

Michaela Antoniou

Performing Ancient Greek Tragedy in Twentieth-Century Greece: Dimitris Rontiris and Karolos Koun

In this article Michaela Antoniou gives an account of the two prevailing acting schools in ancient Greek tragedy in the twentieth century, as formed and developed by Dimitris Rontiris at the National Theatre and Karolos Koun at the *Theatro Technis* (Art Theatre). She discusses how these two great theatre masters directed, guided, and taught their actors to perform tragedy, arguing that Rontiris's approach stemmed from a text-based perspective that focused on reciting and pronunciation, while Koun's developed from a physical and emotional approach that prioritized actors and their abilities. Her article summarizes each director's philosophy regarding the Greek tragedies, and discusses the position of the genre within modern Greek theatre, mapping the process employed by the actors, and analyzing their method in order to illustrate the different perspectives that the two great directors had with regards to approaching and performing a role. Michaela Antoniou completed her PhD at Goldsmiths, University of London, and is currently working as an external collaborator of the Department of Theatre Studies, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. She has also worked on the stage as an actress and playwright, and is a published author.

Key terms: acting styles, *Theatro Technis*, National Theatre of Greece, *Electra*, Epidaurus.

DURING the twentieth century, two great theatre masters, Dimitris Rontiris and Karolos Koun, shaped the way that ancient Greek tragedy was performed in Greece. Both considered themselves to be directors and teachers, as did their students and actors. Thus, even though they reached opposing views and opinions regarding the performance of ancient Greek tragedy, both placed the actor and her/his process of approaching a part at the centre of their work, forming the two main acting schools of twentieth-century Greece.

The Art of 'Logos'

Dimitris Rontiris's 1936 production of *Electra* by Sophocles at the National Theatre of Greece in Athens offered a complete spectrum of his artistic concept of tragedy, which was, in many ways, novel to what had been previously presented on the stage. It proposed an acting style that developed from a vocal/rhetorical/text-based standpoint

because the director believed that, by following the rhythm of the text, the actors had power over their emotions and the way they were expressed.¹ The directorial priorities of this production set the foundations of what was later known as the Rontirian acting school, which had a very strong impact on Greek acting.

This school represented the approach of the National Theatre, an institution that gave at least one production of tragedy per year since its foundation, with the exception of 1944 and 1945 when no ancient tragedies were presented. At least three were shown after the establishment of the Epidaurus Festival in 1955. In order to understand Rontiris's approach, it is necessary to review and examine Rontiris's views and ideas on the origins of ancient Greek tragedy, and such features of ancient tragedy as the shared Greek land, environment, and language.

In *The Aesthetics of the Production of Greek Tragedy*, an English-language manuscript written by Rontiris and currently located in

his archive in the Theatre Museum of Athens, Rontiris stresses that there exists a strong link between contemporary and ancient Greece because, wherever people turn, they are reminded of 'some historic past', and that 'we [as Greeks] should feel deeper the moral responsibility to revive . . . dramatic poetry'.² He points out that because ancient tragedy is part of the Greek heritage, there is an ethical duty towards ancient Greek tragedy, and so Greek artists have an obligation to revive it.³ Moreover, Rontiris argues that modern spectators would not be interested in a 'faithful reproduction' of an ancient tragedy; artists should, therefore, be concerned with 'the revival of the spirit of tragedy' – 'spirit' being the operative word.⁴ He believes that this endeavour can be accomplished, explaining:

There is, in my opinion, only one way by which we can communicate the tragic heights and the holy ecstasy felt by the ancient spectator of these masterpieces to the modern theatregoer and that is . . . to seek to get the spirit of the play in us by emphasizing the eternal human truths that are embedded in the ancient 'logos' of each play.⁵

For Rontiris, tragedy conveyed 'eternal human truths' through the text. However, he did not believe that the main characteristic of the ancient Greek plays was solely their humanistic aspect. He stressed tragedy's religious components, namely, its derivation from the dithyramb (the religious hymn to Dionysus) and the link of the Chorus to religious rituals, explaining that the origin of tragedy was linked to religious worship.⁶

Thus Rontiris did not regard the ancient tragedies as independent artistic creations, but as a genre inherently linked to a religious tradition. Consequently, his productions aimed at 'preserving the ceremonial, the ritualistic character of the play[s]'.⁷ His goal was to find the means that would 'impart to the modern spectator the same feelings that moved the soul of the ancient man' attending a performance of a tragedy in the theatre of Dionysus in the fifth century BC.⁸

Rontiris believed that the only way to convey the 'religious expression and human profundity' of tragedy to the contemporary spectator was to find the elements that con-

stituted the 'uninterrupted continuity' from ancient to contemporary Greece.⁹ Rontiris found those elements in the ritual part of the Mystery and the Holy Eucharist of the Greek Orthodox Church and in the monophonic Greek folk songs.¹⁰ The Greek tradition that influenced him was evident in the way that the actors recited and acted. For instance, in his 1978 production of *Electra*, Eleni Hatzargiri's *Electra* in her opening speech (verses 86–120) delivered her lines accompanied by subtle but evocative music, and her monologue sounded like a dirge. Hatzargiri prolonged the vowels and kept the assonance of the words. Her speech was reminiscent of the ecclesiastic liturgy of the Greek Orthodox Church.

The Rhythm of the Text

Rontiris considers that the 'logos', the spoken word of the written text, conveys the truths embedded in it and so, by focusing on the 'logos', the 'spirit of tragedy' can be conveyed.¹¹ Thus the text becomes the governing element of Rontiris's productions of ancient tragedy: the 'logos' should be well delivered by the actors on the stage so that it is well perceived by the audience. Following this guideline, Anna Sinodinou, Rontiris's student and leading actress of the National, claims that Rontiris rightfully occupies the position of the 'last teacher of the art of the dramatic logos' which equals the 'art of the theatre'.¹² Hence, Sinodinou clearly suggests that, as the art of speech and diction is identified with the art of the theatre, attention to the articulation of speech becomes central, and the intonation and accentuation of every word in the text is of enormous importance.

