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Drama and Theatre in Heritage Education: Negotiating History

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Abstract

As museums seek to reposition themselves as agents of social change and as school history curriculums increasingly adopt a social history perspective, drama and theatre emerge as flexible and nuanced tools for learning. However, questions still remain about how to best apply existing theoretical frameworks and design models to the specificities of heritage education. This paper examines the current situation in Greece and draws on critical heritage and performance theories in order to contribute towards the further exploration of theatre and drama in heritage learning.

Key words: *museum theatre, educational drama, heritage, museums, historical thinking, heritage learning, social history*

1. Introduction

Educational drama has long been used effectively to serve diverse pedagogical aims in the context of formal and non-formal education (Jackson, 2007; Nicholson, 2009). Its value as a medium of social and emotional development has been widely acknowledged, as well as its potential to mediate learning. While extensive research proves the above statements, educational drama's potential in the context of heritage education is significantly under-researched.

The museum[1], as an educational institution that preserves the material evidence of the past, is a place of collective memory forming cultural identities and beliefs. The museum procedures constitute a renegotiation of the past and, simultaneously, a perspective on the present and the future (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2000).

Recent studies support the notion that museums can "contribute towards social inclusion at individual, community and societal level" (Sandell, 2003, p. 45; Sandell, 2002). As they increasingly seek to reposition themselves as agents of social change, museums demonstrate that they have the potential to contribute towards combating prejudices and stereotypes and to promote respect for diversity (Sandell, 2003, p. 45). Educational drama is here emerging as a powerful tool, but questions still remain about how to best apply existing theoretical frameworks and design models to the specificities of heritage education, particularly formal learning or schools programming.

This paper considers the role of drama and museum theatre in heritage education in Greece. In light of contemporary heritage theories, that stress the relation between historical narratives and society and their major role in constructing identities, critical engagement becomes a central axis in the interpretation of the past. In the context of a revised history curriculum that seeks to reinforce critical thinking concerning the great national narratives and to encourage cooperation between museums and schools, a theoretical and practical basis is needed for the further exploration of drama and theatre in heritage education.

2. Heritage education and the concept of heritage

Heritage is a theoretical concept, an institutionalised set of practices, and a means of cultural production. "When most of us write or speak about heritage, we are referring to a social framework of institutions and practices that select, conserve and present material and intangible traces of the past" (Simon & Ashley, 2010, p. 247).

This framework can incorporate both profit-making and not-for-profit or charitable entities; and when we refer broadly to 'the heritage *industry*', we are pointing to those institutions and practices which aim to encourage tourism. Indeed, the idea of heritage - particularly national heritage in light of the "heritage boom" - is nowadays broadly viewed in terms of its contribution to cultural capital and, therefore, as a key element in the economic growth of a community (Lumley, 2005). However, rather than being seen as the past rediscovered, recovered or regenerated, it is important to recognise that heritage "produces something new in the present that has recourse to the past": as such, it is an entirely "new mode of cultural production" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, p. 149).

Within the theoretical field of heritage, the notion itself has acquired multiple meanings and approaches and remains highly contested. The concept seems to appear for the first time in the 17th century and - also used during the French Revolution (Desvallées & Mairesse, 2009) - it is constructed in the context of the Enlightenment and the creation of the nation state. Heritage symbolises a unique kind of relation to the past: a "reconstruction of the link to an abandoned world based on a 'found' object" (Davallon, 2000, p. 6). The exploration of the ways in which this reconstruction is created has led to a significant body of theory that points to the complexity of the notion and its related practices.

According to traditional museology, which emerged in parallel with the establishment of the first public museums in the environment of modernity, objects are selected because of their *intrinsic* cultural, economic or political value. They also serve as agents of an idealised past, they seek our admiration and they are part of the dominant narratives about the past. Contemporary museology rejects this notion of *intrinsic* value, and instead attributes it according to the human stories that are linked to the material or immaterial remains. Any selection and interpretation process, however, is acknowledged to be biased by cultural, economic and political factors. In this sense, heritage is not about things but about "a set of values and meanings". Laurajane Smith (2006, p. 11) argues that "There is a hegemonic 'authorised heritage discourse', which is reliant on the power/knowledge claims of technical and aesthetic experts, and institutionalised in state cultural agencies and amenity societies".

