Recibido / Received: 15/06/2024
Aceptado / Accepted: 02/02/2025

Para enlazar con este artículo / To link to this article:
http://dx.doi.org/10.6035/MonTI.2025.17.08

Para citar este artículo / To cite this article:
MISIOU, Vasiliki. (2025) "Who's afraid of Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*? Marietta Rialde and 'feminist' theatre in translation in 1980s Greece." In: BASSNETT, Susan & Catalina ILIESCU-GHEORGHIU (eds.) 2025. *Theatre translation. Performability and reception from intercultural perspectives / La traducción del teatro. Representabilidad y recepción desde perspectivas interculturales*. *MonTI* 17, pp. 231-258.

WHO'S AFRAID OF CARYL CHURCHILL'S *TOP GIRLS*? MARIETTA RIALDE AND "FEMINIST" THEATRE IN TRANSLATION IN 1980S GREECE

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Abstract

Marietta Rialde, the "enfant terrible" of the Greek theatre world (Steen 2015: 42), was a feminist stage director, leading actress, playwright, and translator. One of the few women in the male-dominated Greek theatre of the 1960s–1980s, Rialde ran her own Experimental Theatre, acted, translated and wrote plays which address women's and gender issues. When in 1984 she decided to direct and stage Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (1983), in a translation by Marlena Georgiadi, she hit the headlines sparking heated debate. This essay shows that both Rialde and Georgiadi saw theatre translation as a social, political and activist praxis. Drawing on paratextual materials and the critical reception of this first Greek translation and staging of *Top Girls*, this article aims to discuss the contribution of theatre translation in Greece to placing feminism on the agenda and raising awareness in the pursuit of equity for women in a changing social landscape.

Keywords: Theatre translation. Feminism. *Top Girls*. Marietta Rialde. Critical reception.

Resumen

Marietta Rialde, la "enfant terrible" del mundo del teatro griego (Steen 2015: 42), fue una directora de escena, actriz, dramaturga y traductora feminista. Rialde, una

de las pocas mujeres en el panorama teatral griego dominado por los hombres de las décadas de 1960 y 1980, dirigió su propio Teatro Experimental, actuó ella misma, tradujo y escribió obras que abordan cuestiones de género y de mujeres. Cuando decidió dirigir y montar *Top Girls* (1983) de Caryl Churchill, en una traducción de Marlena Georgiadi, apareció en los titulares provocando un acalorado debate. El estudio muestra que tanto Rialde como Georgiadi vieron la traducción teatral como una praxis social, política y activista. En una primera exploración de los elementos paratextuales y de la recepción crítica de esta traducción y puesta en escena griega de *Top Girls*, este artículo tiene como objetivo discutir la contribución de la traducción teatral en Grecia para poner el feminismo en la agenda pública y generar conciencia en la búsqueda de la equidad en un panorama social cambiante.

Palabras clave: Traducción teatral. Feminismo. *Top Girls*. Marietta Rialde. Recepción crítica.

1. Introduction

Theatre translation has drawn scholarly attention largely thanks to the pioneering contributions made by Susan Bassnett, Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, David Johnston, and Sirkku Aaltonen, who were among the first to cast light on the interdisciplinary relations between theatre and translation (Misiou & Kostopoulou 2023: 1). Despite the conflicting opinions expressed over certain notions relating to translation and the stage realization of the playtext (Bigliazzi, Kofler & Ambrosi 2013: 1-27), what has remained unchanged is the view of translation as being in a fundamentally dialogical relationship with performance and of translators as participating within a collaborative group of practitioners, involved in the "re-making" (Johnston 2013: 367) of the text. In this context, this essay discusses theatre translation in 1980s Greece focusing on the staging of Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* by Marietta Rialde in a translation by Marlena Georgiadi. Like theatre which was a neglected area in translation studies (Bassnett 1991: 99), the work of Greek women theatre practitioners, especially through the prism of translation, has also been under-studied.