Thus Rontiris worked closely with the text, and his student, collaborator, and critic Kostas Georgousopoulos has explained how Rontiris read and acted each sentence of every part in a play in order to grasp its essence. Once he had perceived the meaning of the script and the dynamics of the characters, he sketched out the emotional development of each part. He delivered and accentuated the text according to his internal

technique, as will be discussed. By these means, he reached what Aristotle called *οικείον μήκος* (the appropriate length) of each word and sentence. Thus he determined how long a monologue or a line would be, how many pauses it would have, how long each pause should be, and so on. In short, he formulated and expressed what he called the rhythm of the text.¹³

Rontiris's next problem was to put this method into a form that he could break down and use to teach. As he did not have any musical education, he turned for guidance to his collaborator, the musician and composer Dimitris Mitropoulos, who proposed a way that allowed Rontiris to map out his ideas regarding a given text.¹⁴ Mitropoulos suggested to him that he could punctuate the text using the marks employed for the beats and pauses of the percussion instruments of an orchestra because those instruments had no melody and no real notes and were essentially percussion.¹⁵ So Rontiris punctuated his text and eventually created a score, where every letter, word, and sentence had a precise tone and length, in short, a specific value. Thus he produced what he called the 'unyielding austere score' of the Rontirian method of acting.¹⁶ Then he was able to teach his students by conveying the rhythm of the score he had created.

Texts as Musical Scores

It is important to note that Rontiris regarded every single theatre text as a musical score (an idea perceived under the direct influence of Reinhardt and in turn derived from Stanislavsky). Rontiris determined a number of choices in relation to his directorial work and especially in the acting of tragedy. He believed that every syllable and letter of a tragic text was equivalent to a note on a score, which meant that every utterance should have a specific value, that is, a certain duration and intensity. It should belong to a specific musical key, low or high, sharp or flat, and it should follow a set rhythm, slow or fast, diminuendo, crescendo, or staccato. By this Rontiris did not mean that there was

only one way to present a part. He meant that the words of the text had specific values, and that every actor, being a musical instrument, had to interpret these set notes.

In the following extract from a lecture he gave at the Belasco Theatre in New York entitled 'The Contemporary Presentation of Classical Greek Plays', Rontiris justified his use of the score and linked his acting method to tragedy:

We tried to fashion the ancient tragedy in its severe architecturally musical form. Ancient tragedy... has all the characteristics of a complete musical composition. Form and substance, content and purpose, are indissolubly tied together in a harmonious unity.¹⁷

This 'harmonious unity' had a tight and strict rhythm. The 'severe architecturally musical form' of tragedy presupposed an inherent rhythm of the language and a rhythm of the 'logos'. It also demonstrated the development of the plot and the variation of the character's emotion.

The rhythm of the language can be understood as the rhythm dictated by the syntax of each sentence, the position of the noun, the existence or lack of an adjective, an adverb, or a conjunction. This is also clear in the extract from Rontiris's notes presented in Georgousopoulos's article, where he indicates that the position of nouns, adjectives, and adverbs had considerable importance in the way that Rontiris accentuated and intoned a sentence.¹⁸

For instance, in the seventh verse of Clytemnestra's first speech addressed to Electra in the Second Episode, the word 'τάχα' – meaning 'supposedly' – is placed at the end of the verse. Its position emphasizes Clytemnestra's claim that Electra is being unreasonable and so the word should be stressed. Thus the syntax and structure of the sentence provided the sentence's goal and, subsequently, this goal provided the sentence's rhythm. This meant that each character's aim, feeling, and reaction was already embedded in the text. Or, to use Rontiris's words once more: 'Changes in rhythm do not happen for their own sake or for variety. They are directed by the change of emotion

and the disposition of the characters.¹⁹ However, the *score* and the rhythm did not complete the Rontirian method. Rontiris was also concerned with the breadth of the voice and its range. As Georgousopoulos points out, Rontiris provided the rhythm and the actor the melody, which was still controlled by the master.²⁰ Rontiris explains:

I use musical terms, such as *crescendo* and *diminuendo* for the characters of the play as well as the Chorus. This approach to the text requires an exceptional pronunciation of the words, in the same manner that a singer following a score pronounces the words prolonging and projecting the vowels that are distinguished, while the pronunciation of the consonants is dry. This requires tremendous control of breathing. . . . This is a matter of technique, not of emotion.²¹

In order to produce these sounds, Rontiris used breathing exercises and exercises for placing the voice; and he developed the actors' phonetic skills.

These exercises were used for many years at the Drama School of the National Theatre. Nikos Papakonstantinou, Rontiris's student and assistant, wrote a book that encompassed all these exercises,²² and this became the basis of the Phonetics and Speech Training course at the Drama School conducted by Papakonstantinou until 1993. The same course, following Rontiris's exercises and the guidelines of Papakonstantinou's book, was taught by Dimitris Vayias at the Drama School of the State Theatre of Northern Greece in Thessaloniki from its foundation in 1975 until 2003.

Vayias, who was a student of the National Drama School and a leading actor of the State Theatre of Northern Greece as well as the Director of its Drama School, also taught acting.²³ He explains that the actor has the ability to develop a part fully by using the technique provided by this method, exactly as Rontiris had suggested.²⁴ This means that, first, the actor reads a part and understands its meaning and the character's emotional charge. Then she/he divides it into sentences, chooses to accentuate specific words and the length of each vowel and word in order to express the part's emotional state and development. In short, the actor pro-

duces a *score* and from this she/he knows the way the role should be acted.

Work on the Body

The ideal use of the 'logos', the inner and outer rhythm of the word, the correct way of projecting the voice, and the range of the voice were some of the elements that comprised the external technique. The body and its movement on the stage completed it. Rontiris paid considerable attention to the body, as he was himself an athlete and worked out regularly until he was eighty years old.²⁵ He advised his actors to exercise regularly and to pay attention to the exterior elements of a part such as walking, moving, and so on, but all these elements were to be derived from the 'unyielding, austere *score*'. So the body followed the speech; it did not ignite the emotion that determined the way a part was approached.

Moreover, his students and the actors of the National did not focus particularly on cultivating their somatic side. As a consequence, the dance and movement teachers at the Drama Schools of the National and of the Conservatory, as well as choreographers and movement trainers working on Rontiris's productions, focused on the external form and appearance. The focus was on the text rather than on bodily expression.

