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Reviewed Article:

# Museum Theatre in Greece: Perspectives in Site Interpretation

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The paper summarizes preliminary findings of a research project on the use of museum theatre in Greek open-air sites, as a part of a PhD thesis. The research focuses on the

exploration of the development, use and function of museum theatre in Greek open-air sites based on available secondary resources and primary research, which included site visits, interviews and data analysis. The research summarized here was carried out in 2012 and presented in September 2012, in the OpenArch Conference "Museum interpretation and public engagement: Challenges and opportunities", in Höllviken, Sweden.

> “Archaeological open-air sites, due to the great importance of Greek antiquities in the construction of national identity (Hamilakis 2007), are subject to a strict policy. This policy applies to the implementation of interpretive activities outside the framework of educational programs (such as events, performances et cetera), mainly where a private initiative is concerned.

## Introduction

Museum theatre as an umbrella-term is used to describe a variety of performative events aimed to interpret fragments of cultural heritage. In the framework of one of the main challenges contemporary museums face, that of having a social impact while dealing with heritage, whom values and narratives can always be “contested and disputed” (Smith 2011, 70), museum theatre has proved that not only can it enforce a constructivist approach in a museum environment but it can also generate debate and promote critical thinking on controversial issues (Farthing 2010).

The use of theatre and theatrical techniques for facilitating interpretation in museums, henceforth museum theatre, has been introduced in Greek museums and open-air sites over approximately the last three decades. Its development in Greece has given birth to certain forms of theatre interpretation. Up to now these forms can be grouped in six categories: educational theatre (Gourgouta 2002, Kakourou-Hroni 2010, Mousioni et al 2002, Vasala 2002), educational drama (Stamati 2002, Bitsa 2009, Destouni-Giannoulatou 2010, Sextou 2005, Kalesopoulou and Selekou 2009, Gotzolis et al 2009, Fourliga and Gavriilidou 2010,Gotsis and Vosnidis 2010, Haidou 2002, Zouros et al 2009, Dafni 2002, Kalokairinos 2002), storytelling (Kalesopoulou and Selekou 2009, Gotzolis et al 2009, Haidou 2002, Oikonomidou 2002, Petropoulou and Stellaki 2002, Vasala 2002, Mousioni et al 2002, Mantzoutsou 2002, Kalkounou 2010, Sextou 2005), live action role playing games (Fourliga and Gavriilidou 2010, Katsanika and Katsaridou 2008), puppet theatre (Fourliga and Gavriilidou 2010, Vasala 2002, Bitsa 2009, Destouni-Giannoulatou 2010), second person interpretation (Kalesopoulou and Selekou 2009, Gotsis and Vosnidis 2010, Haidou 2002, Oikonomidou 2002, Gourgounta 2002, Sioulas et al 2002, Papadopoulou 2002, Petropoulou and Stellaki 2002, Mantzoutsou 2002, Stamati 2002) and, rarely, first person interpretation (Mousioni et al 2002, Sextou 2005, Kakourou-Hroni 2010). According to secondary research results on educational programs implemented in the past and primary research on current programs, emphasis, in terms of frequency, is given to educational drama. Educational drama in site interpretation is used mainly as a methodological tool among other activities of

experiential learning, rather than as a program on its own. Another form of theatre that is growing and developing is Live Action Role Playing Games (henceforth larps). Though larps are implemented till now only in museums and sites mostly in Northern Greece, their popularity and growth, however territorially limited, make their exploration in this paper worth mentioning. These two forms are also applied in open-air sites. Until now, the majority of museum theatre programs have been designed for school groups, while adults were more rarely addressed.

Due to the limited availability of museum theatre bibliographies, especially concerning open-air sites (Nikonanou 2002, ICOM-CECA 2009, Ministry of Education 2002, Ministry of Culture 2002), this paper focuses on presenting some of the most well documented examples of museum theatre implementations in Greek open-air sites. Additionally, the paper explores the forms of theatre and theatrical techniques used as interpretive means in open-air sites, their inclusion in museum education's policy as well as their perspectives and limitations in Greek open-air sites.[1] The research process was based on bibliographical and internet research.

