

# **Folk Dress as an Expressive Means in Contemporary Greek Theatre Costume Design**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines costume design in contemporary Greek theatre over a period of twenty years (1985-2005) concentrating on theatrical productions in which folk dress is a point of reference for the design of theatrical costumes. The paper focuses on certain theatrical productions from the repertory of ancient drama, contemporary dramaturgy or musical theatre, not relating directly to folk dress due to their subject matter or historical context. The analysis of these productions demonstrates that the costume designers who studied, interpreted and subsequently introduced elements of folk dress in theatrical costume had in-depth knowledge of folk culture prior to these collaborations. Such examples are of special interest as they offer evidence that folk dress can provide expressive means for new artistic design in a broad sense - here, through the artistic practice of costume design.

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## **Introduction**

Folk culture and theatre are strongly interlinked. The two intersect in the theatrical form called 'folk theatre', which is popular in many areas of Europe and Asia and is based on native cultures, synthesizing elements of local music, dance and recitation, local dress, crafts, visual arts, and religion, into staged narratives. As such, folk theatre embeds local identities, symbols and social values. However, folk culture – and for the purposes of this paper, folk dress in particular – may become a source of materials and ideas for theatrical creation more broadly, not only in relation to traditional themes within the context of folk theatre, but also in theatre plays from a wider range of global dramaturgy. This is the topic of this paper, examined through the prism of costume design.

The study of costume design in contemporary Greek theatre, particularly since the mid-1970s, reveals that in several theatrical productions folk dress is clearly a point of reference and a source of inspiration for Greek costume designers. This goes beyond theatre plays that directly require the use of folk costume due to their subject matter or historical context, and addresses works belonging to the field of ancient drama, to 20<sup>th</sup> century global dramaturgy or even to the field of musical theatre. Whereas the theme and context of these works may be irrelevant to Greek folk dress, costume designers revert to folk culture to draw inspiration and patterns.

This paper examines costume design in contemporary Greek theatre over a period of twenty years (1985-2005) and focuses on theatrical productions in which folk dress is a source of

inspiration – often, even a point of departure for the development of a new costume design concept – for the Greek stage and costume designers, Ioanna Papantoniou and Yorgos Ziakas. These two designers have used morphological (form) and symbolic (decorative) elements derived from folk culture, that is, from diverse Greek folk costumes, in their theatrical costume designs for works such as the ancient tragedies *Electra* (1988), *Iphigenia in Taurus* (1990) and *The Libation Bearers* (or *Choephoroi*, 1992), as well as in productions of global dramaturgy from the 20<sup>th</sup> century including *Yerma* (2000) and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (2005), and in opera, such as *The Chessboard Fugitives* (1998). These theatrical productions do not require the use of folk costume as a result of their subject matter or historical context, as in the case of bucolic or rural dramas. Thus, the use of folk dress elements in the design of the costumes has been an artistic, aesthetic and expressive choice by the makers of the performance – specifically, the costume designers in collaboration with the director and the rest of the artistic team.

The analysis of these productions demonstrates that the costume designers who studied, interpreted and subsequently introduced elements of folk dress in theatrical costume had in-depth knowledge of folk culture prior to these collaborations. The aim of this study is to underscore the richness that folk dress offers in terms of both aesthetic elements and form for new costume design, as well as to highlight the importance of understanding folk dress in depth in order to investigate its elements and employ them as expressive means in theatre costume. The paper concludes with observations on the creative potential of folk dress today, not only as a source of inspiration, but also as a toolbox of expressive means for contemporary costume design by younger designers.