Here, Smith takes their cue from the notion of "grand national narratives" and touches upon a major issue that arises from this discourse: that the selective presentation of history is controlled by a dominant class. This class, via the voice of technical and aesthetic expertise, seeks to convey a stable and unchanging set of values, but in so doing it prevents critical engagement with historical processes. This critique of heritage is rooted in the view that all knowledge and its pursuit, realisation and deployment are inherently political (MacDonald, 2007). After all, "what may be inclusive and comfortable to one person or community will always be exclusionary and uncomfortable to another" (Smith, 2011, p. 70).

The above statement highlights an issue of great importance, not only in the interpretation of heritage, but also in the teaching of history in formal education. In the case of the Greek educational system, the particular significance attached to history serves to build national identity and to cultivate patriotism and democratic values through the selection and interpretation of 'appropriate' historical events: through the formation of an "official history" (Avdela, 2000, p. 241). In so doing "the teaching of history neither moves beyond this ethnocentric concept of the nation nor familiarises students with the production of historical knowledge" (Avdela, 2000, p. 239). This also becomes the lens through which the citizenry at large interprets its heritage. Critical approaches can and should develop in the context of heritage education and, with this in mind, the cooperation between schools and heritage sites is strongly encouraged by the Greek curriculum both in its current form and in the suggested revised plan (Avdela, 2000; Nikonanou, 2010; Voglis, 2017).

Overall, heritage education focuses on history, on the narratives of the past that are linked to tangible or intangible cultural heritage. However, these things, places and practices and their continued importance or relevance today - especially where sensitive or contested history is concerned - cannot be fully understood or approached from a critical perspective without examining the human "behaviours, attitudes and prejudices" or "social, ethical and economic circumstances" from which they came about (Farthing, 2011, p. 94). Within this context both drama and theatre, alongside other diverse approaches, are used to encourage experiential learning, create connections between the past and the present and serve as a medium of emotional, intellectual and critical engagement.

3. The uses of educational drama

Educational drama in the context of formal and informal education is a means of promoting "the cognitive, social, linguistic and psychomotor domains of learning" (Kondoyanni, 2005, p. 60). Specifically, drama serves to explore universal issues such as social responsibility, as a teaching method for other subject areas such as language and history, and as a "means of enhancing social and emotional development" (Landy,

1982, p. 32). The use of the term 'drama' is linked to an emphasis on the process (O' Toole, 1992) rather than the creation of a theatrical play. This is evident across all of the drama education terms - which are often used interchangeably even though they reflect differences in philosophy (Bolton, 2007) - such as creative dramatics, developmental drama, informal drama or process drama, to name a few (Bolton, 2007; Courtney, 1987; Landy, 1982).

The development of drama has been marked by the contributions of Dorothy Heathcote who, amongst many other things, introduced the technique of "teacher-in-role" and "mantle of the expert". The innovation of Heathcote's approach had a profound impact on the content of drama education. It aims at fostering "credibility and thoughtfulness" within the drama (Bolton, 2007, p. 53) and at encouraging children to access and explore deeper layers of meaning. Here, the teacher is the artist, the playwright and the director, while the children have to face "a problem, a mystery, a journey, a search, or a crisis of mankind – 'a man in a mess' – or, alternatively, the class takes on the responsibility of an investigator's role" (Bolton, 2007, p. 53). In this way, children can be encouraged to explore different possibilities, to ask questions, to see alternatives, to understand that conditions are changeable and to engage critically with the subject matter in hand.