As Savas Patsalidis, a major theatre studies scholar and critic, has stressed, despite the fact that there have been:

> active Greek women dramatists, choreographers, and designers since 1960, only a handful of scholars have examined their work and their

> contribution to the development of Greek dramatic literature and theatrical practice (Patsalidis 1996: 85).

Some thirty years later, no significant change has been seen in the study of Greek women playwrights, directors, and theatre translators, and the same is true for Marietta Rialde, whose work remains largely underexplored in spite of the fact that she is an important figure in modern Greek dramaturgy, notably in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Greece was facing crises in the 1960s and 1970s, shaken by clashes and unrest on multiple fronts. The July Apostasy of 1965, which led to the Regime of the Colonels, that is the military coup d' état in 1967, and the assassination of Grigorios Lambrakis[1] in Thessaloniki in 1963, are some of the events that had a profound impact on Greek society. This period, with 1967 being the culmination of the decade's politics, brought with it winds of change through the greater political consciousness in young people wanting to transform society. It was in this context that Rialde took on the artistic direction of the Experimental Stage-Pocket Theatre in Athens, in 1962. A study of the theatre programmes of the Experimental Theatre, as it was also known, reveals that Rialde wished to introduce the Athenian audience to contemporary avant-garde theatre, as produced in the USA, the UK, Austria, France, Norway, Sweden, Türkiye, and in Greece (Steen 2015; Stamatopoulou 2017; Chrysanthopoulos 2022). She was determined to turn her Experimental Theatre into a space for deliberation, where Greek theatre-goers could come into contact with new ideas. She wanted it to embrace and shed light on new voices and new forms reinforcing the development of contemporary Greek theatre. As van Steen (2015: 139) contends, it was Rialde's wish to "deconstruct the hierarchies of the male establishment and of the conformist spectacle culture." Rialde believed theatre could effect social change and she invested in the "new", especially after having experienced the impact of the seven-year military dictatorship (1967-1974) on Greek theatre and consequently on its audience.

1. Lambrakis was a left-wing deputy of the United Democratic Left, the only legal left-wing political party in the country after the Greek Civil War of 1946–1949 and until the fall of the military junta.

According to Rialde, Greek theatre was "severely damaged" mainly due to censorship and the propaganda enforced (Rialde 1974: 39). As she maintains, the censorship imposed by the colonels on theatre productions during the period of the junta, with its legacy of oppression, led to a ban on the staging of American and European plays under the pretext of their demoralizing effect that threatened to undermine the very essence of Greek society. American and European plays were considered by the military government as resonating with anarchism and this belief resulted in the Greek audience being deprived of quality theatre (Rialde 1974: 39). Yet, for Rialde, both the theatre and those who work at and for the theatre are "political by nature"; otherwise, they "cannot serve their multiple purposes" (*ibid.*: 39-40). She refused to compromise and reinforce dominant ideologies, choosing instead to defy censors and:

> militat[e] against Greek society […] target[ing] the petit-bourgeois spectators, their hypocritical morals, and their desires for comfort and social ascent. Her theater's defying stance, however, ultimately aimed at empowering actors and viewers alike (Steen 2015: 140).

Rialde selected plays – others' and her own – to "shape and validate radical ideologies" (*ibid.*), which was easier for her to do after the collapse of the dictatorship in 1974. The time was ripe then for women artists to adopt a more radical discourse and to openly ask for reforms such as the legalization of abortion, equal pay for equal work etc. that would contribute to better conditions for women. All discussion of feminist theory stifled by the dictatorship emerged again after the fall of the colonels within the context of progressive politics. Although it became clear that the conservative Greek government was not willing to rectify most, let alone all, forms of discrimination against women, Rialde along with those few women playwrights who were still active at the time (Liberaki, Zografou, Iakovidou, Alexiou, Anagnostaki, Mitropoulou, Vergou, and Hatzopoulou-Karavia) was involved in the feminist movement, convinced of the necessity for new narratives. As underlined by Patsalidis (1996: 89), "the plays written and produced in the 1970s are certainly more outspoken on issues of gender equality and women's rights." There were playwrights who wished to portray female characters willing to go against traditional, patriarchal values, and conventions regarding women's role in marriage, in the family,

and in life. They were determined to seek fulfilment in a place where a career and a sisterhood of women would be a reality. Such was the case of Marietta Rialde.

