

## Socrates NOW: Bringing It All Home

*Vicki James Yiannias*

Ever since Yannis Simonides, barefoot, chiton-clad, and wearing a mask of the great Athenian's familiar pug-nosed face, first captured the essence of Socratic ethics in his solo performance *The Apology of Socrates* in 2004, he has led a post-performance discussion with the audience on democracy, philosophy, the universal questions, in the context of each place. Having presented *The Apology of Socrates* to audiences throughout the United States, Simonides and the EllinikoTheatro team have taken these big questions home, back to Greece, where Socrates first asked them, to see how they can be used to help Greece in this time of crisis.<sup>1</sup> The performance and discussion have transformed into a combination performance-discussion renamed *Socrates NOW*, reflecting the team's view of the vital nature of its purpose.

Speaking from Athens after an English language presentation of *Socrates NOW* in Plaka, under the Acropolis, in the Athens University Museum courtyard, Simonides described how he roams the audience, engaging people eye to eye and provoking discussions with questions like, "What do we do tomorrow morning as citizens in this crisis of character, which is not just Greek but universal? What is the "law"? What is civic duty? What does it mean, "living—and dying—by your principles?" How do we define these terms so that we make sure we are on the same page before we debate or argue?

Postponing trips to China and Russia, the EllinikoTheatro team are putting everything aside to stay in Greece for the rest of 2012. "The national issue is in our heart now," said Simonides, "We are inviting all Greek citizens to a continuous dialogue using the immediate relevance of Socratic thought and action to what they are going through. Now both the performance and the discussion focus exclusively on how the old man of Athens can be of immediate help to us in terms of what steps we can take to look at our lives, no

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matter what our ethnicity, political leanings, background or social standing, and to engage each other in dialogue without prejudice, to listen and learn from each other, to change our behavior, before it's too late."

Simonides feels that the old man of Athens has returned to Greece none too soon. "We are needed here," he said, "Not that we're anything special, but what is needed in Greece--and the rest of Europe, because the crisis is not in Greece only--is a process of self-examination."

Elaborating on this thought Simonides said, "The barbarians are not at the gates; we are the barbarians. The battle is not Greece versus the perennial lenders and the creditors, it's more immediate. It's the struggle within ourselves: Do I want the drachma or do I want the euro; do I want the freedom or do I want the dependency? Do I want to be poor but part of Europe, or do I want to be poor but independent and have my dignity and, yes, be responsible, but still be free? Does this matter at all, or should we first—as the old man advised—take care of ourselves, our soul, our conscience, our inner voice, our own character, before we blame anyone else for our troubles or worry about parties and politics and syndicates and the financial privileges we've been used to?"

*Socrates NOW* is popular, drawing audiences up to 2, 000 people, and there is a buzz about what and where the next set of performance-discussions will be. Audiences can include individuals from as many as 38 countries. Taking a grass roots approach, Simonides and his young colleagues do not limit their performances of *Socrates NOW* to theaters anymore, but in whatever spaces are available in yards, gardens, or squares, using the space as they find it. "It's almost like street theater, as it has to adjust enormously to the audiences," he explained, "Sometimes the whole set goes away, or there's a huge screen with Greek, English, Spanish, or French translation, even Russian and Bulgarian, because there are so many foreign people in Greece and we need to engage them all." People of all ages and occupations have attended, said Simonides, relating that government ministers and other officials have come to the show. One commented, "Oh my god, we have to get the Troika to come see this!"

Increasingly, Simonides is not sparing with his political and social criticism during the post-performance discussions. His insights and exhortations meet with both opposition and agreement. "Half the people want to hang me for drawing a parallel between money and product and addiction and the other half applaud the parallel. "I believe that we are addicted, and that the only way we'll emerge is to acknowledge it, forgive ourselves for having gone beyond the point of being able to manage ourselves and realize that the problem can be solved only through commitment to change--personal and collective--discipline, understanding, and a sense of purpose." This realization should lead to action, not complacency, he said, "taking small, little steps, joining another individual to help

somebody, feeding an immigrant, going to the powers that be and saying, 'You cannot let this old woman go without the medicine she can no longer buy.' And there are big steps to take as well, organizing huge, quiet, non-violent demonstrations that cannot be ignored."



*Elliniko Theatro*

EllinikoTheatro is taking action. Appearances at the Small Epidaurus theater and the Theoharaki Foundation in Athens will be punctuated by tours of high schools in Thessaloniki, Rhodes, Corfu, Cephalonia, and Patras, where they will join other teachers and artists that perform and hold discussions with the aim of helping the younger generation regain their hope in themselves. Simonides is also scheduled to speak at the TEDxAcademy event in Athens in September.