### **Folk Dress Elements in Contemporary Greek Theatre Costume Design (1985-2005)**

The most popular garment rooted in folk culture but used widely in contemporary costume design for ancient drama, since the 1980s in particular, is the male islanders' baggy breeches (*vráka*).<sup>1</sup> This garment has been frequently used in modern productions of ancient Greek comedies to dress comical characters, such as male domestic assistants or slaves. Such an example is the role of "Xanthias" in Aristophanes' *The Frogs* in a 1998 production by the National Theatre of Greece designed by Yorgos Assimakopoulos.<sup>2</sup> This production also features an inventive variation of the *vráka* in the costumes for the Chorus of the Frogs.<sup>3</sup> The design of this costume emphasizes the width of this type of garment with the use of a wide ring/loop around the waist, whilst the garment continues to the top part of the body. Ioanna Papantoniou has commented that, 'apparently, all of us, costume designers, feel that [the breeches] helps us create funny characters' (Papantoniou, 1994: n.p.).

Significant for this topic is the case of Greek director Costas Tsianos, who developed a creative and dynamic dialogue with folk culture in his theatre practice. To appreciate his profound understanding and, following, his interpretation and use of folk culture in various theatre plays, it is important to note that Tsianos was himself a dancer of Greek folk dances with the group of Dora Stratou, who was a well-known researcher of Greek local dances and studied folk culture in depth, trying to comprehend the philosophy behind each variation. Tsianos used his

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<sup>1</sup> An example of this type of baggy breeches from a male folk costume from the island of Crete can be found in the public domain: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=10732065> (Accessed 20 July 2020).

<sup>2</sup> A photograph from this 1998 production of *The Frogs* shows the character of Xanthias (actor Petros Filippidis) dressed in a costume the lower part of which consists of large male islanders' baggy breeches (*vráka*). See the Greek National Theatre's digitised archive, freely available at: <http://www.nt-archive.gr/viewFiles1.aspx?playID=619&photoID=10849> (accessed 10 July 2020).

<sup>3</sup> The costume of the Chorus of the Frogs from the 1998 production designed by Yorgos Assimakopoulos can be seen at the Greek National Theatre's digitised archive, freely available at: <http://www.nt-archive.gr/viewFiles1.aspx?playID=619&photoID=10848> (accessed 10 July 2020).

knowledge of dance and rhythm in a large number of theatre productions that he directed, deepening his personal research on the dynamics of each form (symmetry, abstraction, clarity of line, ‘emotional condensation’,<sup>4</sup> etc.) and embedding these elements in the bodily language and overall staging of each production, transferring “a universe of ideas and experiences, the human experiences of anonymous people, who express in a condensed way, carrying the experience of centuries”.<sup>5</sup>

Tsianos mainly collaborated with two set and costume designers who understood and shared his interest in folk culture, both of whom were dancers of Greek folk dances like himself: Yorgos Ziakas, former dancer with Dora Stratou’s group, and Ioanna Papantoniou, former dancer of the Lyceum Club of Greek Women and, for many years, researcher of Greek folk dress through on site ethnographic observation. These two collaborators’ prior knowledge and experience of folk culture offered great potential to the creative dialogue between director and designer on the aesthetic and expressive elements of folk dress that were eventually used in the productions that they created together.

Yorgos Ziakas’ first significant collaboration with Costas Tsianos in which folk elements were embedded in ancient tragedy was for Euripides’ *Electra* produced by Thessaliko Theatre in the summer of 1988. The intention to use the dynamics of folk culture in making theatre is clearly expressed by Tsianos in his director’s note: ‘Our performance aims to draw ideas and propose solutions to the staging of ancient tragedy through the aesthetics offered by our folk culture. We tried to touch the essence and discover its creative powers, away from the picturesque and the “folkloristic”’.<sup>6</sup> The scenography created by Yorgos Ziakas depicts a plain façade of a ‘hut’ made of wood. The chorus dons costumes inspired by the winter variation of the Karagouna local costume from the area of Thessaly (*Figure 1*), which is mainly black, to which the designer added black undershirts, a type of chemise (*pokamiso*) that would normally be off-white in the original costume. In so doing, Ziakas took away any decorative elements of the traditional Karagouna costume and only kept its form, adding black colour to underscore the theme of the tragedy in a rather austere black-dressed chorus (*Figure 2*) Combined with extensive use of



**Left: Figure 1.** Karagouna costume from Trikala, Thessaly, Greece (winter variation, early 20<sup>th</sup> c.). Benaki Museum Photographic Archive.