Inspired by feminist ideas, Rialde was encouraged "towards a political understanding" of how she and her peers "had been either oppressively positioned, or completely left out of, the 'malestream' of social, cultural and political activity" (Aston 1999: 5). By the time she became the first woman director to stage performances at the National Theatre of Greece (50 years after its founding), Rialde's personal and professional experiences had shaped her agenda. She wanted to train the Greek audience in new ways of theatre reception while building at the same time a new female theatre language. In the early 1980s, there were radical legislative changes that improved, or aimed to improve women's position in the family, work, and society. After the emergence of various women's groups, the first feminist marches in Athens, and the appearance of the Women's Coordinating Action Committee, the creation of the so-called Autonomous Women's Space was a fact. In this context, Rialde directed Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* aiming at empowering through theatre not only the audience, but also women more generally through challenging norms and practices. This may account for the criticism, harsh in some cases, directed at her which will be explored below.

2. Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*: Negotiating feminism and representation

Before delving into Rialde's views on her collaboration with the National Theatre of Greece, which are intimately related to the feminist concerns she voiced over women's position in theatre and society in general, and before discussing the critical response to Rialde's staging and Georgiadi's translation of *Top Girls*, it is worth presenting some key information about *Top Girls*, "a major work", as labelled by Elaine Aston (2003: 20), "in the context of contemporary feminist theatre and in the broader context of the contemporary English stage."

Top Girls was written by Caryl Churchill in 1981 and was first performed at London's Royal Court Theatre in 1982. The play was, in a way, her response to Margaret Thatcher's election as the first woman Prime

Minister in the United Kingdom and her tenure. Thatcher rejected feminism, used patriarchal rhetoric (Tusscher 1986), privatized public industries and described unemployed people as "caring about drool and drivel" (Thatcher 1987). Unsurprisingly, *Top Girls*, "now one of the most canonical works of the 1980s" (Milling 2012: 77), is sometimes referred to as Churchill's "Thatcher play" (Luckhurst 2014: 85). As Beatrix Campbell (1987: 233-247) notes, Thatcher used "womanhood merely as a helpful device" – she "wore" femininity, but she "admired" masculinity (*ibid*.: 243). In an interview Churchill gave to John Simon, she clarified that it was Thatcher's stance towards women and feminism that inspired her to write *Top Girls* (Simon 1983: 126). Through her critique of Thatcher and her government, Churchill scrutinizes the role of women throughout history. Focusing on women and feminism, and specially on women who want to succeed in business, Churchill raises in *Top Girls* several questions about women's sacrifices in order to do so. The play begins with Marlene, the protagonist, dining with other women from history and fiction who have defied convention, sometimes suffering harsh consequences. These women, all Marlene's dinner guests, are Pope Joan (a woman who disguised herself as a man, became Pope and allegedly reigned from 854 to 856), Isabella Bird (a Victorian traveller), Lady Nijo (a Japanese courtesan who became a Buddhist nun), Dull Gret (a figure from a Brueghel painting) and Patient Griselda (the obedient wife from Chaucer's 'The Clerk's Tale' in *The Canterbury Tales*).

