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## Back to the Origins

### Museum Theatre on Classical Sites<sup>1</sup>

*1997 vereinte das von der Europäischen Kommission unterstützte Projekt Rafael drei Institutionen in Griechenland, Frankreich und Malta in dem Bestreben, den musealen Werten des Theaters und den theatralen Werten des Museums Gewicht zu verleihen. Der Artikel beschreibt die Ergebnisse dieses Projekts – Ausstellungen, mobile Ausstellungseinheiten, Videos, eine Podiumsdiskussion und Veröffentlichungen – in der Hoffnung, dass sie als Beispiel für eine gelungene Kooperation dienen mögen.*

The theatrical act inside the museum is justified either as a modern creative artistic performance inspired by the items on display, or in terms of educational programmes and, more generally, as an interpretative presentation of the museum exhibits. Seen in this light, the views held by Georges-Henri Rivière,<sup>2</sup> founder of the new museology and president of ICOM (1948-1966), and those expressed in Bertold Brecht's writing about the theatre<sup>3</sup> are, in a curious way, identical.

This same approach has long been deployed with archaeological sites, monuments, large building complexes, archaeological parks, and other places of cultural importance.

In European countries such as Sweden or Britain, the phenomenon of attempting a stage-reconstruction of a historical event, an entire period, or the particular use of an artefact, came into vogue immediately after the end of the Second World War. In the muse-

um space, the life of previous periods was reconstructed by means of special structures and scenery, and actors-guides brought various moments and aspects of history to life in front of the eyes of visitors.

The conjunction of the ideas of museum and theatre is more readily apparent in the case of an ancient Greek theatre or a Roman Odeon than in any that of other monument.

*Figure 1: Mediation of culture in an ancient Greek theatre*



If museums inspire and provide material for the modern artistic creative act, then ancient theatre, both as site and as text, has formed the reference point for dramatic art at all periods, and constitutes the essence of theatre for every country in the western world; it has been the classical (in every sense of the word) theatre of Europe from the 5th century BC to the present day.

Ancient theatres are landmark creations, a visit to which is itself enough to arouse a sense of the common memory of our civilisation, a cultural heritage that we all share. Watching a play on an ancient stage makes the visitors/audience participants in a process that goes to the heart of human existence.

Theatres and Odeas, both small and large, well-known like the theatre at Epidavros or tucked away in a hidden corner of the Mediterranean, archaeological sites visited by thousands of tourists or

half-buried hillsides on which a few stone seats can be seen amidst pines – all these monuments are essentially the stage of Dionysos, home to the spirit of the theatre that dwells in and haunts them.

The protection, effective display and interpretation of these sites was the object of the project »Theamon – Ancient Theatre in the Mediterranean«. The project involved a three-way partnership of Greece (Directorate of Antiquities of the Ministry of Culture), France (Musée Reattu, Musée d'Arles Antiques) and Malta (University of Malta, Foundation of Cultural Studies, Kooperativa Universitaria) and was part of the European Commission's *Raphael* programme.

The Theamon project was aimed at promoting collaboration between countries and scholars in the spheres of research and the exchange of experience and expertise, with the object of designing and producing educational materials of an international character and value.

The exhibition entitled »Nothing to do with Dionysos?«, which has been opened in Athens since 1997.

This archaeological-educational exhibition examines the tragic theatre in ancient times, as it flourished within the context of the Classical city.

The exhibition is aimed at the general educated public. The main focus in its design was on schoolteachers, the aim being to assist and develop the teaching of ancient tragedy in schools by setting the text in its historical and archaeological context. The plays are also approached as historical documents, and specific examples of ancient Greek literature are set in their natural context, the Classical theatre building.

The exhibition is based on the principle that the tragic theatre constitutes an aspect of the identity of the democratic city. The major political and social changes that took place at the end of the 6th century BC led to the creation of a new human consciousness. The democratic city gave birth to tragedy not as a literary genre but as an institution that was one amongst other, political and juridical institutions.

During the theatre performance, the city put itself on stage, and studied and questioned social reality, described its values, formulated its fears, recognised deadlocks and, finally, experienced its coherence and indicated which path to take.

The exhibition is divided into three units, each occupying a separate room. In the blue room, tragedy is approached as part of the

new city. In this first unit, the exhibition illustrates theatrical moments connected with public life, using a combination of archaeological evidence, historical documents, inscriptions and ancient Greek literary sources. To this end, faithful copies are displayed of archaeological findings from the ancient Agora and other excavations in Athens.

*Figure 2: Groups of pupils in the special exhibition:  
»Nothing to do with Dionysos?«*



The yellow room is devoted to the theatre and stage buildings, and to the machines that could be placed at the service of the plot, such as the *ekkyklema* and the crane. Costumes and masks worn by the actors and chorus and known from Greek painted vases, as well as the paraphernalia of the austere, functional scenery, are evoked by two- or three-dimensional replicas.

