

Greek Theater in New York City

By Steve Frangos

PART 2

Marika Cotopouli's (1887-1954) lasting influence on Greek theater in America can be judged by the number of professional troupes forming immediately after her first tour, with the express intent of mounting mass-market performances. We should be quick to point out that Greek theatrical troupes existed long before Cotopouli's arrival. This was especially the case in Greek music hall variety troupes. But it is also the case that the standards of public response to any Greek production in North America, after Cotopouli's 1930-1931 performances, would always be judged by the success engendered by that tour.

Such was the vibrant state of the Greek arts, that at the very end of the 1930s, there were four professional theater groups in New York City: The Thiasos (troupe) of Greek Actors of New York City; The Neon Theatron; Thiasos Apollo, Inc.; and The Greek Theatre, Inc.

Thymiou and Gregory Kourouklis are often mentioned as being especially notable in these musical comedies.

Gregory Kourouklis is a minor figure of some distinction in Greek American theater and music. His wife, Liza, was a featured accompanist on innumerable Greek commercial recordings produced in America. Her most acclaimed performance is her extremely popular rendition of *To Cigaretto* (Columbia Records). This type of musical comedy, or music-hall style performance, for which Gregory Kourouklis was celebrated during his career, can still be heard. Kourouklis accompanies Zoanides along with Liza Kourouklis and Maki Karneri in May 1929 on one of the very earliest self-styled American *rebetika*, the recording "Palia Stratona" and its B-side "Lig' Ap' Ola" (Columbia Records). This choral approach is heard again during the same recording session, in the resounding *E Glendzedes* (Columbia Records). A dedicated trouper to the end, Kourouklis is said to have died of a massive heart attack while on stage.

Blurred Genres



Photo: Basil Hatziminas

The Theatre Troupe, 1930

a number of comedies.

Given the complicated and enduring involvement of Greek immigrants and their descendants in the American labor movement, it is not surprising that a Greek-language troupe would form to "dramatize" their concerns. The interface between Greek-language theater and American theater has yet to be even considered, let alone sys-

she has trained. An orchestra and choir will accompany the stage action.

The Greek Theatre, Inc., is a nonprofit membership organization organized by Miss Cook and Mr. Roubanis for the purposes of dramatizing "with music and dancing the spiritual traditions and religious poetry of various nations." Its second production is to be "a dance-dramatization of American Indian spirit

The Thiasos of Greek Actors of New York City, which usually appeared at the Mansfield Theatre, was composed of over 20 men and women, including John and Katina Thymiou, Gregory Kourouklis, Vrisoula Pantopoulou, Thaleia Leonidou, John Ioanomidis, E. Diamantis, Elene Louka, C. Kazis, Daphnis, Argyriou, Malliarou, Letis, and others. While this troupe was very popular, at least one contemporary writer accused them of presenting "unsophisticated popular dramas and comedies" such as *Ali Pasha and Kyria Phrosine*, a three-act drama of the life and deeds of Ali Pasha (1741-1822), written by Aristotelis Valaoritis (1824-1879).

This group of actors performed what they and their audience most enjoyed. Among their most well-known theatrical choices was *Stella Violante* by Gregory Xenopoulos, which was popular with amateur troupes across the country. Theodore Gianakoulis has made the comment that *Stella Violante* "has also been 'screened' and was shown in New York." Since this fragment is all that Gianakoulis offers on the subject, we are left wondering if this means there was also an amateur Greek American film industry? Other plays in this very active troupe's repertoire included *The Magic Hand*; *Mad Symphony*; *The Festival of Koutoulis* (an especially popular humorous satire with song); Spyros Melas's (1883-1966), *Daddy Is Being Educated*, and a number of American and European dramas translated into Greek.

By the late 1930s, the Thiasos of Greek Actors of New York City would each year divide into two or three smaller ensembles and tour Greek American communities around New England and the Midwest. Chicago is recalled as being especially taken with the troupe's musical comedies. John

As in most areas of Greek American studies, it is hard to draw a sharp line between amateur and professional performers. This may in fact be imposing American definitions onto decidedly Greek situations. In Greece, musicians and performers of all sorts often have had an alternate job or profession. The barber could just as well be the local *laouto* player. In that sense, not being a full-time performer in the Greek neighborhoods of New York City during the 1920s and 1930s was not out of keeping with the lived experience in Greece.