## Museum Theatre in Greece: A short history

Prior to the 1980s open-air archaeological sites' interpretation in Greece was limited to guided tours (Nikonanou 2010, Hatzinikolaou 2008). Meanwhile, the main concern was placed on the preservation and protection of the enormous number of archaeological sites (Voudouri 2003). This priority led to an underestimation of the need to apply organized interpretive programs. Alternative interpretative methods, in the form of educational programs, appeared in 1979 in Greek museums and open air-sites and focused on school groups (Nikonanou 2010, 62-63). In 1985 the Ministry of Culture initiated the Department of Educational Programs and Communication for Museums and Heritage Sites, which started various educational programs in the state museums, open air-sites and monuments (See also Chrissoulaki & Pini 2008, Ministry of Culture 2002, http://www.culture.gr/culture/eindex.jsp). Additionally, professionals in the field of museum education and interpretation were progressively involved in heritage institutions thus enriching their policy.

Archaeological open-air sites, due to the great importance of Greek antiquities in the construction of national identity (Hamilakis 2007), are subject to a strict policy. This policy applies to the implementation of interpretive activities outside the framework of educational programs (such as events, performances et cetera), mainly where a private initiative is concerned. Overall, in the last three decades, archaeological sites have been interpreted in the light of their educational development[2] . At the same time, the implementation of educational activities in open-air sites meets an ongoing development often supported by the growing interest of municipalities, cultural institutions and schools (Nakou 2002, 115).

Among the variety of educational programs developed, interpretation through theatre seems to have a promising role in 'bringing to life' archaeological and open- air sites. Museum theatre in open-air site interpretation is implemented either as part of educational programs, next to other educational methods such as discussion, creative artistic expression, et cetera, or as a complete program. Complete programs base their entire educational design on museum theatre, which forms the core of the educational process.

The examples that follow are indicative of the practices that are being developed in open-air site interpretation through theatre and theatrical techniques.

## Theatre techniques in educational programs

Educational activities in Greek museums and heritage sites are realized mainly through on-site educational programs designed and applied by museum educators. More restricted is the use of educational material offered to teachers in order to apply educational activities at school or at heritage sites and museums. In both cases, theatre techniques have been used.

Research results on educational material for teachers have shown that the main theatre techniques suggested are either the enactment of stories especially written for specific exhibitions and/or sites, or the staging of a play by the students[3] . Overall, the stories performed by students focus mainly on everyday life in antiquity, and could be performed either at the archaeological site or at school (Nikonanou 2002). Similar but more time-limited approaches are observed in educational activities implemented by museum educators. The short duration of these programs (one and a half-two hours) significantly determines the possibilities for interpretation through museum theatre.

According to research results, the most usual form of museum theatre that is used in educational programs is educational drama. This has been introduced over the last decade in Greek schools. Its application is connected to the Anglo-Saxon tradition (Kakoudaki and Karaviti 2007). An investigation of its development and practices in the Greek educational system shows an emphasis on the development of theatre games, as they were realized by Peter Slade (1955) and Brian Way (1967), closely linked with physical training (Bolton 2007). The influence of Dorothy Heathcote and Gavin Bolton (Heathcote and Bolton 1995), who stressed collectivity, thoughtfulness and decision-making (Bolton 2007), seem to have a minor impact. As a result, the drama techniques that are often used in Greek schools focus mainly on kinaesthetic expression and improvisation based on narrated stories, without stressing the development of a critical approach to the content delivered.