The external technique was complemented by the internal technique, which relied on 'emotional charge'. Georgousopoulos:

The actor has to grasp the part emotionally, review its range, which means that she/he either should have life experiences or have trained her/his inner world in order to have an automated production of emotions. Rontiris said that acting is the complete control of the muscular and nervous systems.²⁶

From this statement it is clear that there is a reciprocal relationship between the grasp of the emotion and development of the part and, as well, between the interpretation and understanding of the text. This happens, according to Rontiris, because the actor has to understand the role rationally, find its rhythm, and then approach it emotionally.



Katina Paxinou and the Chorus in Sophocles' *Electra* at the Theatre of Epidaurus, directed by Dimitris Rontiris.

And this goes hand in glove with the fact that the actor has to follow and interpret a pre-set text on which everything is mapped out. Thus the actor has to use intonations on the text in order to stimulate her/his emotions. Although it is true that the stimulation of emotion can occur without rationalization, in Rontiris's method it is imperative to combine rationality and emotion. This also leads to this belief that acting is a matter of control of the muscular and nervous system because, for him, everything in acting is calculated, timed, and exact.

The actor's ability to control her/his voice, body, and emotion makes possible the second

requisite of Rontiris's internal technique, which is the 'automated production of emotions'. This means that the actor has to be able to recall her/his emotion whenever it is asked of her/him and to cry, yell, whisper, or shout according to what the character of the play feels, which is determined by the mapping out of the emotional condition of the character and is imprinted on the text.

Georgousopoulos explains that, because Rontiris was a talented and gifted actor, he did not need to develop a method in order to cultivate his emotional expressions.²⁷ By contrast, because his voice was weak, it was imperative to have a method to improve it.

Thus he focused more on the external technique, which he lacked, and less on the internal, which he possessed. Therefore, he did not develop exercises or training for the progress of the internal technique, and tried to explain the emotional development of each character through the score that he had created. It seems that the operative word regarding Rontiris's internal technique is 'emotional charge'. The word 'charge' clearly refers to the power that an actor should have, and to the actor's ability to maintain this power while acting a part. Hence, 'charge' results in a powerful actor on stage, who can control her/his emotion according to the given score.

Rontiris did not believe in talent. Georgousopoulos explains that, Rontiris, in order to stress how the actor was a tool and that talent had nothing to do with acting, used to say that 'even if a chair trained, it would be able to recite a monologue from *Hamlet*'.

The Rontirian acting style established deep roots in the Greek theatre, and, still today, there are some monologues from *Electra* by Sophocles or the *Persians* that are recited according to Rontiris's intonations.²⁸ Georgousopoulos affirms that one can hear young students in all the drama schools of Athens trying to imitate the accentuations and intonations of important actors, without, however, producing their own emotional charge.²⁹

Rontiris and Papathanasiou

Aspasia Papathanasiou was one of those great actors who collaborated with Rontiris, performing the title role in the 1959 production of Sophocles' *Electra* by the Theatre of Piraeus, a company Rontiris formed after he left the National Theatre in 1955. She was Rontiris's student from the National Theatre Drama School, and her performance as *Electra* won her the First International Acting Prize at the Theatre of Nations Festival in Paris in 1960. She confirms that Rontiris insisted on observing rhythm and intonation:

With Rontiris you had to do exactly what he wanted because he had the general concept and you could not stray from the timed outline that he

gave you. For instance, he told you that the first monologue [of *Electra*] should last half a second. He did not actually tell you that it should last half a second, but the rhythm he imposed on you did not let you get away. He regarded himself as the maestro.³⁰

Her performance also shows that, by using Rontiris's score, the actor can develop a personal acting interpretation linked to a character, background, culture – in short, to the individuality of each actor in question.

Papathanasiou had a powerful voice and a wide vocal range. She used the numerous intonations that her voice was able to produce in order to express *Electra*'s emotional condition and inner feelings while her body moved moderately. She did not employ imposing, highly expressive movements when she acted, but every movement was calculated and precise. She walked smoothly on the stage, like a trapped feline waiting for her saviour to open the cage.

After Clytemnestra's and Aegisthus' death, she remained still at the centre of the stage, while the lights slowly dimmed. The countless variations of her voice communicated the extreme emotions that *Electra* experienced: hate towards her mother, devastation when she hears of her brother's death, and joy when she realizes he is alive. How she used her voice and body are indicative of the Rontirian acting style, where the focus falls on the text and its recitation and not on its bodily expression.

Moreover, Papathanasiou's *Electra* was distinctive from the other Sophoclean *Electras* directed by Rontiris between 1936 and 1972. Papathanasiou's distinctiveness lay in her political orientation. She was left-wing, politically active, and had been a member of the Resistance in Athens during the Occupation. She even remembers that her teacher's technique helped her when she was walking at night from neighbourhood to neighbourhood chanting against the occupation forces and using a twisted piece of cardboard as a speaking trumpet.³¹

Rontiris, aware of Papathanasiou's background, decided that Papathanasiou would wear a kerchief over her hair.³² This kerchief referred to the Greek traditional article of



Aspasia Papathanasiou with kerchief in Rontiris's production of Sophocles' *Electra* by the Theatre of Piraeus (1959).

clothing, indicating mourning. In this way, her performance was charged with her socio-political conscience: thus a post-war Greek woman carrying the burden of a wounded nation could be identified in her *Electra*. This

pervasive notion of the post-war Greek woman was made concrete with the help of the perceptive and politically and socially sensitive direction of her performance. Even though she used the same *score* for her per-

formance, her appearance created a reference point identifiable by contemporary audiences.

In the 1959 production, the sociopolitical circumstances were dramatically different in comparison to these of Rontiris's first staging of *Electra* in 1936. Greece had experienced great human loss during the Second World War and the Civil War that followed. Women wearing black kerchiefs were seen in the streets daily. This detail referred directly to everyday Greek life in the 1950s and 1960s. The female figure left behind by the patriot who dies for his country, the warrior who fights for his beliefs, are mourned by the woman dressed in black, her head covered. *Electra* was the widow of the war. She became the widow of her household.

