

OSCAR WILDE'S SOCIAL COMEDIES IN MODERN GREEK THEATRE (1908–1945)

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Abstract

The reception of Oscar Wilde in Greece has occasionally been studied, although modern theoretical works around aestheticism devote a significant part to his influence on Greek artists at the beginning of twentieth century. Some of his plays – mostly *Salomé* and *A Florentine Tragedy* (1908) as well as an adaptation of *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (1916) – appeared in translation and on theatre stage just after the release of his postmortem apologetic *De Profundis*. His comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest*, was introduced to the Greek audience simultaneously with his tragedies in 1908, and one more melodrama, *An Ideal Husband* was staged in 1917. After that year, only his tragedies were repeated whereas his melodramas disappeared in the interwar years, to reappear again in a sudden and noticeable frequency in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The aim of this paper is to identify the reasons of the constant absence of Oscar Wilde's melodramas from the Greek stage but also to explain their sudden adoption in the late thirties through a new perspective: the interaction between theatre and the newly growing art of cinema. During the controversial 30s, a considerable number of film versions of Wilde's social melodramas were made in Europe, most of them in Germany; these movies were projected in Greece, restoring thereby the Irish writer and his work. The seventh art, which was anyway supplied by writers, actors and theatre directors, became the channel for the Greek public to get acquainted with Wilde's social comedies as a whole. Additionally, it affected the repertoire of Greek theatre groups, including the National Theatre of Greece. The paper will focus on cinema and theatre investigation of the 1930s and 1940s (mainly until WWII) in Greece, exploring the interchangeable relationship between those two arts, as far as Wilde's social melodramas are concerned, in the broader historical, social and cultural spectrum of the era. The essay will also provide a short resume of Wilde's reception in Greece.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, Greece, social comedies, modern Greek theatre.

Oscar Wilde enjoyed a special relationship with Greece and travelled to the country, inspired by his admiration for Ancient Greek civilisation. Nonetheless, he did not become well known in the Southern Balkans until after his death, particularly following the publication of his deeply personal apologia *De Profundis*, with which the aesthete poet assumed the glory of a modern martyr worldwide, or even that of a modern tragic hero who is punished for and repents of the errors of his life and his past, his sins cleansed by his involuntary death. Wilde's name first became known in Greece due to the unfortunate circumstances of his trial, in which the author and poet was presented in the worst possible light as a hedonist and degenerate, a sexual deviant and oddity, whose behaviour shook the Puritanism of not a few societies in the otherwise developed West.¹ Wilde's work, on the contrary, was late to be recognised and performed in Greece, while

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¹ On the reception of Oscar Wilde in Greece, see the work of Kyriaki Petrakou, "Oscar Wilde's reception in Greek theatre", in: *Theatrical Miscellanea*, Athens, Diavlos, 2004, p. 71–133. Also, Ioanna Papageorgiou, "Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* on the Stage in Athens (1908–1925)", *The Wildean: A Journal of Oscar Wilde Studies*, No. 36, January 2010, p. 77–96. It is noteworthy that most studies on Wilde, at least in Greece, are originated in young theatre students; see for example the works of: Aikaterini Iatrou, *The fortune of Oscar Wilde in Greece (1895–1930): an initial recording*, Essay submitted for Master Degree, University of Crete, Department of Literature, Rethymno, 2005; Asana Eleftheriou, *Nikolaos Poriotis as a translator: the linguistic and ideological boundaries in the theatrical translations of Oscar Wilde's plays (1901–1917)*, Essay submitted for Master Degree, University of Crete, Department of Literature, Rethymno, 2012; Panayiota Flevari, *The aesthete Oscar Wilde and the reception of his work*,

the wider Aesthetic Movement, making a delayed appearance in this geographical area compared to the rest of Europe, was rather weak and lacking in fertile offspring. Despite the fact that pioneering theatre directors such as Lugné-Pœ and Max Reinhardt were producing Wilde's plays, the Dublin poet of decadence would only make his appearance on the Greek stage in 1908, with three plays produced by Thomas Oikonomou, the German-bred Greek director and actor, whose skills had been shaped at the court of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen.² Thus that landmark year for the introduction of Wilde's plays to Greece saw the production of *Salome*, *A Florentine Tragedy* and the comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest*.³ In spite of this dynamic start, however, only Wilde's tragedies were favoured on the Greek stage over the following years; with the exception of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and the performance of *An Ideal Husband* in 1917, his cosmopolitan comedies were overlooked and only brought to the Greek public in the late 1930s, half a century after their original conception and creation. The aim of the present paper is to examine the long-delayed reception of the writer's comedies of manners in the independent Greek state, and to discover why and under what conditions these plays appeared at that particular point in history.

