

Meet the shadow puppeteers of Athens.

An account of a journey into the world of Karaghiozis.

The shadows

Shadow theatre has always fascinated me.

I remember my first shadow show at the age of 10, during a trip to Thailand. On the 16:9 screen, just like at the cinema, with the musicians on stage, I was transported into a saga of which I didn't understand a word, but which, through the interplay of images, colours, movements and music, captivated me. More than thirty years later, the same excitement grips me when I enter a small theatre in the centre of Athens for a performance of Karaghiozis.



Culture Moves Europe / Theatre Skion Athanasiou

The reason I'm here is that I'm planning to meet the shadow puppeteers of Athens (karaghiozopaichtis) and learn more about their art. The Culture Moves Europe programme, funded by the European Union and implemented by the Goethe-Institut, is enabling me to carry out this project. Thanks to Anargyris and Iannis Athanasiou, who run the Athanasiou Shadow Theatre Company (Theatro Skion Athanasiou), I was able to learn the basics of this technique, learn how to build figurines, familiarise myself with handling them and share in the daily life and culture of the Karaghiozopaichtis in Athens for over a month.

Karaghiozis, a popular figure

Karaghiozis is the name of the main character in traditional Greek shadow theatre, originally from the East and Turkey, from which he takes his name (Karagöz - black eye). In Greece, this colourful character has been making audiences of all generations laugh for over two centuries. Karaghiozis, a poor suburban dweller, has nothing in his pockets, least of all his language, which is lively, versatile and irreverent. This character (a kind of hero/anti-hero) is miserable and clever, and knows how to fool the powerful and make a mockery of society's codes. Everyone recognises him, no matter what their age, and everyone has an anecdote to tell, a memory to recall, and a smile on their face at the mention of this figure. If this tradition has remained very much alive, it's partly because this shadow theatre is based on improvisation.

A voice, voices both familiar and singular

Karaghiozis's voice is highly recognisable, gravelly and cheeky. So are the voices of the other characters. Originating from different geographical areas, they are recognisable by their accents and the musical genre that accompanies their entries. When I say voices, I also mean the voices of the artist, who brings his own creativity and subjectivity to identical figures. So Karaghiozis is unchanged, but constantly different. We play with voices, accents, words and expressions. This art adapts to any situation. It is not unusual for one or more members of the audience (friends or celebrities) to be named (directly or by implication) during the performance. The artist adds winks to current events. What's more, it's rarely the story itself that interests the audience; there are often the same pieces, taken from the same framework, which each artist reappropriates. The audience is more interested in the characters' behaviour, their allusions, the pirouettes they use to get out of trouble, the dialogue with the audience, the wit.

The transmission

You learn this technique over several years, following a master who gradually shows you his techniques and reveals his secrets of manipulation and production. You assist him, second him, follow and react to the words he improvises for each performance. You have to be ready to listen to the slightest change. The Karaghiozopaichtis may decide at the last minute to bring in a new character, or cancel the entrance of another, shorten or stretch a scene, add an element of action... In short, you have to be ready for anything. But you become a Karaghiozopaichtis once you've made this figure your own. It's a long apprenticeship that requires you to immerse yourself in Greek culture.



Intercultural encounters

During my project, I was able to get a feel for these transmissions and this culture. There's a lot I could say about all the things I learnt during my stay. For a month and a half, I drew, cut, drilled, carved and handled figurines made of leather, cardboard and plastic boards. I loaded/unloaded the equipment, set up/dismantled the shadow play, put up posters, accompanied the puppeteers, helped with the manipulation, took part in workshops with children, and went on tour. I experienced the day-to-day life of a puppeteer and a company, and met several artists who run their own structures or work for others. I saw many performances, mainly for children, but not only. I was immersed in Greek culture, immersed in the language, in the traditions, in the ways of doing things over there.

Immersion takes time, and that's what this project gave me. I was able to meet a large number of artists, follow them during their performances and observe the specificities of each one. That's the whole point of the Culture Moves Europe programme, which not only brings artists from different countries together, but above all makes it possible to exchange ideas outside institutional frameworks. This is all the more important for the study of a traditional art form, but also for artists who follow a different path, not always that of schools, official training courses or institutionally recognised frameworks. As an actress and puppeteer for more than twenty years, I've always wanted to travel, to meet other artists, other stories, techniques and skills. I've trained in many different ways, and I enrich my practice through all these ways of meeting other people. It allows me to question my practice, reinvent it and enrich it. It forges new links, opens up new ways of looking at things, and makes for a living creativity that's constantly on the move and searching.

The most profound experience I'll take away is the close relationship between the artists and their audience, the children and the adults. I liked the simplicity of the set-up, which also allowed a certain nomadism, and offered performances for everyone, in sometimes remote villages. What impressed me most was the atmosphere around Karaghiozis, joyful and undisciplined. The beauty of the moment when the show is about to begin, when we are all there, facing the white screen, impatient to see the entrance of Karaghiozis, always preceded by his musical theme. Invariably, Karaghiozis greets us, and we greet him, as our predecessors did many years before, and as the following ones will do.



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- 1) Contour and performance technique for Karaghiozis figures - donkey from Teatro Skion Athanasiou.
- 2) Children practising Karaghiozis - Teatro Skion Athanasiou ©FabiennePontoire.
- 3) Test creation of Karaghiozis and Barba Yorgos figures.