As far as the use of educational drama in museum interpretation is concerned, preliminary research results show that it follows more or less the practices of drama in formal education. The potential of educational drama to provoke critical thinking was emphasized in very few educational programs; one such was a program implemented in the Ancient Agora of Athens,

which encouraged students to enact a debate (Pini 2002, 63). The following example represents a typical implementation of educational drama in a not-that-typical,[4] Greek open-air site.

The educational program "A Day in Zappeion: The Garden with the statues" was introduced in 2009 in Zappeion Gardens, a central park that represents some parts of the history of Athens. The park, apart from a site of modern cultural heritage, serves also as a reminder of ancient scenery, some traces of which survive nowadays. Educational activities launched at Zappeion Gardens were grouped into three categories: kinaesthetic games, theatre games and improvisation games. Kinaesthetic games were described as follows:

> *Students create with their bodies the river Ilissos: they imitate the flow of the water and the movements of the animals in it, like the frogs and the fish, following the movement of the interpreter. … The drama, as an educational tool, was used to understand issues related to the typology of the sculptures (statues, symbolic issues or specific flora) … students were invited to represent them or to liven them up…. (Keramida et al 2009, 102)*

Theatrical games implemented in the program focused also on the students' representation of the social life. The students were asked to imagine some 'slices of life in the past' by observing a 1910 photo of the most famous cafe in the Garden of Zappeion and a painted postcard. Through this inspiration, students mimicked movements and expressions by adopting the roles of the people represented in the photos. The students created 'still images' (tableau vivants) and talked about the habits of the era and the importance of the Garden, a process that offered them a better opportunity to interpret the open-air sites (Keramida et al. 2009, 103-4).This approach to educational drama confirms the previously mentioned emphasis on kinaesthetic and improvisational aspects of drama education in formal education in Greece.

Another form of activity that appears in open-air sites is the representation of elements of the past by the students, without them being in a role. These activities seem to fall in what Scott Maggelsen refers to as second person interpretation. According to Maggelsen (2006), second person interpretation is a term recently introduced in order to describe the hands-on activities and programming offered by living history museums, through which visitors may try out various practices like weaving, cooking, or musket loading; they can imagine that they are interpreting the past through physical means, without pretending to be in character (Maggelsen 2006, 291). Similar activities are developed in the framework of museum educational programs. The only documented example of such activity dates to before 2002 and refers to the preparation of a monks' dinner at the monastery of Kaisariani: the children prepared a monk's dinner, according to the rules of the place and the time, and, without

pretending to be the monks, they had dinner according to the monks' ritual (Ministry of Culture 2002, 102).

According to existing documentation, supplementary activities based on theatre techniques seem to be added as an enforcement of experiential learning that sufficiently complete the visitor experience, aiming at a "holistic integrative perspective on learning that combines exercise, perception, cognition and behaviour" (Kolb 1984, 21).

## Museum Theatre Programs

Museum theatre programs are significantly fewer and are usually applied in museum spaces[5] . A form that has appeared in open-air sites is Live Action Role Playing Games (LARP). LARP appears to be of a special interest, as their use in museum environments is significantly under-researched (Nikonanou and Venieri, 2014). A presentation of their basic characteristics as far as it concerns their museum application follows.

LARP is a kind of pretend play (Rognli 2008, 199). If play is the basis of the theatrical event (Sauter 2000: 5), LARP forms a part of the theatrical palette. However, LARP stems from the tradition of role playing games (henceforth RPGs) and are mainly studied through game theory. RPGs appeared in the game industry in the 1970s and have been very popular among teenagers. Their roots lie in Moreno's psychodrama (Arjoranta 2011, 3) and they are even connected with 17th -18th century European carrousels also; a form of live role-play often performed at European Courts (Söderberg et al. 2002). RPG is a game in which participants adopt the role of imaginative characters and then create or watch stories. The participants act according to the restrictions imposed by their role and their success or failure depends on certain rules and guidelinescommunicated to the players, usually by a 'game master' and rarely invented by the players themselves (Arjoranta 2011). Through a process based on achieving a number of different targets, players work as a group in order to fulfil their mission. By solving mysteries, the participants encounter dilemmas and explore the options that will lead them to the end of the game. RPGs appear in many variations. Players' decisions shape the course of the game. There are no winners or losers, just "an interactive process of defining and re-defining an imaginary gameworld, done by a group of participants according to a recognized structure of power" (Montola 2007, 179). *Event arrangers called game masters, storytellers or narrators, decide the setting and rules to be used and facilitate play.* The term Live Action Role Playing Games is used in order to describe role playing games that are played physically by the participants and therefore acquire dramatic characteristics. LARPing has also been used for exploring political and social issues in a historical interpretation context[6] for educational purposes. They have even served as the main methodology for school's curricula (Hyltoft 2008; Müller 2011, 45).

