



Κέντρο Περιβαλλοντικής Εκπαίδευσης Βάμου

Karaghiozis – Greek Shadow theatre

Greek shadow puppet theatre, character, and genre. Unknown in ancient Greece, [shadow theatre](#) probably originated in Asia; it appeared in Egypt from the 10th century and was staged during the Ottoman Empire from the 15th century. Since the 17th century, the form spread through the Balkan states, performed in the courts of the local pashas, and later in the coffee houses, gaining a popularity it has never lost. The term *karaghiozis* is a phonetic transformation of the Turkish [karagöz](#).

At the beginning of the 19th century, this form of theatre was seen in Athens, Chalkida (Chalcis), and Nafplio (Nauplia), and, if one credits the writings of the British traveller, John Cam Hobhouse, it appeared on the stage in Epirus, in Ioannina as early as 1809. In the beginning, the form retained the original character of the role of Karagöz, hypocritical, gross and immoral, complete with his snide innuendos, phallic elements and obvious sexual jokes. Then, from the early 1800s, these characteristics began to fade under pressure from an urban middle class enamoured of Western culture, when a “heroic” or “Epirot” (from Epirus) tradition was asserting itself with the Hellenization of people’s names and repertoires.

The main characters were thus renamed: Karagöz became Karaghiozis, still a thief, but at the same time a model patriot, too; Hacivat became Hatziavatis, a good, honest, and hardworking Greek; Çelebi, the young dandy, was now named Sior Dionysios, aping Western fashion; the dwarf, Bebe Ruhi, became Omorfonios, a figure of ridiculous appearance; while the Jew became, from here on, a merchant from Salonica; and Karaghiozis’ wife, now called Aglaea, nags her husband just as her Turkish counterpart had done. Several local figures appear, among them the courtesan with her scandalous behaviour. Karaghiozis’ appearance has also changed: his arms were elongated to show four or five additional knuckles and joints. And the stage was made much larger.

In the mid-20th century, the stage used by Yorgos (Giorgos) Haridimos was a permanent elongated rectangular construction of stone and wood. He played behind a rectangular screen 1.50 metres high and 5 metres long, lit by twelve lamps. There was a second screen above the performing screen, not visible to the audience, so that this could be lowered while the lower screen was raised by pulleys, thus effecting rapid changes of scene. At first, the chief performer (the *karaghiozopaichtis*) moved and spoke for all the characters. He was assisted by one or two apprentices who made the sound effects, set and changed stage scenes, and manipulated supernumerary puppets. Initially, the shadow performer was also accompanied by a singer and a musician but, due to a shortage of funds, they were replaced, after the 1930s, by records and later tapes and then CDs.

Around 1890, Mimaros was one of the great reformers of *karaghiozis*, developing new characters that expressed themselves in the linguistic and social idiom of the Greek society of the time. Among these were Barba-Ghiorgos (Barba-Yorgos), an uneducated stockbreeder, naive but basically honest; Nionios, a petty noble who came from Zakynthos (Zante) on the coast of Patras; Stavrakas, originally from the island of Syros but with all the traits typical of the people of Piraeus, cowardly and frightened but very cunning.

Technical improvements were also made at the time (for example the discovery of the “hinged rod” which allowed the figure to turn on the screen, or the “double” screen for rapid scenery changes, etc.) and the sexual innuendos were removed from the performances. Apart from the phallic element, however, all the other physical characteristics of the traditional Turkish Karagöz were preserved: the hump, the large



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nose, the long articulated arm that served to rain blows on his adversaries, the glittering eye. Part of the Ottoman repertoire was conserved, especially the plays of the category “Karaghiozis in various professions and trades”, which were appropriately adapted, though, to contemporary occupations. Also, there were plays based directly on current issues and events of the times. A larger selection of Greek *karaghiozis* plays has been published than for any other folk puppet theatre in Europe. About 280 texts are known to have appeared in print. (Only ten of these, however, have appeared in English, French or German translations.)

The *karaghiozis* theatre reached its peak between 1890 and 1930. But after World War II, during which time some shadow players such as Antonis Mollas, Orestis (Anestis Vakaloglou) and [Sotiris Spatharis](#) (Σωτήρης Σπαθάρης) produced excellent patriotic plays, the form lost its verve and its inspiration. Especially in urban areas, this decline was mainly due to the general diminishing of popular culture (which had formerly made up the aesthetic context of the shadow theatre) as well as the changes in the audience base, constituted now, more and more, of children and tourists. Rather than a craftsman, the shadow player became an “artist”. His shows were no longer a two-way interaction with an audience on whose reaction the shadow player depended for his improvised dialogue. This popular performance had become a form of urban folkloric theatre.

The Karaghiozis Today

Educational use of the form in schools and private children’s theatres contributed to the folkloric quality. New subject matter was developed, inspired by Greek mythology, the works of Sophocles, Aristophanes as well as fairy tales and other suitable stories. The moralistic aspect was emphasized, even the central figure of the clever jester, with his pro- or anti- social behaviour was rejected and discarded as nihilistic and therefore a bad pedagogic model. If there were a large number of booklets/librettos containing *karaghiozis* plays, the old pre-war outlines have since disappeared (they were in any case dubious sources for the reconstruction of the improvised word in the oral tradition). However, numerous video recordings exist and the *karaghiozis* is often featured on [television](#).

And then there are those, like [Eugenios Spatharis](#) (Ευγένιος Σπαθάρης, and the Spathario Shadow Theatre Museum in Marousi, near Athens), Tasos Konstas (in his theatre in the Plaka, in Athens), and Panos Kapetanidis (in Keratsini and elsewhere in Greece), who continue to perpetuate the tradition. (See [Greece](#).)

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Source

Written by

[George V. Speaight](#) (2012) [Stathis Markopoulos](#) (2012) Translation [Asha Narang Spaak](#) (2012)
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