When the present author brought this detail to Papathanasiou's attention, she was surprised at first, but then admitted that

I carried that inside me. . . . I brought my life with me. My orientation. The beliefs of my life. I tried, of course, to make it come out from *Electra*'s situation, not to be a catchword – the declaration of a political party. But I had that inside me. . . . He [Rontiris] knew that this [the kerchief] would not suit anyone else. That is what every actor brings to a part.³³

This detail clearly indicates that Rontiris was extremely perceptive regarding the socio-political conditions of his era. It also contradicts Antonis Glitzouris's claim that Rontiris did not present any ideological concerns in his work, but was limited to the logical development of the action on the stage.³⁴ Rather, it shows that Rontiris had ideological concerns which he managed to incorporate organically in his productions without overshadowing his conception of the play. In other words, the concerns did not obscure the score of his production or alter what he believed was the intention and meaning of the play he was directing.

Karolos Koun and the Art of 'Emotion'

By contrast with Rontiris's acting school, Karolos Koun's at the *Theatro Technis* was based on a pronounced physical approach to work on the stage. Koun did not dismiss the

meaning of the text, since he greatly valued it. However, he focused on emotion and on the way it could be transmitted to the audience, while neglecting pronunciation and recitation.³⁵ Koun's school influenced Greek acting in that it changed entirely the way tragedy was performed, especially after the international recognition he received for his 1965 production of the *Persians*.

Koun's focal point was the emotional truth of the characters of the ancient plays, the multivocality of the Chorus, ancient tragedy's connection with Greek popular rites and rituals, and contemporary influences such as the epic theatre and the Theatre of the Absurd.³⁶

The presentation of ancient Greek drama occupied a central position in the work of Koun and the *Theatro Technis* because he believed that there did not exist anything more valuable than the meanings and humanistic truths the ancient dramas conveyed.³⁷ Thus it would be useful to examine first and foremost Koun's ideas concerning ancient Greek drama; second, how he approached it in relation to directing and acting; and finally the way that this approach was expressed on the stage.

Koun believed that ancient drama was inseparably linked with the socio-political reality of its own time and, even though socio-political conditions had changed, its themes continued to be relevant across time.³⁸ He also took as a starting point the idea that ancient drama sprang from religious rituals and that there still existed a strong connection with existing popular rites and rituals such as those performed during the celebrations of the Greek carnival and ritualistic forms of theatre from which 'it was impossible to deviate'.³⁹

Ancient drama's ritualistic element, found in the origins, thematics, and structures of the plays, as well as in the Chorus and the characters, had to determine the way that the genre was performed. According to Koun, this could be achieved if the physical, sensual, and emotional Dionysian enchantment that fascinated the ancient Greeks was transmitted to contemporary spectators. The actors, then, had to evoke strong emotions in

the spectators by employing the Greek elements which still exist in today's rituals and rites such as the Anastenaria, a fire-walking ritual, and the phallus processions during the Greek carnival, a ritual linked to Dionysus.⁴⁰

Koun's concepts bring forward the question concerning the cultural identity and substance that these elements had to have in order to stimulate the emotions of a contemporary Greek audience. Koun was aware that, geographically and culturally, Greece stood at the crossroads of West and East, and he believed that tragedy was closer to the latter.⁴¹ He claimed that 'the ancient theatre has a scent of the East', and accordingly that the eastern elements of tragedy were inherent to it.⁴² The ancient Greeks' constant contact with the Middle East and Asia Minor, by sea and land, rather than with the West, which was not known during the fifth century BC, can support this claim. Moreover, the close ties of the Byzantine Empire with Asia Minor and the four hundred years of Ottoman occupation preserved a large number of Eastern elements (Turkish, Persian and so on) in Greek culture in terms of music, physical and verbal expression, and movement.

Aspects of Cultural Specificity

Furthermore, Koun believed, as did all Greek actors and directors who worked on ancient tragedy and comedy, that modern Greeks are the direct heirs of ancient Greek drama.⁴³ According to Koun, this brought advantages and disadvantages:

We are offered great advantages regarding the interpretation [of Greek drama], but we also face great dangers. On the one hand, we face great dangers because we have to be very careful and to have a deep knowledge of Greece so that we are not carried away by directorial brainwaves, which are allowed to foreigners, but are unfit for Greek reality. And we also must not be confined to a lifeless, museum representation of the external form of the ancient theatre as a result of cowardice or pedantry or misinterpreted respect. On the other hand, we are offered great advantages because we live in the same land as the ancients. This allows us to draw inspiration from the same



Reni Pittaki as Electra in Sophocles' play directed by Karolos Koun at the Theatro Technis.

sources and to utilize everything that the Greek tradition has developed.⁴⁴

Koun believed that a Greek director had to create productions close to contemporary theatre, while always keeping in mind that she/he was Greek. Thus he considered that, as a Greek, he had an obligation to interpret the ancient dramas with elements that derived from the Greek land, language, tradition, and people.

However, Koun did not believe that the approach of the directors of the National Theatre was faithful to the way he perceived Greek identity and culture. He therefore wanted to move away from those directors' interpretation, which he thought was influenced by foreign schools and directors, and lacked the particular Greek qualities that he sought.⁴⁵ Koun was also not interested in the way that Greek dramas were presented by directors such as Max Reinhardt, who came from a country more theatrically advanced than Greece, but which had a different climate, people, and customs. He explained:

Even though every human organism reacts in the same way all over the world, the expression of this reaction differs: grandeur and fear are depicted with different ways in the East and the West, and a cry of despair sounds different in the Equator and the Steppes.⁴⁶

The cry in the Equator sounds different in the Steppes because people are different and this also applies to theatre all over the world. As Maria Shevtsova put it, 'The theatre is not the same across the world' but 'unique according to cultures', and this is so 'irrespective of how traits may be similar from theatre to theatre because they belong to the one discernible field across a gamut of cultures'.⁴⁷ The idea of uniqueness relates to the notion of cultural specificity and Koun's belief that Greek people and Greek culture were bound to express the Greek perception of Greek tragedy in a specific, singular way in relation to movement, voice, and acting.