The Theatre-in-Education movement adopted Heathcote's approach, but replaced the teacher with the actor. This new format allowed the development of new structures and objectives and often saw theatre companies enter into consultation with schools regarding the selection of the topic (Bolton, 2007):

> The T.I.E. programme is not a performance in schools of a self-contained play, a 'one-off' event that is here today and gone tomorrow, but a co-ordinated and carefully structured programme of work, usually devised and researched by the company, around a topic of relevance both to the school curriculum and to the children's own lives, presented in school by the company and involving the children directly in an experience of the situations and problems that the topic throws up. (Jackson, 1980, p. ix)

Boal also combined theatre and drama to initiate a theatre of social empowerment by staging a play of social and political interest to the community. Here, the spectators - turned into "spect-actors" - could intervene, take on the role of the oppressed, make decisions and examine the consequences.

Both Heathcote's and Boal's approaches involve a profound social dimension, as they challenge participants' critical abilities. They involve intellectual, problem-solving skills and they encourage understanding with regard to the complexity of the human experience. Nowadays, the above elements have a central role in heritage education and have become components of a field of performance practice known as museum theatre.

4. Museum theatre and the museum shift

In the heritage field, theatre as a learning medium was first introduced in 19th and early 20th century open-air museums (Venieri, 2017). Museum theatre, as it is now called, is a field of theatre practice born and developed in a museum context. Museum theatre is defined as:

> A specific kind of interpretation that employs fictional activity to communicate ideas, facts and concepts. A museum-theatre performer assumes the role of a character (as a solo gallery character, an interpreter or as part of a play or scenario) in order to entertain and educate visitors. They take on the role of a particular character in a particular circumstance in order to help visitors appreciate and understand the story in hand and, through that, some aspect of the host museum or site.[2]

It is a form of applied theatre, an interpretive strategy, an educational approach and a form of public history. It appeared for the first time in 1897 in Skansen: the first open-air museum, situated in Sweden. There, interpreters in the role of inhabitants, aimed to enliven the reconstructed village that sought to preserve the way of life of pre-industrial society (Venieri, 2017). Since then, museum theatre has undergone many changes in its theory and practice, which have mirrored the development taking place in museums over the last centuries.

In the beginning of the 20th century, museum theatre spread rapidly in open-air museums - mostly in the US - which followed the example of Skansen and became known as living history museums. Museum theatre served to reinforce the experiential approach to learning, to contextualise objects and to give a more lively image of the past. Although the learning approach was progressive, much early criticism focused on the fact that the represented past was limited to an idealised image of society, where the only parts of life worth showing were the heroes of the nation and - when these later emerged in the 1950s - the reenactment of glorious battles (Venieri, 2017). This criticism was connected to a growing shift in understanding concerning heritage practices.

Emerging in the 1970s, 'the new museology' called for a more democratic approach in museum exhibi-

tions. It addressed a variety of issues concerned with the politics of representation and the narratives that emerged from within the closed circuit of the dominant cultural institutions (Vergo, 1989). These "new" museums became instruments of identity politics, sites of redressing and negotiating identities (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 2000). Their exhibits began to be recognised as carriers of diverse human stories, as narrators that had the potential to - and that ought to - offer open interpretations: representative of and accessible to as many social, ethnic and age groups as possible. This shift was part of the broader development of cultural and social studies, which called for the representation of minorities and of the voices of the marginalised members of society (Mac Donald, 2006). Here, the museum's value as being primarily an educational institution was highlighted (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999). Also, with the framework of "the new museology", museum narratives were increasingly influenced by the field of social history, which was mainly developed in the US and the UK during the latter part of the 20th century. For the first time, slaves, women, and ethnic minority groups were put "on stage" and given a voice through the interpretation of their history. The past was no more a glorious land, but a place of controversy and a struggle for power.

