, particularly noble Italy. This was the world that started to fade after the union of the Ionian Islands with Greece (1864) and whose history finally was terminated at the closing of the 19th century.

The Ionian Islands had the great fortune of living separate lives, experiencing on behalf of the rest of Greece a different social life: that of a European land, much before the rest of Greece became aware of its potential. This was a life at its early stages, limited by geography but very open in terms of ideas, representing on miniature terms the whole known world of the time. Ideas originating in the West would not be stopped by "walls" in the Ionian Islands; on the contrary, they would be welcomed, as people there were ready to receive them. This was a world adjusted to European standards.

Romas' theatre style has many virtues the greatest of which is his familiarity with foreign plays whose themes are loaded with class and social issues. Romas did not need to struggle with anything and did not betray the society he had set to dissect and observe. However, as long as society as a whole had been placed under such a theatrical roof he, a conscientious creator, would not tamper with his "painting".

Myths in his plays are complete but also charged; so much so that, no matter how much one tries to set them in prearranged forms, they will retain their strength, fight back and overwhelm.

Those at the receiving end of Romas' plays may not justifiably request or indeed demand from a scenic myth on display any verified historical accuracy, because at the background of his works there lies a story, or rather a spherical description of history. He aimed at viewing history as a time scent; a decorative setting, rather than observing it with the eyes of a dramatist wishing to present it in its psychological completion via the parable of a myth. He had no such aspiration; he saw what he wanted to see in various interesting periods.

The historical crossroads in which he wished to stand offers a lot to whoever is able either by disposition or other, more special circumstances, to not only research a period but also feel its pulse, its people and their passions, the hidden causes that prompted them to critical individual or group manifestations.

Dionysis Romas constitutes a unique and unparalleled presence in our theatrical world. His four plays under the respective titles *Ζακυνθινή Σερενάτα* [*Zakynthian Serenade*]; *Τρεις Κόσμοι* [*Three Worlds*]; *Ζαμπελάκι*; and *Ο Καζανόβας στην Κέρκυρα* [*Casanova in Corfu*] stand out for their distinct scenic economy, dramatic confrontations and strength of their speeches. The former

three, in particular, are characterised by elegance, theatrical sense and balance and do not resolve to convenience and sloppiness. There are very few Modern Greek plays from the same period notable for their theatrical mastery, clear psychology and combined virtues such as his. A fifth play of his, under the title *Ιδού ο Νυμφίος έρχεται...* [*Behold, the Bridegroom comes...*] (2nd Prize in the 1964 GNTTO Contest) also possesses an interesting structure and successful technique but will not be considered here, as it was never staged, while it also differs from the rest in relation to its theme. It is part of a different world, monopolized successfully during the same period by Angelos Terzakis (1907-1979).

During an interview of his to Georgios Roussos in 1939, Romas had said that he was writing a new play at the time, a satire of modern Zakynthos. He also intended to write further one, mostly autobiographical. He had given it the title *Δέκα παρά μία* [*Ten minus One*], explaining that the reference was not to ten women but Commandments, with the One deducted being "Thy shall not kill". Apart from their mention in that interview, I have come across no other indication that these two plays were eventually written. So, one must conclude that they were just a passing thought. In another interview from 1953 he had referred to a historical super revue of his, called *Τα μαργαριτάρια του Αλή Πασά* [*The Pearls of Ali Pasha*], as still not staged. It seems that this project also did not materialize, since the only relevant piece found is a radio sketch under the same title.

His accomplishments include the kind of sketch that he cultivated with great success, establishing it for the first time in the Greek Broadcasting Station, the medium that mostly broadcasted such sketches from 1938 to 1969. He had deemed them Radio Theatre, classifying them in various categories, according to their theme: Radio Chronicles; Radio Compositions; Radio Scenes; Historical Revues; Nautical Radio Chronicles; Frenzied Sketches; Radio Fancies; Comic Sketches; Detective Sketches; Sentimental Sketches. In an interview from 1953 he had stated that there were 124 of them in his files. After his death 93 were found, along the titles of another 12.

Two other important and notable sides of his theatrical activity relate to: a) the translation of theatre plays staged either by the National Theatre or private companies (such as those of Marika Kotopouli; Kostas Mousouris; Lambeti-Papas-Horn; Manos Katrakis etc.) that met with success, as well as frequent acclamations for their translator, and, b) his cooperation for five years (1946-1951) as a theatre critic with the newspapers *Αίμος* [*Haemus*]; *Ελληνική Πνοή* [*Hellenic Breath*]; *Οι Καιροί* [*The Times*]; *Ελευθερία* [*Freedom*]. At this point I would like to dwell a little longer on this complementary activity of his broader relationship with theatre.