The above statement suggests the need to clarify what constituted Greek culture and tradition according to Koun. For him, the Greek tradition was characterized by a strong link to carnival, popular rites, and rituals. It was influenced by its proximity to Asia Minor and the Middle East and it was determined by the knowledge of a glorious ancient past combined with four hundred years of Ottoman occupation.

It included the legacy of the Byzantine Empire and the Orthodox Church. It was influenced by the 1922 Asia Minor Disaster, the *rebetika* songs (*ρεμπέτικα* – popular songs usually accompanied by bouzouki), and the poetry of Dionysios Solomos, Konstantinos Kavafis, and Kostis Palamas. Finally, it was interconnected with the climate, the sun, and the sea, which gave Greek people an extroverted, open, and emotional way to express even the deepest grief.

Twentieth-Century Concerns

Koun also insisted on bringing out every play's relevance to the present time. He argued that if Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were to present their work today, they would take into consideration 'contemporary theatre, contemporary scenic condi-

tions and the mentality of the contemporary spectator'.⁴⁸ As a result, he aimed to combine his interpretation of Greek culture and tradition with present-day elements that would speak to modern Greek audiences.

For example, he focused on the element of suspense in the narrative structure of *Electra* by Sophocles, which he thought would attract a contemporary audience, rather than on the poetry of the play.⁴⁹ Koun claimed that 'the first thing I look for in a tragedy is whether or not it is contemporary, direct, and addressed to the man of today'.⁵⁰ Thus he tried to find analogies between the ancient drama and contemporary conditions, and he created productions that were addressed to Greeks of the twentieth century.

Koun's quest for contemporary elements must not be confused with the postmodern presentation of tragedy, which sets fragments of the plays in conventional everyday spaces such as apartments and uses props such as machine guns or cigarettes. He was categorical in not accepting such devices. He claimed that important foreign directors like Peter Stein, who directed the *Oresteia* in 1980, might be allowed to bring a tragedy up to date to a certain degree 'because they have always something to offer', but that he was generally opposed to such productions.

I've seen pictures of a performance of *Antigone* in Stuttgart, where they tried to present the heroine's environment as plutocratic, or in another production where she had a handbag round her shoulder, smoked, and drank whisky. Or in a kitchen. All these seem too far off for me; as is Reinhardt's spirit.⁵¹

All the above seemed 'too far off' for Koun because the contemporary sets, props, and habits such as drinking whisky or smoking deprived tragedy of its universal and humanitarian qualities and rendered it small and trivial.

For Koun, the very heart of tragedy was the struggle of the human in the universe. In order to bring out this struggle and present it on the stage, Koun turned to contemporary theatre. He argued:

The Dreamlike Theatre reveals aspects of Ancient Theatre; Ancient Theatre helps us interpret the



Electra directed by Karolos Koun, with Eleni Hadjiargyri in the title role.

Epic and Ritual Theatre; and the Theatre of the Absurd open paths towards the Ancient Theatre and the Classics. Poets like Brecht, Ionesco, Beckett, and Pinter bring us closer to Shakespeare, Aeschylus and Aristophanes and, in turn, they enter the space of contemporary theatre.⁵²

Tragedy within Modernity

Olga Taxidou, in her *Tragedy, Modernity, and Mourning*, where she reviews ancient Greek tragedies and twentieth-century approaches to performance, argues that both Brecht and Beckett's work 'respond to the same question: the question of tragedy. Both projects seek to create a theory and performance (a praxis) for tragedy within modernity.'⁵³ Similarly, Koun looked for a way to stage tragedy within his own time. He argued that the material supplied by these great theatre writers and their plays extended ancient theatre because, through them, contemporary theatre returned to the origins of the theatre, 'banishing the conventional logic of time, space, and plot'. Thus theatre's focal point became 'the Human, within society, within the Universe'.⁵⁴ He insisted on the universality of tragedy:

The Epic Theatre and the playwrights of the avant-garde broke the restrictions, eliminated the limits that singular psychological and emotional cases conveyed because they render no meaning today in comparison to the universal condition. They redefined and repositioned man within the open space and untimed time, facing the grand questions of his existence.⁵⁵

The leading Greek theatre historian Yiannis Sideris notes that contemporary Greek theatre owes to Koun and the *Theatro Technis* the notion that ancient tragedy and the Theatre of the Absurd are linked and spring from the same roots. This sense of connection of the two genres makes possible an understanding of ancient tragedy today and of the eternal suffering of human beings.⁵⁶

Koun turned to Brechtian theatre in order to understand the function of the Chorus and the characters. The function and structure of multivocal choruses, their sociopolitical significance, and their critical function in the development of the plot might be linked to the use of songs in Brecht's plays, the long speeches of the messengers found in ancient Greek tragedies analogous with the eyewitness in Brecht's essay who narrates to by-

standers what has taken place in the street accident.⁵⁷ Further, the use of music, speech, and expressive movement in Brecht's productions opened the way for Koun, who argued that

The *Verfremdungseffekt*, the direct contact with the audience, the critical opinion, and, finally what is called total theatre, are not primary elements of the Epic Theatre. They are the basis of ancient theatre, which was the well from which contemporary poets derived their material.⁵⁸

Koun was aware of Brecht's ability to take basic elements from ancient theatre, to incorporate them and develop them in his own work, and, finally, to give them back to contemporary theatre practitioners. Thus he recognized Brecht as the channel through which modern theatre might re-examine ancient drama. He believed that Brecht was initially taught by ancient theatre, and, in turn, through the Brechtian approach, Koun had been helped to find the theatrical analogies with ancient Greek theatre.⁵⁹

Koun claimed that the 'renewal' of tragedy in relation both to its external/scenic presentation and to the intrinsic meaning that it conveyed relied upon bringing forward 'the situation of the heroes in a plain and austere manner'.⁶⁰ He made clear that actors 'cannot act tragedy like they act a psychological drama'.⁶¹ This comment connects Koun's work with his observations in relation to the Theatre of the Absurd and Brecht's work. It also brings up the question of how ancient tragedy was performed by the actors of the Theatro Technis.