At the same time, museums underwent a change in focus from an object-centered to a visitor-centered approach. In line with the development of constructivist learning theory, visitors began to be seen as diverse individuals with different needs, background narratives and expectations (Hein, 1998). Contemporary emphasis on the combination of education and entertainment, expressed through the term "edutainment", is increasingly a defining element of museums' communication and education strategies. In addition to this, visitors increasingly expect to be able to actively engage with the sites and spaces they visit and to be able "to discuss, share, and remix what they consume" (Simon, 2010, p. ii).

> The notion of experience is central to museum programming agendas, while in contemporary society it constitutes a motivating factor for cultural participation. Museums, in order to fulfill their social role and define their qualitative excellence compared to the leisure industry, are increasingly prioritising experience and edutainment. (Nikonanou & Kasvikis, 2008, p. 16)

Contemporary museum theory recognises heritage as a "cultural performance": "a term that broadens the conceptual understanding of heritage and puts forward its cultural role in the social sphere" (Smith, 2006, p. 4). In this context, an exhibition may either aim to promote a consensus narrative over its content or "challenge and redefine received values and identities" (Smith, 2006, p. 4). Nowadays, the recognition of the multiple meanings and functions of cultural heritage has led to the formation of an ethical framework linking culture and society and, consequently, the museum to the social environment to which it belongs (Mairesse, 2000; Alexander, 1979; Sandell, 2003; Sandell, 2002; Schultz, 2011; Janes & Conaty, 2005). This recognition has been followed by an investigation of the role of museums "in tackling specific manifestations of inequality, such as racism and other forms of discrimination" and the impact of museum activities on the lives of individuals and communities (Sandell, 2002, p. 3). Moreover, fundamental questions which had been marginalised for a long time, such as the social purpose and role of museums, have emerged as key issues that are now hard to ignore (Sandell, 2002). Museums are increasingly seeking to become vital parts of their local community and, at the same time, part of the global community: a natural result of ongoing globalisation and human migration.

Museum theatre followed this turn by increasingly incorporating practices that align with the new ideal of the visitor-centered, democratic and social museum: critical engagement with the subject-matter of the exhibition, the unsettlement of prior ideas, stereotypes and prejudices, as well as the notion of multiple perspectives of truth. It acknowledges the inherent limits of our knowledge about the past, its layers of memory and meaning, and establishes a frame for the re-examination of the ways we perceive and interpret the remains of the past (Venieri, 2017). In this context, museum theatre seeks to unravel the complexity of the historical, social and political processes that form various views on reality. This approach, which essentially concerns itself with historical thinking, is also the objective of current efforts to revise the history curriculum in Greek schools (Voglis et al., 2017).

5. The teaching of history in schools

The teaching of history in Greek schools is predominantly delivered according to a "traditional" approach. It presents a linear view of the past and focuses on the narrative of the great historical and political events, on historic facts that reinforce the national narrative and promote national consciousness (Kokkinos, 1998). The educational means are limited to a single textbook which presents "a closed and very-well-isolated national history" of Greece and which aims at the reproduction of a unique "authentic", "orthodox" and objective historical knowledge (Kouseri, 2015, p. 52). The bibliographical sources serve therefore "to confirm the one-sided narrative". Students have to learn their lessons by heart. As a result, 'traditional' history education

"is based on a dry, didactic monologue that prevents students from becoming engaged with history, while their historical thinking is limited to the historical knowledge that has been 'objectively' put forward by the one and only school history textbook" (Nakou, 2002, p. 120). The focus is solely on history as knowledge of the facts, rather than on the ways in which this knowledge is produced.

During the last decades of the twentieth century, a more critical approach to history began to emerge. The 'new history' movement of the 1970s addressed the need for a shift away from content towards the processes of historical knowledge, as well as a focus on learning tools that help the development of critical thinking and the necessary skills for historical interpretation.

Recently, the Institute for Educational Policy, part of the Hellenic Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs, issued a suggested revised history curriculum for schools. The theoretical framework of the curriculum highlights, as one of its aims, the development of humanitarian and democratic values. It also puts an emphasis on social history with a focus on historically disenfranchised social groups such as religious, ethnic and gender minorities, people with disabilities, women and children (Voglis et al., 2017, p. 4).