Establishing Wildean theatre in Greek society was no easy matter. In the rather low "fever" of the emergence of Aestheticism in the Greek theatre, among the few Greek artists willing to embrace it, the comedies of the "paradoxologist" playwright were at a disadvantage compared, for instance, to *Salome*, which was placed in the category of a rather provocative drama, or even the more frequently performed *Florentine Tragedy* or the stage adaptation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.⁴ Neither *The Importance of Being Earnest* nor *An Ideal Husband* bore major fruit in the Greek theatre. The former, first performed, as we have said, in 1908, was also known by the title *Burberry*, probably due to its reception *via* the German translation or production – which would certainly have matched Thomas Oikonomou's German intellectual roots.⁵ Neither the 1908 production nor the 1910 effort by another major contemporary troupe (that of Maria Kotopouli) went beyond farce.⁶ Even so, though, as evidenced by the isolated example of *An Ideal Husband* in the following years (1917, Cybele troupe, without the leading lady), Wilde's Anglo-Saxon comedies, with their satire of Victorian society and its moral hypocrisy, their aristocratic male and female characters, their stylised speech and mannerisms, the narcissistic witticisms of the "paradoxologist" poet and the delicate lacework of the dialogue, did not bear fruit in Belle Epoque Greek society. This was perfectly natural, given that Greek society had only just begun to cast off the Oriental tradition of its Ottoman heritage, slowly assuming the tails and gowns of Western society. It was also only logical that the finesse and precision of Oscar Wilde's Anglo-Saxon wit would be unappreciated⁷, at a time when Greek society had not yet managed to express its national, bourgeois or, above all, European identity. The nation was busy negotiating its borders and the liberation of areas still under Ottoman rule. Its attitude of romantic nationalism was still intact, as was the vision of the Great Idea, the Greece "of two continents and five seas", a vision that the devastating defeat of the Asia Minor Catastrophe⁸ would retrospectively turn into a "syndrome" of collective self-deception.

Strangely, those of Wilde's comedies which had never seen the footlights of the Greek theatre made their appearance suddenly, at the end of the 1930s⁹, in the heart of the interwar period and immediately following the establishment of the 1936 Metaxas dictatorship.¹⁰ This made an impression on later criticism, and raised questions as to why they should appear then, at a time when it seemed that Wilde's overall oeuvre

Essay submitted as a Graduate Thesis, Department of Philology, University of Patras. One can also cite the PhD thesis of Styliani Platskou, *The Irish drama in Greece: fifty years of theatre productions (1943–1992)*, Department of Philology, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 2000.

² Kyriaki Petrakou, *op. cit.*, p. 76 and p. 84–85. On the Aesthetic movement in Greece, see Apostolos Sachinis, *The Prose Literature of Aestheticism*, Athens, Vivliopoleio tis 'Hestias', 1981, and Lena Arambatzidou, *Aestheticism. The modern Greek version of the movement*, Thessaloniki, Methexis, 2012. On the directorial work of Oikonomou, one can cite Antonis Glytzouris, *The Rise and Consolidation of Stage-Direction in Greece*, Athens, Ellinika Grammata, 2001, p. 67–78, as well as his research on the same director focusing on his career in Germany, "New elements on the activity of Thomas Oikonomou on the German Stage", *Ta Istorika*, no. 27, December 2010, p. 494–500.

³ *Id.*, p. 76.

⁴ Ioanna Papageorgiou, *op. cit.*, p. 77–96; Kyriaki Petrakou, *op. cit.*, p. 83–92.

⁵ Lucia Krämer, "The German versions of *The Importance of being Earnest*", *The Oscholars* (e-journal), vol. IV, no. 4–9, issues no. 35–41, April–September 2007.

⁶ Kyriaki Petrakou, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

⁷ *Id.*, p. 123.

⁸ Asia Minor Catastrophe, also known as Asia Minor Campaign, concerned the 1919–1922 war between Greece and the Turkish National movement, which ended up at the expense of the Greek nation, which now had to be restricted to its pre-war borders, giving full sovereignty of Anatolia and East Thrace to the Turks.

⁹ *Id.*, p. 107–108.

¹⁰ See the electronic records of performances in Areti Vasileiou, *Modernization or tradition? The prose theatre in Athens in the Interwar period*, Athens, Metaichmio, 2005.

was doomed to remain unknown in Greece. One reason was that his comedies of manners served the troupes' repertoire, since they did not disturb the status quo or question the institutions of royalty or Fascism, evaded the machinery of censorship¹¹, and swept the European political upheavals of the time under the carpet of the Victorian age, the satire of Victorian morality and the stylisation and outwardly polished surface of Wilde's wit. At another level, the National Theatre of Greece, which had opened its imposing doors just a few years earlier, in 1932, had made the public educational nature of the theatre its avowed aim.¹² The concept of "academicism" in the educational programme of the national stage now assumed a major share in the *raisons d'être* of the National Theatre, and Wilde and his plays were added to the list of "classic" writers whom the institution must promote and educate its audience on.¹³ Furthermore, despite the original intentions of the artistic director of the National Theatre, Fotos Politis¹⁴, to shape a group theatre, it proved impossible to avoid the continuation and creation of the new generation of the star phenomenon, reinforced by a repertoire mainly starring leading ladies.