Koun analyzed the way in which his actors had to achieve their performance. Initially, he repeated that the pronunciation of the speech and the power of the sound and the kinetic expression of the body within the space had to be inseparably linked.⁶² He explained that, given the space of the open-air theatres where the plays were presented and the magnitude of the emotions that the characters expressed, 'it would be necessary that the speech, the sound, and the movement 'obtained different dimensions from the ones we knew'. He also revealed that he and his collaborators 'rarely came across

psychological swings, emotional conditions, and nuances in speech and movement of the kind we come across in contemporary drama'. Nevertheless, he insisted that the 'psychological chain' – the what, the why and the how of a character on stage – 'had to be maintained intact'. He concluded that 'we must experiment so as to convey with plasticity and within different dimensions the truth'.⁶³

Organic Connections and Inner Realism

In rehearsals of the *Persians*, in order for his actors to understand the manner in which they had to talk and move, he told them that they had to feel as if the air around them was thick and that they had to make an effort when they spoke or walked. Maria Konstantarou, actress of the Theatro Technis, argued that if the actor was immersed in this notion of the thickness of the air, she/he automatically and naturally had to make the vowels longer and the consonants sharper.⁶⁴ This enabled the actors to approach physically what Rontiris requested of his students, as analyzed earlier.

Considering the above, it is important to understand how Koun worked with and taught his actors. He believed that every actor had to use her/his body and voice, and to bond with her/his fellow actors on the stage. This connection should happen organically and should not be cerebral.⁶⁵ For Koun, the actor's centre was his psyche, which determined how the actor felt when acting a part, and the mind filtered the expression of the emotion. Hence, acknowledging the direct influence of Stanislavsky, the actor had to find the 'inner realism' of the role, its inner truth, and, simultaneously, to determine the what, the why, and the how of a character on stage.⁶⁶

Furthermore, Koun did not regard the bodily and vocal expression of the actor as elements independent of the actor's emotional condition. Thus the 'inner realism' of the character had to be linked to her/his somatic expression on stage. For example, a character who was in a specific emotional condition had to convey this condition on

the stage through the character's movement, the facial expressions, the intonation of the phrases, and the articulation of speech.

Koun searched for plasticity of posture, movement, and voice.⁶⁷ For him, plasticity meant the spontaneous and natural development of a movement and the suppleness of a posture.⁶⁸ It had nothing to do with the precise and calculated movement of the dancer or the choreography of a performance. His notion of plasticity coincided with that of the Russian theatre director Evgeny Vakhtangov, according to whom,

The actor must train in plasticity, not so that he can dance, make elegant movements, gestures, and postures, but so that he can be incorporated in plasticity. And plasticity is not found solely in movement. It is found in a carelessly hanged piece of cloth, on the surface of a peaceful lake, in a sleeping cat. . . . Nature does not recognize non-plasticity.⁶⁹

Thus plasticity was a natural quality that granted to Koun's actors flexibility and the ability to slide naturally from one position to the next, or one word to the next.

Focus on the Body

In this lies the great opposition between the two existing Greek acting schools of the Theatro Technis and the National Theatre. On the one hand, Koun enabled his actors to create characters that were part of their own personality while, on the other, the actors at the National had to follow pre-manufactured verbal canvases such as those that Dimitris Rontiris constructed.

As a result of this opposition, Koun was not obsessed with absolutely clear diction from his actors. What he expected from them was the expressive qualities of a specific pitch or vocal volume – a cry or laughter – that justified the character's emotional state, and was not self-conscious verbal delivery. He used to say that he did not care how an actor intoned a word, a sentence, or what she/he said, but what the actor felt and how this particular emotional quality was communicated in a particular way. He insisted that an actor should not listen to her/his voice.⁷⁰

His opposition to the National Theatre's acting school, where clarity of the words was a prerequisite, is evident. His ideas regarding this issue seem to coincide with Stanislavsky's ideas as found in *My Life in Art*:

We will better talk without clearness rather than talk as the other actors do. They either flirt with their words or take pleasure in running the whole gamut of their vocal register, or their prophecy. Let someone teach us to speak simply, musically, nobly, beautifully, but without vocal acrobatics, actors' pathos, and all the odds and ends of scenic diction.⁷¹

Conversely, the body and bodily expression occupied a central position in Koun's teaching. The posture of the body, its deficiencies, or, for example, the force with which one hand squeezed another determined each character's being on the stage. He would ask his actors to find the way that a character walked, moved, sat, stood still, or touched their fellow actors.⁷²

Koun also believed that an actor could find her/his emotional situation through physical stimulation.⁷³ He instigated his actors to imagine the environment around them and aimed to make them feel the environmental conditions of a play or a specific scene with their bodies. For instance, when he directed the opening scene of the second act of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, he said to the actors that they had to keep in mind that it was hot.⁷⁴ The element of heat determined not only the actors' movement, because due to the temperature it was slower, but also their mood because the heat made them act less rationally. A physical stimulus thus helped the actors to find the emotional condition of the scene. This practice of provoking an emotion through physical stimulation was typical of Koun and demonstrated his belief that a corporeal incentive was more powerful than a verbal one.

Character and the Creative Process

Koun expected his actors to have initiative and to improvise. The personal contribution of each actor regarding the bodily, psycho-emotional, and vocal expression of her/his

character was Koun's requisite from his collaborators in the creation of a performance. He wanted his actors/students to contribute to the conception and construction of a production. He never started rehearsing a play with a fixed opinion on how it should be presented.⁷⁵ He left his actors free to propose their ideas and feelings about their character, and he then used these ideas and feelings in order to construct the final performance.