Historical thinking is prioritised as an important asset in contemporary democratic and multicultural societies. Historical thinking includes six key aspects (Seixas & Morton, 2012), which are also emphasised in the theoretical framework of the suggested revised history curriculum (Voglis et al., 2017, pp. 5-8):[3]

a. Historical significance: Events that changed the lives of many people for a long time are considered important, such as WWII. However, the life of a worker, or of a grandfather can also be significant, so the criteria of significance depend on our point of view. Even if the life of a worker is insignificant compared to WWII, it can become significant if through this personal story we approach other historical events, like economic development, workers' struggles or the post-war depression.

b. Use of historical evidence: the remnants of the past - letters, archives, diaries, etc. - reveal its secrets. We have to place them in their historical context in order to understand what happened when they were created.

c. Continuity and change: History is not a sequence of events but a complex mix of continuity and change. The understanding of this aspect leads to a totally different sense of the past. Thus, the learning of chronological notions and notions that reveal the multiplicity of historical time and different layers of historical life is very significant. Historical time includes "the cyclical time of nature, psychological time, early/late past, present, past, future, continuity/transformation, duration, inertia, period, sequence, contemporaneity, diachrony, short time, long time, juncture and circle" (Voglis et al., 2017, p. 6).

d. Causes and consequences: What were the actions, the beliefs and the situations that led to certain consequences? Unlike geology or astronomy, history depends on the human factor. Humans have motives and reasons to act or not, but the reasons for historical events go further than that: they are "multiple and multi-level, connecting ideologies, institutions, circumstances, short-term motives and actions".

e. Historical perspective: "Taking a historical perspective means understanding the social, cultural, intellectual and emotional settings that shaped people's lives and actions in the past: different historical actors may have acted on the basis of conflicting beliefs and ideologies, so understanding diverse perspectives is also a key to historical perspective-taking". Theatre is able to develop historical perspective by bringing to life characters from the past and encouraging students to take on specific roles, being aware of their historical context and characteristics (Jones, 2011). However, historical perspective should not be confused with historical empathy, with the "identification with another person". Historical perspective means "comprehension of the vast differences between us in the present and those in the past".

f. Understanding the ethical dimensions of history: As stated in the Historical Thinking Project website, "historians attempt to hold back on explicit ethical judgments about actors in the midst of their accounts, but, when all is said and done, if the story is meaningful, then there is an ethical judgment involved. We should expect to learn something from the past that helps us to face the ethical issues of today". The ethical dimensions of history involve:

- the responsibilities that historical crimes and sacrifices impose upon us today
- the ethical judgments we make about historical action

In the case of Greece, the new recommendations and the suggested curriculum attach significance to critical engagement with historical narratives. They also mention museums and heritage site visits as a necessary component for the development of historical thinking. Central to the proposal is the notion of a disciplinary approach to history (Kouseri, 2015) and a focus on "transformative history" (Lee, 2011). The *disciplinary approach* aims to critically engage students in the processes of history as a science, rather than to focus on the accumulation of knowledge about the past. As Shemillt (2011) states, it encourages an understanding of social change and it challenges the dominant historical narratives that young people encounter in their

everyday life. *Transformative history* refers to the power of history to change the way we see the present and the future, and to transform our lives: "History can transform the simplicities of a world categorised in polarities, or organised in law-like generalisations, many of which have their origin in 'memories' of the past, but not history" (Lee, 2011, p. 149).
Both transformative history and the disciplinary approach to history can significantly enrich the implementation of theatre and drama in the interpretation of the past.

6. Drama and museum theatre in the Greek museums

Drama techniques are often encountered as part of the educational programmes of Greek museums, whereas fully-developed educational drama (specifically process drama) programmes are very limited (Venieri, 2017). While drama, in the context of heritage education in Greece, might indeed be emotionally and socially engaging, a precedent has not yet been set where it can be used to critically engage students with aspects of the official national narrative, with the curriculum itself and with the process of history making.