**Right: Figure 2.** Production photograph from *Electra*, Thessaliko Theatre (1988). Set and costume design: Yorgos Ziakas. Bottom left: “*Electra*” (actress Lydia Koniordou) with the chorus. Courtesy of Thessaliko Theatre Archive.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the director’s note in the theatre programme of *Electra*, reprinted in *15 Years Thessaliko Theatre* [in Greek] (Municipal and Regional Theatre of Larissa, 1991: 194).

<sup>5</sup> Quote from actress Lydia Koniordou’s talk, entitled ‘Ancient Drama – A Dialogue’ organised on 30 November 2010 by the Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation in Nafplion in the frame of the ‘Theatre Evenings’ talks series (transcribed by the author). All quotes are translated from Greek by the author, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>6</sup> Tsianos’ director’s note, op.cit.

black in the costumes of the male roles, the visual result was a monochrome effect of shades of black according to the materials used in each costume.

Another, yet more direct reference to folk costume from the same production is the internal garment worn by "Electra", which is an authentic traditional chemise (*pokamiso*), an undergarment from the local costume of the village of Tanagra that Ziakas chose to use without modifications. This chemise is off-white, made of raw, thick cotton and only bears black decoration with stylised cypresses on the hemline; this garment dresses the role of "Electra" in a clear, earthy form (*Figure 2*). The critics praised Ziakas' costumes as 'authentic' (Thymeli, 1988: 202),<sup>7</sup> and 'theatrical, yet bearing memories' (Christides, 1989: 206). This performance has been described by critics as 'an ethnographic *Electra*' (Varopoulou, 1988: 194) inspired by the 'rural topology of the myth' (Vakalopoulou, 1988: 194). The majority of reviews considered this production simple in its form and faithful towards its goals, its staging 'touching deeply the spectators' (Vakalopoulou, 1988: 194).

The next significant collaboration between Tsianos and Ziakas was for Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*, also for Thessaliko Theatre, in the summer of 1990. This production was considered successful by the critics due to the 'authenticity' of the director's choices combined with his collaborators' insightful contribution using folk culture elements once more.<sup>8</sup> Yorgos Ziakas' design work here went deeper into a search of elements of form to create a mystic atmosphere for a simple yet 'ritual Iphigenia'.<sup>9</sup> To achieve this, Ziakas used folk decorative elements made of golden thread embroidered on black background both on "Iphigenia's" costume as well as on the Chorus' costumes (*Figure 3*). These costumes draw inspiration from cultures living along the

Mediterranean Sea and bearing common characteristics in their folk dresses, for example wearing variations of kaftans as in many areas of North Africa. The kaftan is a type of garment based on the ancient



**Figure 3:** Production photograph from *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Thessaliko Theatre (1990). Set and costume design: Yorgos Ziakas. Chorus Costumes. Courtesy of Thessaliko Theatre Archive

<sup>7</sup> Papantoniou notes that, with the exception of Electra's costume, all other costumes are certainly not authentic: 'If one observes them from close distance, the details of the embroidery that is so convincing from afar are revealed to be small scraps of fabric sewn closely together to give the right impression at long distance. My view is that this is one of the best costume designs done in Greek theatre' (Papantoniou, 1994: n.p.).

<sup>8</sup> Both *Iphigenia in Tauris*, as well as *Electra*, were invited to the prestigious Epidaurus Festival at the Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus; their success with audiences was such that both productions were presented numerous times. With the production of *Electra*, Thessaliko Theatre was the first Municipal Regional theatre of Greece to perform at the Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus (this information is available in Greek at the theatre's website, see: <https://www.thessaliko-theatre.gr/to-theatro/istoria/>). For more reviews on *Iphigenia*, see the press clippings published in the volume *15 Years Thessaliko Theatre*, pp.228-232.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. M. Christides (1989: 228).