This is also apparent from the remarks of George Vakalo, Koun's collaborator and important set designer:

Koun never confronted directing as a mental problem, so that he would give irremovable solutions from the beginning and before commencing to direct a play. . . . During rehearsal he shaped and was shaped. He corrected and, by correcting, he discovered and sought. The internal function of a composition was revealed during its development.⁷⁶

Koun's rehearsals were an inspiring experience.⁷⁷ In order to initiate the creative process of his actors, Koun tried to excite their imagination, and he avoided guiding them by given intonations and movements. He also tried to visualize their feelings and their voice. He used to say: 'I cannot see clearly the one in the other's reaction. . . . Vera, I didn't hear George's hair in your voice' – thus trying to establish an emotional connection between them beyond their physical co-existence on the stage.⁷⁸ The important playwright Iakovos Kambanelis described the manner in which Koun taught his actors:

His teaching is an inexhaustible source of organic expressiveness! Colours, tastes, perfumes, shapes, images, poetry, paradoxes, surrealism, his unexplored fantasy, his passion for his work, his experience, and his instinct are in constant mobilization and give form to the most subtle, the most insubordinate, the most compound emotional nuances. . . . He rushes towards the actors and starts to act. . . . He doesn't speak the text, he speaks the person. . . . He is not twenty years old, but lives the twenty-year-old. . . . What he holds is not a knife, it's a spoon . . . but he transforms it to what he feels.⁷⁹

Koun would get up and act the part by showing the emotional condition of the char-

acter. He would not use words from the text. He often did not use words at all. Antonis Antoniou, the well-known actor and director, student of the Theatro Technis Drama School and member of the original cast of the *Persians*, recalled that, during a rehearsal of that play in Paris, Koun got up and for some four minutes demonstrated to his pupil, George Lazanis, who played the Messenger, the emotional nuances of his character, without using a word from the text, without using words at all, but only sounds, gestures, movements, and silences.⁸⁰ Lazanis was able to understand him because he was his student and they shared a common code.

It has been made clear that Koun did not have a specific method in approaching a play or a part, on which his students and his collaborators agreed.⁸¹ However, he managed to form the most powerful and influential acting school in Greece. This is not the paradox it may seem. He managed it because he had the complete trust of his actors and because they enjoyed their work with him. As actor and director Thanos Kotsopoulos noted, Koun had to have actors who loved the parts that they were playing and the processes they followed while working on them.

In this way, Koun 'completed' his actors while taking their best qualities from them.⁸² This was necessary because Koun's theatre was based on ensemble work, experimentation and a vision of an innovative Greek theatre. He concluded in his speech on the Theatro Technis's contemporary performances of ancient tragedies:

We search, we work, we let ourselves be influenced by our country's tradition, the contemporary socio-political reality, and the expressive means of today's theatre in order to project our poetry, not as static speech but as contemporary theatre.⁸³

Rontiris and Koun were the two great Greek theatre masters of the twentieth century. Rontiris defined the way tragedy was acted and directed for over four decades, from the 1930s until the 1970s. He developed a school that created actors who approached their parts through the rhythm of the text and the

way that they pronounced and accentuated their speech. Conversely, Koun focused on the emotional development of characters, while paying no attention to pronunciation and accentuation. His acting school influenced his students at the Teatro Technis and a great number of other Greek actors. These directors, each in his way, created directing and acting approaches that linked Greek tragedy with contemporary Greek theatre and life. The two different schools that they nurtured formed the mode and system according to which tragedy was performed in Greece.

Notes and References

1. Dimitris Rontiris, *The Contemporary Presentation of Classical Greek Plays*, English-language typescript in Rontiris's files, Theatre Museum of Athens, 1961, no pagination.
2. Dimitris Rontiris, *The Aesthetics of the Production of Greek Tragedy*, English-language manuscript in Rontiris's files, Theatre Museum of Athens, 1952, no pagination.
3. The notion of continuity and heritage, of the same sun, earth, and sky, in short of the same country, is also found in Koun's view of tragedy. See Karolos Koun, *Creating Theatre for Our Soul (Κάνουμε θέατρο για την ψυχή μας)* (Athens: Kastaniotis, 2000), p. 33–6.
4. Rontiris, *The Contemporary Presentation of Classical Greek Plays*.
5. Rontiris, *The Aesthetics of the Production of Greek Tragedy*.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Rontiris, *The Contemporary Presentation of Classical Greek Plays*.
8. Rontiris, *The Aesthetics of the Production of Greek Tragedy*.
9. Rontiris, *The Contemporary Presentation of Classical Greek Plays*.
10. *Ibid.*; Kostas Georgousopoulos, 'Possessing the Legacy Leads to Discovery' («Από την περιουσία στην εύρεση»), *To Vima (To Bήμα)*, 4 May 1986; interview by the author with Kostas Georgousopoulos, 25 February 2006.
11. Rontiris, *The Aesthetics of the Production of Greek Tragedy*.
12. Anna Sinodinou, *Praise the Worthy (Αίνοσ στους Αξιουσ)* (Athens: Kastaniotis, 1999), p. 216.
13. Interview by the author with Georgousopoulos, as above.
14. Dinos Kydoniatis in *In Conversation with Rontiris's Students about Rontiris (Με τους μαθητές του Ροντήρη για τον Ροντήρη)*, ed. Thanasis Lalas (Athens: Kastaniotis, 2001), p. 53–7.
15. Interview by the author with Georgousopoulos, as above.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Rontiris, *The Contemporary Presentation of Classical Greek Plays*.
18. Kostas Georgousopoulos, 'Body Language' («Η γλώσσα του σώματος»), Athens, *To Vima (To Bήμα)*, 12 January 1986.
19. Kostas Georgousopoulos, 'The Rontiris Method' («Η Μέθοδος Ροντήρη»), Athens, *To Vima (To Bήμα)*, 1 June 1986.
20. Interview by the author with Georgousopoulos, as above.
21. Rontiris, *The Contemporary Presentation of Classical Greek Plays*.
22. Nikos Papakonstantinou, *Education of Speech: Speech Training (Αγωγή του λόγου. Ορθοφωνία)* (Athens: Dodoni, 1985).
23. This comes from the personal knowledge of the author, as a student at the State Theatre of Northern Greece's Drama School from 1990 to 1992 and at the National Drama School from 1992 to 1993. She was taught by both Dimitris Vayas and Nikos Papakonstantinou.
24. Interview by the author with Dimitris Vayias, 7 May 2008.
25. Interview by the author with Georgousopoulos, as above.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. Kostas Georgousopoulos, 'Without an Acting School' («Χωρίς σχολή στ' αγκάθια»), Athens, *To Vima (To Bήμα)*, 24 November 1985. This has also been experienced by the author during her training at the Drama School of the National Theatre and the State Theatre of Northern Greece.
30. Interview by the author with Aspasia Papathanasiou, 10 September 2006.
31. Aspasia Papathanasiou, *Memory Pages (Σελίδες μνήμης)* (Athens: Kastaniotis, 1996), p. 81.
32. Interview by the author with Papathanasiou.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Antonis Glitzouris, *The Rise and Consolidation of Stage Direction in Greece (Η σκηνοθετική τέχνη στην Ελλάδα: Η ανάδυση και η εδραίωση της τέχνης του σκηνοθέτη στο νεοελληνικό θέατρο)* (Athens: Hellenic Letters, 2001), p. 398–9.
35. Interview by the author with Maria Konstantarou, 11 February 2008; interview by the author with Reni Rittaki, 5 December 2008.
36. Karolos Koun, *On Theatre: Essays and Interviews (Για το θέατρο: Κείμενα και συνεντεύξεις)*, ed. George Kotanidis (Athens: Ithaca, 1981), p. 62–5.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 65.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
42. Karolos Koun, interviewed by Anna Mihalitsianou, 'Karolos Koun: the Ancient Theatre Has a Scent of the East' («Κάρολος Κουν: Το αρχαίο θέατρο μυρίζει Ανατολή»), *Ena (Eva)*, n. 1205 (August 1984), p. 35.
43. Karolos Koun, *Creating Theatre for Our Soul (Κάνουμε θέατρο για την ψυχή μας)* (Athens: Kastaniotis, 2000), p. 33.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*, p. 36; Thodoros Grammatas, *Twentieth-Century Greek Theatre: Cultural Originals and Originality (Το Ελληνικό Θέατρο στον 20^ο αιώνα. Πολιτισμικά πρότυπα και πρωτοτυπία)*, Vol. 2 (Athens: Exantas, 2002) p. 39–40.
46. Koun, *Creating Theatre for Our Soul*, p. 36.
47. Maria Shevtsova, 'Appropriating Pierre Bourdieu's *Champ* and *Habitus* for a Sociology of Stage Productions', in *The Sociology of Theatre and Performance* (Verona: QuiEdit, 2009), p. 98.

