Creating a Database for Theatre criticism in Greek literary journals, 1900-1950: Case Study

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Abstract:
Theatre criticism holds an important place in theatre studies, especially as a tool for studying theatre history and reception - it is one of the three main branches of theatreology along with theatre history and theory. This study aims to present the cataloguing, digitization and interpretive study of a body of theatre reviews published in Greek literary journals in the years 1900-1950.
The questions that we attempted to answer in this research concern various characteristics of theatre criticism in Greece in the period we are researching, and more specifically:
- The language used, its construction and function
- Its main representatives
- Its ideological and aesthetic axes
- The reception of the plays
- The connections to the European intellectual currents of the time
- The ways in which the nature of the publications (literary magazines) affected the thematic and structural organization of the texts, in contrast to the reviews published on the daily press.

As part of the same project, we also created a searchable electronic database, comprising a complete index of theatre criticism published in Greek journals in the years 1900-1950, which offers users access to the full reviews.

Keywords: Theatre, Criticism, Database

1 | INTRODUCTION

A peculiarity of theatre criticism is that, unlike academic writing on theatre and literature, it is directly connected to the periodical and daily press, the history and function of which play a decisive role on its textual identity. Theatre criticism in particular is organized around a basic typological

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distinction: a) the informative, descriptive review of a performance (review), accompanied by the personal opinion of the review’s author and b) the more extensive, rigorous and detailed texts (criticism), that offer a broader perspective and whose arguments are often based on a theoretical framework.

It is worth pointing out that the review columns in theatre or literary magazines are not affected by the journalistic restraints and time pressure that apply to the daily or periodical press, because they tend to circulate at a much slower publishing pace (every fortnight, every month, bi-monthly, quarterly, etc.). This way the authors have the opportunity to gain a broader understanding of the play, having watched more than one performance and often writing about stage productions after the end of the theatre season. In other words, unlike newspaper articles and reviews, theatre criticism published in literary journals is not subjected to special restrictions of time and scope, nor is it addressed to heterogeneous audiences, but instead is aimed at informed readers with a special interest and knowledge of the subject matter. Such texts tend to be more extensive and use a more demanding, interpretive discourse on theater and the stage event, which presents affinities, in terms of textual structure, style and argumentation, with the essay.

It is a fact that in Greek theatre studies there is a distinct lack of a widely accessible, single corpus of theatre criticism for the period 1900-1950, which would be of great use to researchers, especially because until now only a small number of digitized reviews are available online, on the websites of the Greek National Theater and the National Theatre of Northern Greece as part of their extended stage production archives, as well as on the website of the Hellenic Union of Theatre Critics and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki’s digital library. All these databases, however, only include texts published after 1940.

This lack motivated us to pursue our research project titled “Discourse, Aesthetics and Ideology of Theatre Criticism in Literary and Art Journals (1900-1950)”, carried out in the University of Peloponnese’s School of Fine Arts - Department of Theatre Studies, and lead by professors V. Georgopoulou and Z. Ververoupolou, joined by Phd researchers A. Antonopoulou and E. Spiropoulou. This research is co-financed by Greece and the European Union (European Social Fund-ESF) through the Operational Programme «Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning 2014-2020» in the context of the project “Discourse, Aesthetics and Ideology of Theatre Criticism in Literary and Art Journals (1900-1950)” (MIS 5048990).

2 | METHOD

The research presented here is therefore attempting to fill a significant time gap in the study of Modern Greek theatre criticism and thus a) to enrich our knowledge on the theater of the first half of the 20th century and its reception and b) to lay the scientific foundations for the unearthing and study of a canon (if there is one) that would apply to Greek theatre critics of that period, as well as its formal and ideological characteristics.

The field of greek theatre studies is characterized by a lack of systematic research regarding the history, theory and interpretive analysis of criticism focusing on the first half of the 20t century. Our project aims to fill this lack using archival research to strengthen and add to the study of the history of modern greek theatre.

For our project, we first researched the theatre publications of the period under consideration, and later added to our list non-theatrical art and literature journals if they a) published a regular column on theatre criticism, or b) had published theatre criticism signed by prominent intellectuals.

In this context, our initial task was to study journals from 1900 to 1950, in order to create a catalogue of possible theatrical reviews and to index them in an excel spreadsheet. The main areas of indexing are:

- Journal title
- Critic / author (if applicable)
- Date of publication
- Column title (if any)
- Title of the play (if mentioned)
- Playwright (if applicable)
Along with establishing our list, we designed a database comprising all the indexed reviews, in order to be able to present them publicly for the first time as a joint corpus. For this purpose, we photographed and digitized each review as we processed it during the indexing phase. The photographs were then edited to create a pdf file for each review, which is accessible to users through a corresponding hyperlink in the database, thus contributing to the creation of an overall corpus of theatre criticism, which belong to the desiderata of theatrical research.

Among the main concerns that arose during our research was a) the need to clarify the very concept of "theatre criticism / theatre review", along with the criteria for characterizing a text as such, b) the categorization of journals, and c) the frequent use of pseudonyms by both theater critics and playwrights. In order to solve those issues, we decided to exclude reviews of published plays and to limit the index on reviews of presented plays, while the journals were split into three categories: literary, theatre and criticism. We also decided to include publications that were called newspapers, but are in form and effectively journals, and are generally regarded as such in academic research. Finally, regarding the issue of pseudonyms, we believe it is necessary to systematically record it - because the same nickname is often repeated in many publications - and to try and identify each pseudonym with the real name of the critic or writer, as well as the indexing of both (pseudonym and name) in the database, in order to facilitate the users’ search.

In conclusion, it is important to note that in the course of our research we indexed more than 70 journals and newspapers, and we recorded more than 1800 reviews of theatrical performances concerning over 1000 plays of around 500 playwrights, both Greek and foreign. (1–5)

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3 | CONCLUSIONS

In the website that was developed from our research - and is hosted under the domain of the Department of Theater Studies of the University of the Peloponnese -, there is a separate section for each of the categories of journals mentioned above (literary, theatre, criticism), which presents the journals that were studied and indexed, as well as the publisher-director of each publication and the release dates. This way the researchers have the opportunity to study not only the theatrical reviews, but also to extract some information about the journal in which it was published. The database offers free access to both researchers and the general public, and the index of theatre reviews can be sorted by publication / journal title, by critic / reviewer, by play, by playwright, and by theatre company.

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