Romas is associated mostly with the history and intellectual tradition of Zakynthos. Only a few passing references had been made (at least until recently) by the occasional researchers of his work to his largely unknown activity as a theatre critic, which had been most probably considered unworthy or unequal with the rest of his works. However, this quality of his complements the picture of his various interests and personality, revealing a complete theatre person, as he wished to be seen. One also needs to note at this point that, unlike some of his fellow authors who were involved with theatre reviews at the same time, he possessed not just a sense of aesthetics and boldness, but also a theatrical and historical mentality.

Apart from his more or less known views (since, besides his other qualities, he served as MP for ERE), his reviews reveal coherent theoretical views and firmly founded beliefs not lacking, however, a certain degree of moderation that would allow him an understanding of opposite views or even the exceptional adoption of certain elements of them, the least associated ones with any current confrontation. His strong opposition to not just communist ideology but any kind of Marxist approach is part of the ideological framework the other end of which is marked by Nazi ideology and its offshoots. Both of these poles he strongly rejected from a moderate's point of view.

Considering his views in the context of the polarized post-civil war Greece, one cannot help acknowledging that on a theoretical level (indeed more so vis-a-vis artistic events) he tried to avoid political single mindedness by expressing admiration for, or even promoting leftist artists, such as Koon or Aimilios Veakis (whose last performances were on a play by Romas), while also attempting to see the benefits of works with obviously leftist ideological origins. One needs to acknowledge his efforts towards a clearheaded evaluation of works of art, beyond the vulgar field of political confrontation. Such was the case, for example, of his acknowledgement of Lorca's artistic value, along with his noting of the "excessive exploitation" of his dramatic death by the Left. His disagreement with Marxist views was not limited to the field of current politics; it was rather based on a higher antithesis occurring as a result of a combination of his worldview and sufficient awareness of European philosophical trends, both past and contemporary. For example, his views on Jean Paul Sartre and existentialism, and well as the latter's relation with Marxism; or his correlation of the philosophical background of Ibsen's work with Nietzsche's philosophy, reveal his relevant knowledge, familiarisation and, at times, objectivity.

His language and style as a theatre critic are his recognizable features, constituting a personal trademark. His texts were written mostly in Demotike, with a few scholarly features; at times, though, intrusive elements of Katharevousa are discernible. His intention had been to address a wider average public; however, his unhesitant use of a multitude of French, Italian or English words or expressions reveals a personal exuberance that eventually renders his texts easy to understand. He requires his readers to come to terms with a barrage of expressions such as "fusel", "faiser", "comedie des situations", "standarizer", "article de lux", "en gross", "diction", "boux de rolles", "vennes", "agilite", "physique de l'emploi", and a multitude of others which he never considered translating or even explaining in a circumlocutory manner, simply because he would consider them self explanatory: almost Greek, having used them in an everyday fashion.

He had an interest in spotting new artists. At this point one needs to note that most of his assumptions and predictions in this field were confirmed over time. He easily spotted Ellie Lambeti's virtues, remaining a strong fan of hers, obviously unhappy and ready to excuse her when, at some point, she would fail to meet his expectations; or, boasting full of relief when, after some period of "stagnation", he felt she had rediscovered her enormous potential. He would respectively glorify Horn's art and technique, being mindful of Melina Merkouri's scenic presence and great potential or changes in her acting manner as a dramatic ingenue or comedienne; welcoming her development, even when concerning minor genres; and at times risking a prediction that "one day she will

carry on her shoulders the heavy and grandiose load of Aeschylus' Clytemnestra". He would get carried away by the talent and scenic charm of the newly graduate, jeune premier Alexandrakis, while being steadily supportive of Vasilis Diamantopoulos' artistic value. He would describe in every detail Dinos Iliopoulos' acting abilities and virtues, also welcoming enthusiastically Alexis Solomos as a new director. His preferences of directors or theatre schools would be expressed with significant clarity, revealing his soft spots. He would also be capable of recognizing any presence of interest in the Greek theatre of his day. He would deem Karolos Koun a real mystic, someone devoted to the art of theatre. He obviously expected a lot of him in terms of staging demanding modern plays; therefore, not allowing him to easily get away with blunders in his choices of repertoire. He would comment very favourably on Koun's work, considering the intellectual circle of the Art Theatre (Koun's "parish", as he used to call it) a great contribution to the artistic effort to raise the level of theatre by creating a kind of audience capable of following it. On the other hand, he would consider Dimitris Rontiris, Koun's opposite, the "leading Greek director", a figure that defined Greek theatre. His calmness and honesty would prevent him from getting involved in any way in the dispute between these two opposite directorial concepts that largely defined Greek theatre; however, his psychological kinship and unlimited admiration for Rontiris are obvious in every text relevant to his staging of plays.