In the museum environment the games are designed around the stories that derive from the museum's exhibition. Participants explore and observe museum exhibits, trying to make

connections among various historical data, following the structure of rpgs but maintaining the 'authenticity' element that the museum offers. It is worth noticing that museums don't design LARP games, but rather co-operate with a private company. So far, there is only one company (http://www.gamecraft.gr) that designs and implements LARP events in museum spaces.

The aims of LARP events implemented in Greek museums and heritage sites are mainly cognitive and, according to the company's website, focus on enhancing:

- the knowledge of the history of the area,
- the knowledge of the exact elements of the monument's construction and function
- the knowledge of antiquities found in the area (http://gamecraft.gr/?page_id=501).

The Roman Agora, the castle of Redina, and the Aristotele Interactive Park are some examples of open-air site interpretation based on LARPing. The Roman Agora LARP is a typical example of LARPs' implementation in Greek open- air sites. The game was addressed both to school groups and adults and lasted for four hours. The members of the organizing team set up a plot where a central character was guiding the visitors-members of the group in an imaginative story created on the ruins of the Roman Agora and transported them to Roman times. The introductory text explains:

> *"... Fate unveils surprises for the citizens of Thessaloniki. Participants will play the roles of citizens that take part in a strange case of sabotage concerning the remaining quantity of water in the Roman Agora. Who is behind this gruesome act? How will they find the real offender? What do they have to do and how fast do they have to react?".* (http://gamecraft.gr/?p=628)

LARP in the castle of Redina and in Aristotle's interactive park were only aimed at school groups, though they followed the same planning: the students adopted some roles from the past in order to solve the mysteries imposed by some central in-role narrators. In the castle of Redina, visitors assumed the roles of members of a caravan that had arrived in the castle late in the evening. The program included a sleepover inside the castle:

> *"Next day, the caravan faces a castle guard contingent that accuses them of having stolen the golden cross of the diocese of Litis. The cross was in the castle from the time of the transfer of the diocese in it. The caravan is innocent but has to prove it. The aim of the game was in understanding the role of the castle as a fortress and a station in Macedonian Tempe".*(http://gamecraft.gr/?page_id=501)

In Aristotle's interactive park, which is equipped with physics tools for hands-on activities, the program was aimed at making the public familiar with Aristotle's *Physics* and his life.

Another LARP implemented in an open-air site is the "Thessaloniki City Rally (Treasure Hunt) The Share". The whole city of Thessaloniki, with its many disparate monuments, which cover a significant territorial and historical part of the city, became a kind of open-air museum in order to 'stage' a LARP event.