chiton with sleeves (Papantoniou, 2000) and was widespread in this area through commerce and intercultural exchange. However, the strongest visual element of the female roles' costumes in *Iphigenia in Tauris* is the headgear. "Iphigenia" bears a headpiece that looks like a diadem decorated with layers of coins in the front, whilst her hair is covered with a veil at the back. The women of the Chorus (a Chorus of Greek women, "Iphigenia's" servants) wear headdresses decorated with golden wreaths and jewellery, tying under the chin with a piece of fabric. This type of headdress freely reminds of the festive head covers of the local costume from the village Pyrgí at the island of Chios, though there is no direct connection between the origins of these women and this specific area. Under the chin, there are layers of decorative rows of beads, another element deriving from north-African traditions. With the merging of these diverse features, Ziakas succeeded in creating an image of a 'foreign land', the land of the Taurians.

In a third production by the Thessaliko Theatre involving folk culture elements in its staging, Aeschylus' *The Libation Bearers* (or *Choephoroi*) in 1992, the director Costas Tsianos worked with set and costume designer Ioanna Papantoniou. Papantoniou has deep knowledge of the typology and symbolisms of Greek local costumes and used direct references to folk dress in both male and female characters' costumes. The most dynamic of these is "Clytemnestra's" costume, which has the brightest colours amidst a rather dark colour palette; this costume is characterised by a majestic form and an imposing headdress (*Figure 4*). The headdress has been borrowed from a particular costume, the bridal dress of Attica, depicted in a well-known lithograph entitled 'Greek wedding in Athens' (*Mariage Grec à Athènes*) by Louis Dupré.<sup>10</sup>



**Left: Figure 4:** Costume drawing by Ioanna Papantoniou for the costume of "Clytemnestra," *The Libation Bearers* (or *Choephoroi*), Thessaliko Theatre (1992). Courtesy of the 'V. Papantoniou' Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation.

**Right: Figure 5:** Production photograph from *The Libation Bearers* (or *Choephoroi*), Thessaliko Theatre (1992). Set and costume design: Ioanna Papantoniou. "Clytemnestra" (actress Lydia Koniordou). Courtesy of Thessaliko Theatre Archive.

Ioanna Papantoniou dressed "Clytemnestra" with this characteristic bridal headpiece, which becomes the queen's royal 'crown', maintaining all the specific elements of its design: the overall shape and the decoration with coins, flowers and metal pins like tassels (*surguts*) on the top (*Figure 5*). As far as the main garment is concerned, Papantoniou chooses to replace the bride's open dress (a Syrian *anteri*), depicted with a scalloped/curved finishing in the lithograph, by a grandiose *doulamás*, an austere over garment with wide sleeves that suits "Clytemnestra's" strong character. Papantoniou's costume drawing shows the designer's notes addressed to the costume makers in order to explain to them how to cut and make this particular garment.

<sup>10</sup> A copy of the lithograph by Louis Dupré *Mariage Grec à Athènes*, published in Paris in the volume *Voyage à Athènes et à Constantinople* (1825) can be found at the online archive of the Benaki Museum collections: [https://www.benaki.org/index.php?option=com\\_collectionitems&view=collectionitem&id=109443&Itemid=162&lang=el](https://www.benaki.org/index.php?option=com_collectionitems&view=collectionitem&id=109443&Itemid=162&lang=el) (accessed 20 July 2020).