In Act I, Marlene, a former member of the rural, working-class community, celebrates her promotion to managing director at the Top Girls employment agency. In Act II, the audience sees Marlene at her office in London and at the same time learns about Angie, her abandoned daughter that Joyce, Marlene's sister, raises as her own child. It is in this act that Churchill reveals Marlene's determination to succeed and not let herself become invisible again, even if this means that her daughter and sister will not be part of her new life. Act III invites the audience to follow Marlene in her attempt to reconstruct her life and it takes place a year before her promotion. The play challenges societal expectations of women, particularly with regards to the role of the mother, placing emphasis on gender and class oppression while exploring women's issues through an intersectional

lens. Marlene's path to success is used by Churchill to criticize bourgeois values from a socialist feminist perspective given that the play's protagonist does not care about the weak and powerless for she has trodden a long, thorny path to be(come) successful. But then? Is this a feminist victory? Churchill urges readers and the audience alike to ask: "Does freedom and feminism consist of aggressively adopting the very values that have for centuries oppressed your sex?" (Nightingale 1982: 27).

Top Girls was first performed three years after Thatcher came to power and a year before she was re-elected for a second term of office. However, Churchill believed that Thatcher's right-wing politics did not favour the majority of women and as a self-described feminist-socialist she made it clear in another interview that her writing was spawned by Thatcher and her politics because Thatcher "may be a woman, but she isn't a sister, she may be a sister, but she isn't a comrade. And, in fact, things have got much worse for women under Thatcher" (Betsko & Koenig 1987: 82). Shelagh Stephenson asserts that with *Top Girls* Cary Churchill "hacked out a path for a whole generation of female playwrights" (in Aston 2003: 20), and this is also true for Rialde, who "loved" this play and fervently supported its staging for the Greek audience (Rialde 1983: 6), as will be seen below. It enabled her to raise women's issues and needs from a feminist and woman-centred perspective, making them part of public discourse.

2.1. Greek "Top Girls" being front stage

Top Girls was the first play Rialde staged upon taking the role of director for the National Theatre of Greece. This decision cannot be considered accidental based on the information shared so far – both about Rialde herself, and about Caryl Churchill and her play. *Top Girls*, an experimental play with the technique of overlapping dialogue, its non-linear narrative structure, and multiple role casting (there are sixteen roles for women often played by seven women actors), mirrors Churchill's wish to draw attention to capitalist patriarchal society and women's oppression, as well as her desire to empower audiences. Rialde's intention was similar to that of Churchill. The emphasis was on women, and on women's struggle for greater equality not

only in the workplace but in all aspects of life. During a press conference, on December 16, 1983, Rialde declared:

> A few years ago, we, young directors, playwrights and actors, could not even think of ourselves walking through the door of the National Theatre of Greece which is dominated by old men. The new management has decided to give the opportunity not only to young artists but also to women to present their work. The proposal I received from the National Theatre was very tempting and I accepted it straight away (Rialde 1983: 6).[2]

She did not hesitate to target her criticism at the male-dominated management of the National Theatre, pointing out the restrictions and challenges women and young artists had to face. Rialde then explained why she decided to accept the proposal:

> On the one hand, there was an extremely interesting play which is about women, and its poetry and craziness suited me. On the other hand, I didn't expect the proposal and I felt important knowing that I would direct at this theatre, which has been praised by so many brilliant artists and its productions have been well organized; something that non-state theatre can never boast about.
>
> […] I have found myself surrounded by seven determined and talented women who work with passion non-stop.
>
> We all love and are enticed by the play, the title of which is "Successful Women"[3] … [sic] It is of course an ironic title because there are no successful women who have not paid a high price for their success (*ibid.*).