In this context, in 1937 *Lady Windermere's Fan* was produced by two different troupes: in April by the Katerina Andreadi troupe and in December by the National Theatre, now renamed the Royal Theatre, produced by the German-educated student of Max Reinhardt, Dimitris Rondiris.¹⁵ The following year, 1938, the Royal Theatre included another Wilde play in its repertoire: *An Ideal Husband*. Both performances followed the pattern established by the star theatre, with Katina Paxinou and Eleni Papadaki or Vasso Manolidou, among the divas of the time, in the main roles.¹⁶ Although successful, the plays did not remain long in the repertoire and gave rise to ambivalent emotions: for one thing, they were at the limits of the public's comprehension, with audiences seeing them as bourgeois comedies of manners similar to dramatic or comic boulevard theatre, with which Greek audiences had been familiar since the 19th century. The critic of the *Kathimerini* newspaper, Georgios Vlachos, grasped the peculiarity of the reception of Wilde's comedies. As he reported the day after the Royal Theatre performance of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the play "was well liked for many reasons, but one above all: the spectators saw a drawing room, it had carpets, around them they saw familiar things..."¹⁷ A critic of the time, Petros Axiotis, noted the contradiction between British and Greek social mores in the performance of the Royal Theatre: "The plot [of the play] unfolds around various episodes in the upper English aristocracy. Frock coats, top hats, gowns, luxury. All these lend the play an exquisite flamboyance, without, however, moving the spectator to whom the life of the lords, duchesses and ladies of England is foreign".¹⁸ A second issue was that Wilde's plays followed the pattern of melodrama, but did not serve the didactic purpose they were expected to. According to the *Kathimerini* critic, the play "is old, with all the artlessness, improbabilities and flaws of old-fashioned plays (...) The end is unsatisfactory and immoral. For the whole drama, a drama of honest, moral people, has a need for catharsis, we the audience need to see the daughter in her mother's arms, we want this victim to be purified in the final scene and arouse our pity and compassion..."¹⁹

Views on *An Ideal Husband*, in 1938, were not very different, although it was considered a work "wrinkled" by time, whose only interest lay in the duel concerning the luxurious costumes and gowns of the two leading ladies.²⁰ This choice was apparently not shared in 1939 by the groundbreaking Greek stage director Karolos Koun. In the early years of his career he had collaborated with the troupe of Marika Kotopouli, the main protagonist and impresario of Athens theatre life, on the production of *A Woman of No Importance*.²¹ Koun, whose dramatic art was based primarily on inner rather than commercial criteria, placed the play in its time, dressing the actors in 1900s costumes and avoiding comparisons with the modern era.²²

¹¹ Kyriaki Petrakou, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

¹² Areti Vasileiou, *op. cit.*, p. 291.

¹³ *Id.*, p. 291-292.

¹⁴ On Fotos Politis and his activity at the National Theatre of Greece, see Antonis Glytzouris, *The Rise and Consolidation...*, p. 320-336.

¹⁵ Kyriaki Petrakou, *op. cit.*, p. 108-112.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 113-115.

¹⁷ *Kathimerini*, 10/12/1937 (*apud* Kyriaki Petrakou, *op. cit.*, p. 109).

¹⁸ Petros Axiotis, "The performances of the Royal Theatre", *Macedonia* (Thessaloniki), 11 July 1938.

¹⁹ *Kathimerini*, 10 December 1937 (*apud* Kyriaki Petrakou, *op. cit.*, p. 110).

²⁰ Ach. Mamakis, "Ideal husband at the Royal Theatre", *Athenaika Nea*, 15 December 1938. The play was also performed by other troupes in 1938. See Kyriaki Petrakou, *op. cit.*, p. 113: footnote 116.

²¹ Konstantinos Kyriakos, "The young director Mr. Karolos Koun", *Skini*, no. 4, 2012, p. 31. See also Kyriaki Petrakou, *op. cit.*, p. 115-117.