This deserves mention when considering another popular theater troupe. The Thiasos Apollo, Inc. usually performed at the Palm Garden, 308 West 52nd Street, and was noted especially for its regular production of dramas, comedies, musical reviews, and operettas. In the late 1930s, the regular troupe members included Lambros Chaidos, Liza Christophoridou, Lina Dorou, A. Manoliakis, G. Papadopoulos. N. Patsis, Maria Pofanti, and N. Zapnoukayias. A few of their most popular presentations would have to include: *E Golfo*, *Mother's Grief*, *Three Days in the Dungeon*, and *The Lover of the Shepherdess*.

Dramas of the People

The Neon Theatron was reorganized in 1933-1934 by 15 young Greek Americans from an older troupe. Accounts always report that this troupe had political undertones, being labeled as "progressive," and that they consciously "presented original Greek dramas with social content" aimed expressly at "the workers." In the 1937-1938 season, their productions included *Mother Earth*, *The Black Pit* and *Private Hicks* (by A. Maltz), *The Murderess* (by Anton Demitrieff), Ibsen's *Ghosts*, along with

dematically studied. But it may well prove to be the case that it was from the politically inspired spectrum of the New York theatrical world that the Greeks most readily found a means by which to engage the *allofili*. Elia Kazan (b. 1909) and Alexander Scourby (1914-1971) were both involved in American troupes that had a decidedly "left-of-center" orientation. Scourby definitely, and perhaps even Kazan, had direct involvement with the Greek theater scene of New York City.

While the Neon Theatron consisted of a regular troupe of actors, it must be noted that they were a very open collectivity, encouraging the participation of other Greek actors and musicians. With that in mind, the core troupe was composed of P. Adamides, Ch. Rozas, Maranth Bargis, Helen Sdonas, John Vokos (considered by many as the leading comedic actor of the Greek stage in New York City), and others.

Greek American Theater

In 1938, The Greek Theatre, Inc. was organized and with it a clearly dedicated effort to offer a program entertaining for both a Greek and an American audience. The following *New York Times* announcement offers the artistic aspirations of this uniquely Greek American effort:

The Greek Theatre, Inc. will give the first performances of "The Song of Daphnis," subtitled "A Dionysian Dithyramb in Modern Greek," arranged by Hila Cram Cook, at the Guild Theatre on Wednesday evening. The work, which is a little difficult to categorize, contains dance, song, and speech. This music is by Nicholas Roubanis, and the dances have been created by Miss Cook. They will be danced by young Greek girls and boys whom

legends which bear a close relationship to the ancient dithyrambic sources of Greek theatre.

June 12, 1938

Ultimately, *The Song of Daphnis* featured over 50 dancers, musicians, and actors. Nicholas Roubanis is the noted Greek American composer who, among his many other accomplishments, wrote in 1927 the internationally popular song "Misirlou."

Of particular interest is the fact that the noted New York City musicians Anna and Demetrios Kriouas led Roubanis's evening of compositions. The Kriouases were recognized recording artists: Anna Kriouas was one of the first Greek female vocalists to record regularly in North America, making her first recording, a duet with Tetos Demetriades, "Svysan Ta Onira Mou," on August 16, 1929 (Victor). Today, she is most remembered for her duets with Mme. Th. Sabanieva, a select few with her husband, and several more with Demetriades.

But we must assume that *The Song of Daphnis* did not fare well with the American public, since we hear no more about The Greek Theatre, Inc. in *The New York Times*.

Future Continuous

Greek theater continues in all its many forms in New York City and around the country. As a truly popular theater, friends and family, as well as recognized professionals from Greece, still "strut and fret their hour upon the stage" for the community at large. More needs to be learned, collected, and preserved concerning the early history of Greek theater in North America - first so that we may simply know more about our collective artistic past, and second so that the Greek American actors of tomorrow will know of their forebears.