This comment by Rialde on women's determination, passion, talent and professionalism is seen as a means of dispelling long-held prejudices against women whose position in Greek society had been affected by the male doctrine that a woman's place is at home (Igglesi 1990: 250-251). Living in a traditional, conservative society women were not able to break free from the model imposed upon them and engage with a dynamic feminist agenda that would include, among others, the demand for equal rights at work and equal opportunities. For most of the twentieth century, certainly up until the 1980s, Greek women were treated as guardians of the home, expected

2. All translations from Greek into English are by the author unless otherwise specified.
3. *Top Girls* was rendered as Πετυχημένες Γυναίκες 'Successful Women' in Greek.

to perform the role of mother and wife. Being dependent on men financially and socially increased their vulnerability and deprived them of access to political and societal power. Unsurprisingly, Greek women remained at the margins of society, impacted by the gender hierarchy of their own culture and when they attempted to enter male-dominated territories, they were met with disdain. This is why Rialde touched upon the consequences women have to suffer while struggling to succeed in life but also why she decided, in the last part of her address to the audience (her speech was included in the programme of the performances), to privilege what seems to be a more moderate form of feminism:

> The issues raised are equally important to both women and men. Viewers will feel relief after watching these seven women on stage. They are able to change their lives as opposed to the heroines who are trapped and cannot see clearly through their circumstances (Rialde 1983: 6).

Here, however, Rialde simply plays by the rules of the dominant patriarchal Greek theatre world and society, which in the early 1980s prioritized the needs of "the people", that is the nation. In that political climate, women's needs were equated with the wider demands of the Greek people, and women's issues as well as women's potential were overlooked, which is why Rialde wanted to emphasize the contribution of empowered individual women like herself:

> […] I hope the National Theatre will open its doors to all young artists and I believe that the New Stage belongs to them.
>
> I myself have contributed to its creation. Ever since I started running my Experimental Theatre I have engaged in conversation with brilliant theatre teachers – Terzakis, Katrakis, Skarimbas – and we have stressed the need for a breeding ground for young artists that would work for our National Theatre.
>
> The New Stage was built but it deviated from the right path […] it is high time it was given to those for whom it was built in the first place (*ibid.*).

Marlena Georgiadi, the translator of *Top Girls* into Greek, shared similar views about Churchill's writing and her personality, and about its feminist agenda highlighting men's discrimination against women. In her note to the audience, a significant peritext accompanying the programme together

with other important information about the performance (its cast, its set and costume designer, its music designer, etc.), Georgiadi underlines that:

> "Successful Women" is an intensely feminist play which established Churchill as one of the most progressive, original and exciting playwrights of our era. […] it presents through a multifaceted lens the feminist issue: how can women who aspire to succeed and make a career survive in a world made for men without losing themselves? And how much courage and strength do they need to have in order to break free from what is accepted? (Georgiadi 1983: 15).

Georgiadi's feminist and political agenda is also reflected in her choice to focus on and describe the first scene and first act of the play, highlighting once again that this play invites the audience to see women's issues, struggles, and subjectivity along with the dynamics of cultural expectations across different eras and societies:

> Sitting around a table and taking an historical perspective, these women [she has already referred to Marlene and the other female characters invited to dinner] delineate the achievements, dreams, struggles, and challenges faced by women. They chat, they narrate their life stories in a humorous tone and through the different experiences shared they shed light on women's position throughout history and their subjugation to men's superiority and dominance. […] all women have some common experiences. (*ibid.*)

Identifying with the women characters of the play and speaking as a woman herself, Georgiadi points out the importance of togetherness and solidarity and emphasizes that they are not alone:

> Caryl Churchill delves into the hearts of her characters and reveals them to the audience using simple, realistic language to talk about things that most of us think are solely of our private concern and kept well hidden in our soul. (*ibid.*)

Both Rialde's speech and Georgiadis' note can be seen as feminist manifestos. They both use the translation and staging of Churchill's text as a tool that enables them to share their feminist views while drawing attention to women's and their own journeys. They both underscore the feminist elements of the play and the importance of representing women who talk about their position and role in society and the sacrifices they have to

make in order to have a life of their own that would meet their needs and expectations. Georgiadi is not a "woman-identified translator" (Maier in Godayol Nogué 1998: 161) but a feminist one, and the same can be said for Rialde as a director, as the orientation of their approach to the translation and staging of *Top Girls* is "distinctly politicized" and shaped by feminist goals, as revealed by the paratexts discussed above. Both can be seen as gender-aware agents who have tried to challenge prevalent values in the target culture, proving once again that translation and language are political acts and can be used as powerful means of protest and resistance.