In 2013, EllinikoTheatro plans to take *Socrates NOW* international again, with trips to Hamburg, Munich, and Frankfurt, and Turkey, which has extended invitations from Bilgi, Bogazici, Istanbul and American Universities, Robert College, and Zografeio School. Argentina has extended an invitation as well, which presents the opportunity to talk with a country that has dealt with the problems Greece is facing.

Simonides urges Greek Americans who wish to help Greece to take action as well. The keyword is participation. "Come here. Get your hands dirty. This is a battlefield," he said, supporting his conviction that taking action has ultimate value over giving monetary assistance, "Everyday we invent what is the most useful thing to do."

His work with *Socrates NOW* provides him the privilege of realizing that an enormous number of Greeks, primarily young, but also middle-aged and older, are "working day

and night for a renaissance, for a redefinition of Greece, a re-examination of everything cherished and sacred, from the constitution to the party system, to all systems of governance, business, finance, syndication, education and social services," Simonides said, and an enormous number of "well-educated, ethical young people, worthy of our trust", need to be supported in their choice not to leave Greece, to invest in each other and in their children.

Although Simonides strongly emphasizes that he is "only one of many, in Greece and all over the world, who are working to learn from, understand, and teach each other what we are going to do tomorrow as citizens of Athens, citizens of Greece, citizens of the world," the Fulbright Foundation has pointed out that his dual Greek and American citizenship can be a significant asset in promoting understanding between cultures. As an American citizen he is a cultural diplomat abroad; as a Greek citizen he can bring understanding of Greece's problems to Americans and the world.

*EllinikoTheatro* promotes Greek culture internationally in another venture, as well, *The Readers of Homer*, (co-founded and co-directed by Simonides), producing marathon audience-participation readings/singings (some 24-hours long) of Homer's epics by people of all ages and backgrounds in the languages of the world in various cities. In Brussels, on May 16, 2012, the 9-hour marathon reading held in the context of *Twelve Hours For Greece*, an independent citizens' initiative to express solidarity with the Greek people, *The Odyssey* was read by 400 people only in the languages of Europe to show support for shared European cultural identity. *Twelve Hours For Greece* was intended to send a powerful cultural message from the heart of the EU for the human values Greece represents and to raise funds for The Smile of the Child, a Greek NGO that provides educational, social, and medical support to thousands of children affected by the Greek crisis.

*EllinikoTheatro* and *The Readers of Homer* collaborated again to present a 10-hour marathon reading of *The Iliad* at the Hellenic Centre in London on July 21st, just a week before the official opening ceremony of the London 2012 Olympic Games, with the aim of adding their voices to the international Olympic call for truce and permanent peace and to promote the human values and ideals which originated in Greece thousands of years ago. Some 200 participants and a 300-member audience, (representatives of cultural societies and communities based in London, ambassadors, artists, journalists, athletes and students) gathered to read, sing, and listen to Homer's great epic. On-stage projections of the text in English and related images enhanced the performance and the sound of music played on reconstructed ancient Greek instruments suggested the epic past. A Homeric feast topped off the event.

Saying that "Greece is a larger entity, composed of Hellenes and philhellenes everywhere," all of whom, now and always, are more Hellenic than Greek, as the poet, the

old man of Athens, said ‘and all of them, not Athenians, not Greeks, but citizens of the world,” Simonides related two memorable comments from readers at the London event. One commented, “This was not just magical, it was sacred,” and another said, “Three works are truly universal: the Bible, Shakespeare’s plays and Homer. While the first two are taken care of, often and well; we thank you for inviting us to experience the exquisite poetry and diachronic values of Homer’s epics in an interactive manner, sensitive and accessible to an international audience.”

*EllinikoTheatro* and *The Readers of Homer* remind the world that Greece represents something more than narrow political and financial interests; that despite the criticism Greece is receiving it remains the carrier of a great heritage, which still reverberates there despite the current crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> *EllinikoTheatro* is a non-profit organization based in New York and Athens, aiming to promote Hellenic Culture worldwide by expanding the temporal, spatial and social boundaries of Greek theater and literature. Through partnerships with dozens of cultural and educational organizations around the world, Yannis Simonides and his colleagues have developed events in 15 countries, serving cultural diplomacy in practice. Some of the nations involved have been France, Italy, Turkey, Luxembourg, Belgium, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Cyprus, the United Emirates, Egypt, England, Canada, Mexico, Uruguay and Malta.

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