Ioanna Papantoniou also used elements of folk costume in her designs for a musical theatre production, the opera *The Chessboard Fugitives* by composer Yorgos Kouroupos and librettist Eugenios Trivizas, first staged by Greek National Opera in 1998 with actress Lydia Koniordou as stage director. The story is an opera fairy-tale<sup>11</sup> in which the “White Queen” escapes from the chessboard in search of love and freedom together with the “Black Bishop”. *The Chessboard Fugitives* does not make use of folk culture in a holistic way as the aforementioned productions (which embedded folk dance, music and rhythm in the actors’ bodily language) but only embraces folk costume elements in some protagonist costumes. Although this may sound fragmentary, the interpretation of ideas combined with carefully selected forms and materials creates an original aesthetic whole for the costumes, enriched by humoristic elements. The two “Queens” (Black and White) and the respective “Kings” wear costumes based on folk dress. These have the same cut for both Black- and White “Queens/Kings”, differing only in the colour, like the actual chess pieces. The costume for the “Kings”, for example, is based on the dragomans’ (interpreters’) costume from the Ottoman occupation times of Greece (esp. the 18<sup>th</sup> century) and includes a kaftan-like main garment (*anteri*) that is fixed with a wide sash, long breeches (*vráka*), and a *doulamás* - a long overcoat with sleeves, open at the front. The two “Kings” also wear huge hats (*calpác*) in the shape of a prelate’s mitre, which were part of a costume established during the Ottoman occupation time in urban populations (Papantoniou, 2000: 131, 134). Ioanna Papantoniou has mentioned that the dragoman costume as a whole was inspiring for her much before this specific production; she has said that the specific shape of the hat is truly theatrical and at the same time also interesting for the representation of a man of higher society, particularly in a comical role, as the hat is hyperbolic (Papantoniou, 1994). The hats of the two “Kings” in *The Chessboard Fugitives* are an application of this idea. The costume designer’s intention to experiment with folk costume elements in the costumes of this opera production is evident when looking at the costume drawings (*Figure 6*), each of which has a general title that describes the style, e.g. ‘White Queen in oriental style’, ‘Black King in dragoman style’, ‘Black Bishop in Georgian style’ and the chess pawns ‘in Pontic style’.



**Figure 6:** (Left to right) Working copies of Ioanna Papantoniou’s costume drawings for the costumes of the “White Queen” (a), “Black King” (b), “Black Bishop” (c) and “Chess Pawn” (d) for *The Chessboard Fugitives*, Greek National Opera (1998). Courtesy of the author.

<sup>11</sup> The librettist, Trivizas, calls this work a ‘dream-drama’ in the programme of the production, see: *The Chessboard Fugitives*, printed programme, Greek National Opera/Attiki Cultural Company, 1998-1999 season.

Ioanna Papantoniou worked two more times with director Costas Tsianos using elements of Greek folk dress in theatre costumes for plays from the global theatre repertory of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first of these is *Yerma* by Federico Garcia Lorca staged at the National Theatre of Greece in 1999-2000. For the first time, Tsianos' choice to use elements of folk culture in performance is not well received, as the critics characterize the production as 'a folkloric tragedy' (Andrianou, 2000), a 'folklore festival' where 'the Thessalian plain is the protagonist [...] but Lorca's characters are absent' (Polenakis, 2000). These comments sustain that the use of folk culture here was probably less suitable (Georgousopoulos, 2000).<sup>12</sup> However, it is important to note that these comments refer to the staging and to the music of the performance given that the aesthetic references to folk dress are not easily traced by a non-expert eye and therefore for many of the critics remained unnoticed.<sup>13</sup> The elements of folk dress in this production are mainly related to "Yerma's" and other female characters' costumes, especially in the scene in which the women wash clothes by a river.<sup>14</sup> There, the women are dressed with a classic type of a short dress of western European origin (*fustáni*), consisting of a short bodice and a skirt, which has roots in the Renaissance period and reached the Greek coast through the Frankish and Venetian rule (14<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries); this was 'undoubtedly the main garment worn on the islands and coasts of the Aegean from at least the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century' (Papantoniou 2000: 179). In a way, this design choice connects Greek folk dress to the west, through the origin of this type of dress, in a play by a playwright from the western side of the Mediterranean. This indirectly justifies the review that observed the style of the costumes as inspired by rural Spain (Karanikolou, 2000) and, once again, points out the common elements of Mediterranean cultures.