Although the 1980s saw a rise of Greek women theatre practitioners, they were largely ignored, with some of them even reinforcing the predominant notion that directing is a man's job (Angelikopoulos 1990) and thus fostering men's belief that "a play needs a man to be staged the way it deserves" (Nitsos 1998: 45). The reviews regarding Rialde's staging of *Top Girls* reflect the dominant ideology and stereotypical beliefs prevalent in Greek society; that is, women are not "naturally" creative and that women's participation at and work for the theatre needs to be compared to their male counterparts, especially when it comes to the most important roles, that of director and that of playwright (Rosi 2020: 351) Even though Georgiadi was bolder in her description of the play and of women's situation in society, she was not the one targeted by critics. It may be because translation was still considered to hold a marginal status compared to writing and staging a play, and thus a translator's views were not as important. It may be because Rialde was blunter and more outspoken regarding the situation of the Greek theatrical landscape. Or it may be because Rialde had drawn the audience's attention to the narrow-minded, all-male management of the National Theatre. What can certainly be said is that both Rialde and Georgiadi manipulated the space they themselves created with the use of the paratextual elements accompanying the text to express themselves freely, and be seen and heard.

3. "Missus" Churchill and "Inexperienced" Rialde

There were seventeen reviews published about Rialde's staging of *Top Girls* in Athens, traced and digitalized so far by the National Theatre of Greece,

on which this analysis will be based. Only one of these reviews, published on 16 December 1983 in *Estia* newspaper (Several authors 1983c), does not go into details regarding the performance. Nevertheless, it is considered important as it refers to an all-female production listing the names of all women members of the crew and cast who have taken front stage.

An all-female production was exceptional for Greece and it was also commented on in a review published in *Eleftherotypia* newspaper under the heading "Women have conquered the New Stage" and the subheading "There's no man in tomorrow's premiere" (Several authors 1983b). As the anonymous critic (*ibid*.) maintains, "what is remarkable is that only women participate in this play, all members of the cast and crew are women at the New Stage and it is the first time that a woman has directed a play for and at the National Theatre." The review, draws readers' attention to the all-female production and to the fact that this has never happened before. The critic's decision to cite part of Rialde's speech during the press conference and Georgiadi's discussion of the play as provided in the programme, more specifically the part where they refer to women and the sacrifices they have to make in order to succeed in a man's world, mirrors their wish to make women and their discourse visible in the then predominantly male-dominated Greek society. The opening words as "a play intensely feminist", taken from Georgiadi, indicate right from the beginning its agenda which is linked with Churchill's as well as with Rialde's and Georgiadi's views on women's role within the larger socio-political and cultural context. Quite interestingly, the review continues with two short paragraphs regarding the viewpoints held and shared by the then artistic director of the National Theatre of Greece, Kostas Nitsos, about the operation and importance of the New Stage. This section is titled "Equal", a word used by Nitsos to refer to the New Stage while clarifying that it may be "experimental but it is entirely equal to the Main Stage." Yet, the choice of the word "equal" (ισότιμη) which is in its feminine form (*-η-* is the feminine ending of adjectives in Greek), along with its implied meaning(s) – a woman equal to man – adds to the intention of the critic and to the message to be conveyed, that is, a woman is equal to a man, and a small stage is equal to the main stage of a theatre. At the same time, it could be seen as a protest against the

practice of the National Theatre of not trusting women directors with large stages at the time.