According to the statement of the company:

> *"People called 'players' or 'participants', will visit interesting and alternative (compared to standard city tours) locations in Thessaloniki's historical centre. Through playing, the participants will be able to obtain a wide variety of historical information, starting from the Byzantine period, through Turkish occupation and the 1930s, to the present day. At the same time, they will have the chance to be 'in the shoes' of a local spices vendor or an antique shop owner, taste delicious dishes in a classic street tavern or decipher a code hidden in books, while sitting in a traditional cafe. The players pursue goals within a fictional setting represented by the real world, while interacting with each other. The outcome of player actions may be mediated by game rules, or determined by consensus among players". (http://gamecraft.gr/index.php?s=the+share)*

The main innovative contribution of LARP is the fact that it addresses groups of adults. Organized museum activities stressing 'experience' and addressing adults are extremely rare in Greek museums and open-air sites. The inclusion of LARPs in a museum's education policy could significantly heighten the museum's impact and outreach. The implementation of LARP attempts to cover this need by offering active engagement for adults and families, though these activities are mostly offered on special occasions.

## Limits & Perspectives

The aforementioned examples illustrate the growing interest in site interpretation through theatre and its various means. Museum theatre interpretation in open-air sites seems to be in constant development, firstly, due to the willingness of educational institutions to increase their impact and to enrich the ways of interacting with the audience. Furthermore, this development is supported by the progressive acknowledgement of the value of theatre as an educational means in the Greek educational system. Until now, the forms of museum theatre in open-air site interpretation, are limited mostly to educational drama and second person interpretation, as part of educational programs and LARP as complete museum theatre programs. Despite their occasional implementation, they improve the communication with visitors and engage new audience groups. The examples stated above show also that theatre techniques are used to emphasize cognitive and sensory aims that rely heavily on the power of the exhibits. So far, museum theatre's potential to generate debate on social and historical issues has not fully developed. While keeping a focus on the past, the agenda of discourse on social issues that formed the existing reality and the correlations between the past and the present day phenomena is significantly limited. However, a recent implementation (2012-13)

of a performance walk in the city of Thessaloniki did address issues of immigration and citizenship, showing signs of a shift in the interpretation agenda[7] .

Perspectives on site interpretation through museum theatre include the expansion of museum theatre forms used, such as first person and third person interpretation, and the further inclusion of different visitor-groups, like adults and families.[8] Moreover, the transformation of cities and villages rich in monuments of cultural heritage (which without many changes may provide a scenery) into live museums - as in the previously mentioned program of "Thessaloniki City Rally" - could offer additional opportunities for the development of museum theatre. The generation of a discourse on challenging issues of the past and current reality would be another possibility that could arise from the use of museum theatre, if museums and responsible entities have such an intention.

1 The function and content of museum theatre programs is also a key research question that will be explored in the next phase of the project by on-site visits and visitor research.

2 For instance, according to the Ministry of Culture up to 2002, 184 educational programs have been implemented by the Ephorate of Prehistorical and Classical Antiquities, 85 of them were realized in 69 archaeological sites.

3 In this case, the script is created by the students, who follow the guidelines of the educator.

4 The term 'open-air site' in Greece is usually identical to the term 'archaeological site'.

5 As in the case of the educational program "Exploring the history of a manuscript" that was undertaken at the Museum of Byzantine Culture (Avdi et al 2008).

6 i.e. in Belarus and the Czech Republic enlivening aspects of the 2nd World War (Karalevich and Springerberg 2010; Gotthard and Zlatohlavek 2010)

7 An audience research on its impact has been completed by the writers of this article and it will soon be published. Part of the research results were presented in the 2013 Imtal Global Conference in Washington DC and can be accessed on-line at: https://www.academia.edu/6247739..