In the red room consideration is given to the concept of the tragic – the responsibility of the tragic being, since tragedy begins where the plot ends. In this room are presented the subjects of ancient tragedies drawn from mythology. Through the plays the tragedians give expression to the aspirations of their age and deal with the intellect. The vicissitudes suffered by the tragic heroes engage the emotions of the audience. The sufferings and adventures, the crushing or redemption of the characters in the play, generate distress, fear and sympathy and create a new balance. The exhibi-

tion encourages visitors to think closely about their own lives, to ruffle the waters of daily routine and public life, to turn human relationships upside down, and, through self-knowledge, to achieve a new balance.

The exhibition includes music, the composition and performance of which forms part of the comprehensive approach to this complex, multi-faceted subject. »Eternal Sounds of the Theatre« is the title of a music CD produced for the exhibition, based on the three units, which helps to interpret the archaeological items on display, and sometimes as an exhibit itself, since it includes extracts from the orators and ancient plays.

»Nothing to do with Dionysos?«, the title of the exhibition, poses the question of the dependence of the theatre on Dionysiac rituals, and the relation between tragedy and the worship of the gods. The view expounded as an epilogue to the exhibition is the same as that held by Brecht, who asserted that, »according to Aristotle, the purpose of the theatre was to entertain people. When we say that the theatre is derived from religious rituals, we mean nothing more or less than that it was born from them; it became theatre after it was born. Theatre was never part of the religious mysteries, though it offered the same pleasure that people found in the mysteries. Catharsis, relief through fear and sympathy, is a pure source of joy« (Brecht 1967).

The Greek leadership of the Theamon project devised a mobile exhibition unit called »Theasis: Ancient Theatre and the Democratic City«, which has been housed since August 1997 in the University of Malta. The educational object of this self-contained unit is to take slides, panels and replicas of museum collections to other locations in an easily transportable, versatile unit. The objects are accompanied by documentary material that assists in their interpretation. The unit should thus act as a catalyst to public participation through discussion workshops and the training of animators.

The Educational Department of the Museum at Arles contributed to the project by using an archaeological site as a pedagogical terrain. The endeavour involved 15- to 16-year-old high-school pupils who, working together with a video-operator, made a documentary about the scattered vestiges of Roman theatres in Provence. The idea behind the project, which concentrated mainly on the Roman Odeon in Arles, was to involve young people in care for the preservation of their cultural heritage.

Malta's contribution was a round-table conference held in Va-

letta under the title »Ancient Ritual/Theatrical Spaces: Action and Communication«, held in September 1997, with participants from various parts of the Mediterranean basin. The conference was convened with the aim of bringing together archaeologists and theatre specialists. The proceedings were published by V. A. Cremona, in a special issue of the *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*.<sup>4</sup>

The round table produced a »Malta Document« on the use of non-theatrical spaces for theatrical purposes. This document complements the Segesta declaration (1995) of the European Network of Ancient Theatres and Places of Performance – Council of Europe, and the Charter on the Rise of Ancient Places of Performance (Verona 1997).<sup>5</sup>

The results of the three-partner Raphael project Theamon, funded mainly by the European Union, may be summarised in the following points:

- The museum should inspire in the public a desire to rediscover Classical theatre and renew the relationship between modern dramaturgy and the Greek tragedies.
- Monuments with theatrical associations, such as ancient theatres and odea, public areas and squares in which theatrical rituals took place in the past (e.g. the *comedia del'Arte*) can contribute to an understanding of ancient, medieval and other plays, and serve as »ritual spaces« in which visitors/scholars can feel the essence of the play.
- Museums have an obligation to make the public feel the need to preserve the theatrical heritage for future generations, and to sensitise performers to respect the sites, to which they want to give something back through their performance.
- The aim should be to promote theatre-in-museum as well as museum theatre: that is, to give a proper presentation of the history of the theatre through museum exhibitions, and at the same to use the expressive means of the theatre to promote understanding of museum collections.
- Finally, to place emphasis on the theatrical education of the young, both in the history of the theatre and the study of plays, and on educating young people in the expressive means of the art of the theatre.

»Let us take this opportunity to remind ourselves that the role of the arts is to entertain the children of the age of science by using the senses and the joy of the senses. This does not happen enough for us Germans. For us, everything slips into the incorporeal and the abstract, and we start to talk about the ›vision of the world‹ at the very moment that the world has fainted.«<sup>6</sup>

These words of Brecht, more relevant today than ever, are true of the entire western world. If the museum offers the joy of knowledge, and the theatre the joy of life, let us offer young people the chance to experience both.

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## Notes

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- 2 According to Lévi-Strauss, Georges-Henri Rivière (1989) has devised an avant-garde, puritan, and refined museology, in which the museum exhibit speaks for itself. See also Schaer 1993.
- 3 »It has always been the job of the theatre to entertain. We should not ask it to instruct, except perhaps to teach us the joy of emotions at both the physical and intellectual level« (Brecht 1967).
- 4 *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, Volume 8, Number 1, 1998.
- 5 *Op. cit.*, reproduced in Appendix I and II, pp. 125-136.
- 6 Bertold Brecht (1967); free translation.

## Literature

- Brecht, Bertold (1967): *Kleines Organon für das Theater*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Rivière, Georges-Henri (1989): *La Muséologie*, Paris: Dunod.
- Schaer, Roland (1993): *L'invention des musées*, Paris: Gallimard.