²² Konstantinos Kyriakos, *art. cit.*, p. 31; Kyriaki Petrakou, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

In this way, on the one hand, he could explain the difference between Greek and English morals by placing them in the sphere of theatricality; on the other hand, it also allowed him to distance himself from the risks of the star system and the trap of using the stage as a catwalk for the latest European fashions.²³

The information presented above gives a picture of the way in which Oscar Wilde's comedies were performed in Greece and, partly, of the ideological processes of their reception in this geographical area. It does not, however, answer the question why Wilde's cosmopolitan comedies appeared in a cluster, mainly in the three years from 1937 to 1939. The reasons mentioned above, that Wilde's plays did not provoke censorship and served the star system, are perhaps not enough to justify this sudden and constant barrage of performances. A wider look at the spectacles of the period reveals that, before being performed on stage, Oscar Wilde's comedies had been shown in the immediately preceding years at the cinema, theatre's sister art. The 1930s were a time when films of the writer's works, particularly the comedies, abounded. It is surely also no coincidence that the previous decade had been that of *Salome*; some of the performances, for instance that of Spyros Melas in 1925, may well have been influenced by the film version starring Alla Nazimova, or by the sensation caused by Richard Strauss's opera of the same name in Germany and elsewhere, as early as 1905.²⁴ Of the various film versions of Wilde's plays, all the social comedies were successfully screened in Greece, in the three-year period 1935–1937. The only exception may be the best-known silent version of *Lady Windermere's Fan* by Ernst Lubitsch (1925, an American film with a German director²⁵), which was shown in Athens cinemas in 1927, two years after its original release, under the title *Closed Lips*.²⁶ In the next decade, however, just before the stage productions, two more German-made films were screened: *An Ideal Husband* in 1936, renamed *The Interloper* (first released 1935) and directed by Herbert Selpin, with box offices sales of 15,111 in the single week it was screened;²⁷ and *A Woman of No Importance* in 1937, by Hans Steinhoff (first released 1936), with sales of 11,979 tickets in its one-week run.²⁸ Earlier, in 1935, a French film version of *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Maurice Champreux had appeared, entitled *Touchons bois* and selling only 3,438 tickets.²⁹

So it was probably the cinema, new to Greece, which placed Wilde in the public eye and led theatre artists to turn to his satirical comedies. In any case, the two art forms, particularly at their outset, fed off each other, using the same people and scripts.³⁰ A glance through an interwar cinema magazine will show that, of the multitude of British, French, German and American films shown in Athens during that time, most were adaptations of successful stage plays, belonging to all types of 19th and early 20th century theatre: melodrama, problem play, classical comedy and drama, realism and symbolism, revue and musical theatre... Cinema idols and the ever-increasing glamour of American cinema, heavily promoted in the contemporary press, further enhanced the theatrical star system, while the creams and powders of Hollywood had entered the lives of the Greek leading ladies of Wilde's comedies, whitening their tanned skin in the name of onstage verisimilitude...³¹ The last Wilde comedy staged in the period studied here (1908–1945) was during the German Occupation. The director Takis Mouzenidis, who had also studied in Germany, produced *The Importance of Being Earnest* or *Burberry*.³² Thus the course of contemporary comedies came full circle. But in the midst of war and occupation, of the great famine and countless deaths, being Earnest, with a capital letter or otherwise, may no longer have seemed so important...

²³ As the critic M. Rodas mentions, Koun led the actors to play in an exaggerated way following a fake expression (*Eleftheron Vima*, 26 November 1939).

²⁴ On Melas production of *Salome*, see Ioanna Papageorgiou, *op. cit.*, p. 88–91, and Kyriaki Petrakou, *op. cit.*, p. 94–97.

²⁵ Charles Musser, "The Hidden and the Unspeakable: On Theatrical Culture, Oscar Wilde and Ernst Lubitsch's *Lady Windermere's Fan*", *Film Studies*, no. 4, Summer 2004, p. 12–47.

²⁶ See *Kinimatografikos Astir*, no. 23, 2 October 1927, and no. 2, 8 January 1928, p. 11–12.

²⁷ *Kinimatografikos Astir*, no. 2 (371), 9 February 1936, p. 8 and 12.

²⁸ *Kinimatografikos Astir*, no. 2 (393), 31 January 1937, p. 11–12.

²⁹ *Kinimatografikos Astir*, no. 10 (356), 9 June 1935.

³⁰ Areti Vasileiou, "The impact of European (American) Art of the Cinema on the Greek Theatre of the Interwar Era", in the *Proceedings of the second Pan-Hellenic Theatre Conference, Relations of Modern Greek Theatre to European* (Athens: Ergo editions, 2004), p. 335–345. For a closer look on the interactions between theatre and film, see Nicholas A. Vardac, *Stage to Screen. Theatrical Origins of Early Film: David Garrick to D. W. Griffith*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1987.

³¹ See the interview of Eleni Papadaki in "The Royal Theatre in Thessaloniki. Miss El. Papadaki", *Ta Paraskinia*, 2 July 1938.

³² Kyriaki Petrakou, *op. cit.*, p. 118–120.