8 Larps in museum spaces already address families and adults

## Link(s)

Ancient Agora of Thessaloniki
Aristotle's Park
Gamecraft Company
Redina's Castle

Keywords living history
archaeological open-air museum
theatre
education

Country Greece

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## Gallery Image

FIG 1. LARP AT ARISTOTELE'S PARK

FIG 2. LARP AT THE REDINA CASTLE

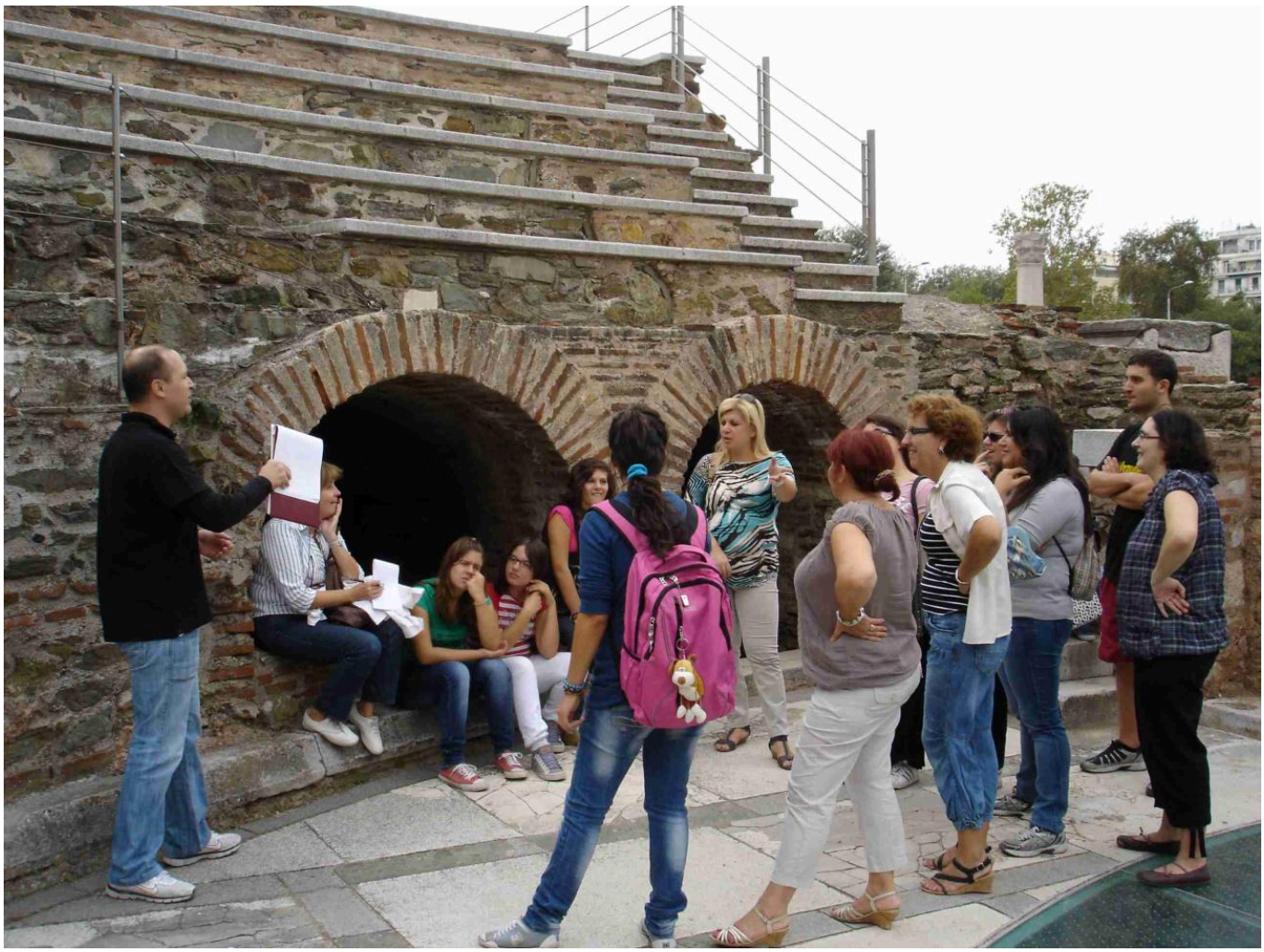

FIG 3. LARP AT THE ROMAN AGORA

FIG 4. ZAPPEION GARDENS_KINAESTHETIC GAMES

FIG 5. ZAPPEION GARDENS_OBSERVING THE PHOTO