In 2005, the same team of collaborators presented Bertolt Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* at the National Theatre, a performance that some described as a 'folk tale' (Dimadi, 2005: 69), 'anti-Brechtian' and 'politically disillusioned' (Georgousopoulos 2005: 8/24). In this production, Ioanna Papantoniou designed costumes based on her interpretation of each role by using styles and decorative patterns from traditional costumes of the 19th and early 20th century Greater Caucasus area, including from Georgia as well as Armenia. This can be seen in both women's and men's costumes, in the basic shape of the garments and the typical hats and scarves of women. Among these, "Natella Abashwili" is dressed with a long sleeved outer garment of the *doulamás* type, once more signifying a dynamic character.<sup>15</sup> Since the spectators – and usually critics alike – do not have specialized knowledge of costume, and at the same time perhaps because many Greek local costumes have common characteristics with some types of traditional clothing from former Soviet areas, titles such as 'Karagounas in Caucasus' were published by the press (Kaltaki, 2005).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> An unsigned review in the newspaper *Adesmeutos Typos* notes that 'the Spanish Catholic province is different from the 'Karagounas' [the local nomadic population] of the Thessalian plain' ('Yerma', 15 March 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Most of the reviews actually speak of an elegant setting and costumes of high-quality aesthetics, stressing that 'the genius of Ioanna Papantoniou (who knows how to turn a folk motif into poetry) triumphed' (Georgousopoulos, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Yerma's and the other women's costumes from the river washing scene can be seen at the Greek National Theatre's digitised archive, freely available at: <http://www.nt-archive.gr/viewFiles1.aspx?playID=606&photoID=10442> (accessed 16 July 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Papantoniou's costume for "Natella Abashwili" (actress Melina Vamvaka) can be seen in a rehearsal photograph (left) together with Grusha (right, actress Lydia Koniordou) from the final scene of the play. See the Greek National Theatre's digitised archive, freely available at: <http://www.nt-archive.gr/viewFiles1.aspx?playID=329&photoID=10157> (accessed 20 July 2020).

<sup>16</sup> This response may also be a result of the prior collaborations by the same team.

## Conclusion

The aforementioned costume designers have often been called upon to contribute to the needs of performances where a search for artistic means drawn from folk culture was sought, because they precisely ensured this specialized knowledge. Ioanna Papantoniou explains that, through referring to folk culture, she spontaneously searched for the simple and the coarse elements that would provide a pure form.<sup>17</sup> She also says, 'in my theatrical career I experimented with ethnic designs, as well as our own *doulamás*, for a timeless approach to ancient Greek drama or Brecht, which led me to some interesting design solutions' (Papantoniou, 2010: 25). Yorgos Ziakas, on the other hand, notes that his intention was never to make explicit references to the elements of folk culture.<sup>18</sup> In Ziaka's case, the rather indirect influences of folk dress – with the exception of *Electra*, where he deliberately used an authentic traditional garment – come from the impulsive combination of his knowledge and experience, without pre-determined motivation.

The theatrical collaborations explored in this study, for the most part, developed artistic ideas departing from, but expanding beyond folklore and deepening into elements that served as expressive means for costume design. Such means (patterns, shapes/forms, colours and decorations) enabled conveying concepts and styles into specific theatrical characters. The warm audience response to most of the productions analyzed in this paper confirms that such elements of folk culture awaken a sense of familiarity and dormant collective memories. The analysis of these productions demonstrates that the costume designers who studied, interpreted and subsequently introduced elements of folk dress in theatrical costume had in-depth knowledge of folk culture based on their own embodied experience of wearing folk dress (or replicas of it) during their dancer experience, as well as on their deep study of it, particularly in the case of Ioanna Papantoniou.

Such in-depth study is a prerequisite for interpreting and processing the aesthetic and morphological elements of folk dress in order to use them as expressive means in another context – that of a theatrical performance – in a meaningful way. As actress Lydia Koniordou has noted, 'If one uses forms, either from folk tradition or anywhere else - not just looted or just for impression or to create a beautiful surface - but s/he seeks to discover the dynamics behind the form, and the cause for which it was created, [...] then I really find it unreasonable not to work with the forms we know so well, that are next to us'.<sup>19</sup> Such an approach has the potential to provide an enriched toolbox of expressive means for consideration by the costume designers of the future.

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Ioanna Papantoniou, 6 December 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Yorgos Ziakas, 28 April 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Lydia Koniordou's talk, entitled 'Ancient Drama – A Dialogue', op.cit.



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