Museum theatre is a field of practice that has only recently been introduced in Greece. One programme that directly aimed at critical engagement with the national narrative, entitled "April 1884, a visit to the Exhibition of the Monuments of the Holy Struggle", was implemented at the National Historical Museum in Athens, in the context of a PhD research (Venieri, 2017). The research project set out to examine the ways that museum theatre might affect visitors' perceptions of the museum experience and promote critical engagement with the museum narratives (in this case, with the great national narrative of the Greek revolution). Open to families, teenagers and adults, the programme invited visitors to meet and interact with Mary - a costumed actor-interpreter representing, in the 1st person, a woman from the 19th century - and accompany her on her visit to the first "Exhibition of the monuments of the Holy Struggle", held in 1884 by the Historical and Ethnological Society (Karamanolakis, 2011). This exhibition - created almost 60 years after the start of the event itself - was the first official representation of the Greek war of independence, connecting the ideology of religion and heroism with the narrative of national history. Today it has been enriched by further acquisitions and is hosted at the Old Parliament Building.

The programme's evaluation data indicated that Mary acted as a stimulus for the visitor-audience members, offering "food for thought" and generating interest in and curiosity for exhibits to which the audience of visitors were previously indifferent. The visitors also felt that Mary's short bursts of commentary corresponded to present-day transmittance of information, which is immediate and delivers core messages. The clarity of Mary's commentary helped to highlight issues that were previously obscured, and encouraged visitors to reflect on them critically. The performance provoked their curiosity about what lies behind the museum narrative. In that way, it generated new questions, i.e. concerning the reasons behind the absence of women in the museum narrative and the lack of information about the lives of lower-class people, like Mary, in the 19th century. The visitors connected the societal issues of 1884 and the Greek Revolution with current issues of contemporary life and also commented on the construction of national identity and the need to create a place where different views can be negotiated.

Overall, visitors valued their experience as participants of the in-role encounter with Mary, both for its educating and entertaining effect. The museum theatre experience heightened empathy through the connection of various elements of the performance, both material and immaterial, with personal memories. Thus, it transferred the discussion about the past from a heroic level to a human one. All interviewees agreed that the experience broadened their understanding and revealed different aspects of the exhibition that they couldn't have otherwise noticed. Finally, although they appreciated that the implementation of this museum theatre programme was a "progressive step" on the part of the National Historical Museum, the visitors believed that certain national issues are generally still not dealt with, either within or outside the museum sector (Venieri, 2017).

7. Conclusions

Programmes using either educational drama or museum theatre for school-age audiences have yet to be developed and implemented here in Greece. A combination of educational drama techniques with museum theatre could provide a methodology for engaging younger audiences in a critical examination of national narratives. The presence of an actor reinforces the suspension of disbelief, can keep a balance between empathy and detachment (so participants can observe the bigger picture) and presents the historical context in an interesting way. At the same time, educational drama techniques can engage students in role-play activities that can encourage the development of historical thinking.

Contemporary heritage education in Greece, both in the museum and school contexts, is working to-

wards establishing and integrating a model of practice that favours experiential approaches in the development of historical thinking and critical engagement with various aspects of historical narratives. The social significance of such approaches becomes even greater in the context of the current political setting: the rise of the far-right in various parts of the world and the role of narratives of the past in nurturing ideologies of exclusion. Educational drama and museum theatre combined can provide a methodology for re-examining historical narratives on multiple levels; intellectually, emotionally and socially. The field of practice is broad and offers plenty of ground for innovative approaches.

Notes

1 The term "museum" is used in accordance with the latest definition provided by the International Council of Museums:

> A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment. (Desvallées & Mairesse, 2009, p. 57)

2 https://www.imtal-europe.org/ (Accessed on 15/10/2018)

3 All phrases in quotations in the following six key aspects that do not refer to a source derive from the 'Historical Thinking Project' website (http://historicalthinking.ca/)

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