During the five years that he wrote theatre reviews he commented on plays of both older, established Modern Greek authors, and newly appearing ones. Shining stars of Modern Greek playwriting, such as Gregorios Xenopoulos or Pantelis Horn, have passed his exhausting analysis unscathed, having lasted over time. Generally speaking, he believed that Modern Greek plays needed to be staged, in order to pass the stage test (irrespectively of any defects they may have had) in order to develop and cover the need of the native theatre for expression. Overall, he was a theatre critic that had great faith in Modern Greek plays.

Romas' ethics as a reviewer was defined by his multiple qualities in the world of theatre as a playwright, translator, administrator as well as reviewer. He was a fan of high quality and art in particular, but would equally enjoy the laughter of an ordinary spectator.

Despite theoretical analyses, either his own or any respectable colleague's of his, he would essentially approach theatre not as a mind process but with an instinct for the stage as such, in the belief that the primary aim of any play is to move audiences. Due to the fact that he knew theatre "from the inside", he was in a position to occasionally make very accurate observations on acting.

Being an author, scholar, and theatre critic at the same time, Dionysis Romas had assimilated respective "rules"; however, he would always remain an effusive, "demonstrative" spectator. Above all, he was a man of theatre in the widest possible sense; an accomplished author but also a voracious spectator; a fact that at times sets a critical mind free, making it socially, artistically and methodologically meaningful, much more than following approaches based on the "sobriety" of a specialist that keeps his distance, thus missing out on the joy of viewing.

Commenting on Dionysis Romas' theatrical activities, one needs to add his productive terms as Head of the theatre productions of the Athens State Radio

(1938-1940); Secretary General of “Thespis Chariot” (1938-1940); Assistant Director of Administrative Services of the National Theatre (1944); Associate Personnel and Etiquette Manager of the National Theatre (1946); Director of the Theatre Department of the National Radio Foundation (1950); Vice President of the Hellenic Centre of the International Institute of Theatre (1950-1957) and the Society of Greek Playwrights (1950-1953); and Director of Broadcasts and Programming of EIR [National Radio Foundation] (1954-1958), in the context of which a special mention needs to be made to his concern for the foundation of the Third Program, in 1954.

Dionysis Romas’ association with the theatre lasted for almost the whole of a 40 year period (1938-1978), being multifaceted and productive. Romas produced original works, notable translations, important theoretical texts and reviews for Modern Greek theatre; overall, a very productive work associated with the high administrative positions he occupied at times.

He was also elected an MP for Zakynthos with ERE (National Radical Union) in 1958 and 1961, succumbing to Constantine Karamanlis’ intense pressures, despite his lack of interest or inclination for politics.

Being a multifaceted personality, with a flexible talent and well founded groundwork extending from the Classics to information on modern intellectual trends, he distinguished himself not just as novelist and essayist, but mostly as playwright, one of the most important of the “Generation of the 1930s” and the last one inspired by the tradition of the Ionian Islands.

There is no doubt that Dionysis Romas was a unique, charming personality: witty, exuberant and scathing at times; with a strong disposition for storytelling; a good speaker, with physical expressions that revealed his theatricality; possessing a vast memory, as well as more impressive features: multilingualism, erudition and an astonishing sense of reality matched only by that of his sister, Dominica’s. He was difficult to approach, but also friendly; proverbially calm but also explosive. His costumes were very distinctive. In the winter he would wear crossed jackets with an indispensable handkerchief (pocket square) floating carelessly. His trousers were made of grey flannel and had a characteristic revere; his shoes were suede with crepe soles. In the summertime, he would wear wide silk shirts and respective trousers, of the shantung version. He was short, with very thick, black shiny hair and moustache, and had the brightest, moving eyes that I can remember.

Dionysis Romas tried to promote with both knowledge and passion historical novels of manners; a new theatre genre that owes its existence to him. This he accomplished partly, but had no followers, since Greek theatre was forced to diversify, with the number of theatres increasing and the repertoire changing, due to the audience’ change of preference. There followed a period during which there prevailed farcical plays and texts that downgraded theatre to the level of low quality commercial films. This era came to an end in the mid 1970s, to be followed by a new one generally seen as one of the most important in Modern Greek Theatre History, due not just to the quantity but also the quality of theatre plays.

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