48. Koun, *Creating Theatre for Our Soul*, p. 35.
49. Karolos Koun, editorial presentation of the production of *Electra* by Sophocles by Vasilis Angelikopoulos; 'A Sensitive Electra from Karolos Koun' («Μια αισθαντική Ηλέκτρα από τον Κάρολο Κουν»), Athens, *Ta Nea* (Τα Νέα), 1 August 1984.
50. Karolos Koun, *Greek Theatre: Karolos Koun*, CD recording (Ελληνικό Θέατρο. Κάρολος Κουν) (Athens: Lyra, 2007), track 14.
51. Koun, interviewed by Anna Mihalitsianou, p. 36.
52. Karolos Koun, 'Theatro Technis 1942-1972' («Θέατρο Τέχνης 1942-1972») (Athens: Theatro Technis, 1972), p. 32.
53. Olga Taxidou, *Tragedy, Modernity, and Mourning* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 199.
54. Cited in Yannis Sideris, 'Karolos Koun's Theatro Technis («Το «Θέατρο Τέχνης» του Καρόλου Κουν)», in *Theatro Technis 1942-1972*, p. 7.
55. Koun, *On Theatre: Essays and Interviews*, p. 63.
56. Sideris, 'Karolos Koun's Theatro Technis', p. 8.
57. Bertolt Brecht, 'The Street Scene', in *Brecht on Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 121-9.
58. Koun, *On Theatre: Essays and Interviews*, p. 63.
59. Ibid.
60. Koun, interviewed by Anna Mihalitsianou, p. 36.
61. Ibid.
62. Koun, *On Theatre: Essays and Interviews*, p. 67.
63. Ibid.
64. Interview by the author with Konstantarou, as above.
65. Koun, *Greek Theatre: Karolos Koun*, track 14.
66. Koun, *On Theatre: Essays and Interviews*, p. 59; interview by the author with Konstantarou, as above.
67. Koun, *On Theatre: Essays and Interviews*, p. 23.
68. Interview by the author with Konstantarou, as above; interview by the author with Pittaki, as above.
69. Cited in Marios Ploritis, 'Prologue' («Πρόλογος») in *The Vakhtangov School of Stage Art* (Βαχτάνγκοφ μαθήματα υποκριτικής και σκηνοθεσίας) (Athens: Medusa, 1997), p. 10.
70. Interview by the author with Konstantarou, as above.
71. Constantin Stanislavsky, *Building a Character*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Theatre Arts, 1967), p. 233.
72. Constantin Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, trans. J. J. Robbins (London: Penguin, 1967), p. 233.
73. Interview by the author with Konstantarou, as above; interview by the author with Pittaki, as above.
74. Interview by the author with Konstantarou, as above.
75. Ibid.; interview by the author with Pittaki, as above; interview by the author with Antonis Antoniou, 20 March 2009.
76. George Vakalo, 'Life's Truth' («Αλήθεια ζωής») in *Karolos Koun: Twenty-five Years Theatre* (Κάρολος Κουν. 25 χρόνια θέατρο) (Athens: Theatro Technis, 1959), p. 77.
77. Interview by the author with Konstantarou, as above; interview by the author with Antoniou, as above.
78. Iakovos Kambanelis, 'Under the Rehearsal Bulb' («Κάτω απ' τη λάμπα των 500»), in *Karolos Koun: Twenty-five Years Theatre* (Κάρολος Κουν. 25 χρόνια θέατρο) (Athens: Theatro Technis, 1959), p. 73. Koun talks to his students Vera Zavitsianou, who had an extremely successful career in the Greek theatre, and Giorgos Lazanis, who succeeded him as Artistic Director of the Theatro Technis after his death.
79. Kambanelis, 'Under the Rehearsal Bulb', p. 73-4.
80. Interview by the author with Antoniou, as above.
81. Interview by the author with Konstantarou, as above; interview by the author with Pittaki, as above; interview by the author with Antoniou, as above.
82. Thanos Kotsopoulos, 'Karolos Koun' («Κάρολος Κουν») in *Karolos Koun: Twenty-five Years Theatre* (Κάρολος Κουν. 25 χρόνια θέατρο), p. 56.
83. Koun, *On Theatre: Essays and Interviews*, p. 68.