

GREEK THEATRE

ANCIENT AND MODERN

FRANCIS REID reaches Athens on this theatric tourist trail

The location of theatre museums often involves a little detective work. A letter to the Greek National Tourist Office in London produced a telephone response that doubted whether there was a theatre museum in Athens but that they were checking by telex. A couple of days later a voice, in tones of mingled surprise and pleasure, called to give the address and opening times. This museum, as so often happens, is not listed in the normal tourist guides nor in the comprehensive listings in 'The Week in Athens'. However it is in the 1981, but not earlier, edition of the 'Blue Guide', with an entry given the minor status of appearing in italic rather than bold.

The location is *Akadimias* street (number 50) and there are prominent signs – well, signs that are certainly prominent by the usual international standards for indicating the presence of theatre museums!

This is not a museum of classical Greek theatre. The displays are mainly from the mid-19th century with heavy emphasis on the early years of this century. There is, of course, a large library and it is always comforting to find that the girl collecting the 20 drachma admission is clipping current newspapers.

The entrance vestibule leads to the centre of a very long corridor with display galleries at each end. The walls of this corridor carry a comprehensive poster collection. Alas my command of the Greek alphabet is, shall we say, weak. And so deciphering was tricky. As every tourist (theatric or otherwise) knows, strange alphabets are more daunting than unknown languages. I have successfully interpreted playbills in languages to which I am a total stranger. But my painfully slow transliteration of the Greek alphabet continues to produce surprises – although, in matters gastronomical, these surprises are frequently very pleasant indeed.

Posters, whose original function was to attract an audience, become a very tangible reminder of performance actuality. The best of them provide a commentary by the durable graphic and pictorial arts upon the more ephemeral performing arts. The Athens collection contains not only posters of performances in Greece, but visits by Greek companies to other countries.

One gallery has a series of dressing rooms along the walls. These are of standard size and design, constructed rather like swimming pool cubicles. Glazed doors and walls allow the contents to be displayed in an appropriate setting which combines informality with security.

Each dressing room is a memorial to an eminent Greek thespian and contains the sort of items which combine to help give more tangible form to the actor's ephemeral and unrecordable act. Costumes hang, or drape over chairs. There are

photographs, ikons, medals and awards on the walls. On the tables stand make-up boxes, props, and personal items like the framed family photographs that traditionally stand in front of dressing room mirrors.

A blood-stained costume is brought alive by a photograph alongside of the actor wearing it.

In addition to items specifically associated with the leading actors displayed in their designated dressing rooms, there are displays of other actor-related items such as costumes, jewellery and props. A prop curiosity is a wad of stage money, printed not in the expected Greek script but as 'Theatre Moussouris'. There are silk programmes from gala performances and, naturally, lots of photographs. These nearly all indicate acting on a large expansive scale with tragedy and comedy clearly differentiated. I expected to find masks and was not disappointed. Many delicately traditional ones, but also a magnificently robust Cyclops – just what I have always imagined Handel's Polythemus might well wear for "Ruddier than the Cherry".

There are models of actors (again mostly in full rhetorical flow) and many laurel wreaths with which the performers were acclaimed. Several of these crowns are in bronze or silver, although the ordinary leaf type have also been preserved by drying and framing.

There is a small opera section: I tried to sing Don Giovanni in Greek but my knowledge of the alphabet brought an early defeat.

A couple of the theatre models of 1835 and 1846 include stage and auditorium. Models are in wood and my understanding (well more of a hunch than an understanding) is that the actual theatres were of timber construction.

Set models date mainly from the decade of the 1920s and indicate quite a lot of experiment with cyclorama spatial settings. Also models of sets from modern productions in the archaeological site theatres.

And something that, please, can we have more of in all theatre museums – a couple of productions for which (A) Design, (B) Ground Plan and (C) Set Photograph are mounted together (vertically stacked) in the same frame.

But, as I said at the beginning, this is a museum of recent Greece rather than the theatre of the pre-Christian centuries. The performance of these eras can be studied on the sculptures and friezes in the archaeological museums; and, but a short walk from the Theatre Museum, one can study actor/audience relationships for real in the remains of the 4th century BC *Theatre of Dionysus*. Or, also at the foot of the Acropolis Hill, the *Odeon of Herodes Atticus* built in the form of a Roman theatre

in the 1st century AD, excavated in the 1850s, and with seating restored for performances in the 1950s.

But then it is difficult for the theatric tourist to travel anywhere in Greece without coming across a theatrical fragment, plus or minus a couple of centuries either side of the first Christmas.



The entrance to the museum



A display case in the Athens Theatre Museum