The review published by *Exormisi* newspaper under the heading "The long journey of inequality" also raises the issue of women's (in)equality to men. The anonymous critic (Several authors 1983e) starts with a reference to the symposium organized by Marlene, "a successful woman of today's era" who has invited "other women to celebrate her promotion" and informs the readership about Churchill's description of "women's struggles and the problems they face while fighting to succeed in life and break free from social oppression." Then, the critic (*ibid.*) notes that throughout history "women's journey across the world has been the same, despite their different experiences, and the same holds true for men's dominance." Women in the play, they (*ibid.*) add, "narrate their stories and taking an historical perspective, they delineate the achievements, dreams, struggles, and challenges faced by their peers in every era." The critic seems to have embraced both Rialde's and Georgiadis's viewpoints as certain words of their discussion of the play are reproduced. Much like the review discussed above, this one cites the entire speech of Rialde during the press conference, key details regarding Churchill herself, her work and *Top Girls* in particular (venue, dates of performances, etc.) and the names of all members of the cast and crew. It is all about women, by and for women.

It is worth mentioning that several reviews included Rialde's speech in its entirety and part of Georgiadi's address to the audience, especially the part where she discusses women's attempt to make a career amidst expectations originating from society and to survive in a world not designed for them. This is, for instance, the case with the review entitled "'Successful Women' at the New Stage starting today" published by *Imerisia* newspaper on the day of the premiere (Several authors 1983f), which also lists the names of all the women in the cast and crew. Rialde's being "the first woman director to stage a play at the National Theatre" also hit the headlines, and, accompanied by the subheading "A feminist play by Carol Churchill" (i.e. the review published by *Allagi Patron* newspaper, Several authors 1983a), raises the issue of women's lack of opportunities and leadership in the Greek theatrescape, along with the predominant preference for staging plays that are not feminist in nature. The review published

in *Ethnos* newspaper under the heading "They loved 'successful women'" (Several authors 1983d), also cites part of Rialde's speech, specifically where she refers to the old-male-dominated National Theatre, her satisfaction with the work of the seven women actors, and their love for the play and its characters – along with the names of all the women who make up the cast and crew.

Interestingly, out of the reviews studied one was entirely positive and favourable (unfortunately both the name of the critic and the newspaper remain unknown). The critic (Anonymous 1983: 13) contends right from the beginning that the audience will be interested in an all-female production of "a play which is about women." They (*ibid.*) also praise the National Theatre for its choice to stage this play, something that, as it is stressed, went against its usual practice and approach, as well as for its decision to assign its direction to Rialde, the "first woman who transgressed the untrodden space of the male-dominated National Theatre" and offered a truly good performance with the help of "a remarkable translation" by Georgiadi. Rialde's directing skills and approach are also commended by the critic in that she has enabled Churchill's writing – "she writes as both a woman and a playwright" – to be presented in a "balanced way that does justice to the playwright" (*ibid.*). The review concludes in positive terms commenting on the exceptional performance of all seven women actors.

3.1. "Almost Successful Women": "Feminist Misunderstandings" and Rialde's "Scribble"

Many reviews, however, were quite negative about the play itself, Churchill's work and writing in general, the decision of the National Theatre of Greece to assign this play to Rialde, and mainly about Rialde's approach to the play and her performance as a director. Three days after the premiere, a review written by Vaios Pagourelis for *Eleftheros Typos* was published under the heading "Almost 'successful women'" – clearly implying the lack of success. Pagourelis (1983) first struck out at the National Theatre, focusing on the problems that it had been facing for years, among which a) the lack of clear goals and objectives especially when it comes to the selection of plays and b) the failure to assign their staging to the right directors. He (*ibid.*) also

criticized the National Theatre's decision to promote this play as a feminist one, arguing that it is wrong to make such a claim "just because a play is written by a woman and all of its characters are women." Pagourelis's claim can be read as a scathing indictment of the National Theatre's decisions in general, as he (*ibid*.) also expressed openly his disagreement with the choice of assigning it to Rialde – a decision shaped, in his words, "only by her sex" and not by her ability to carry out successfully this task, which "she didn't," aiming merely at offering "a competent but not brilliant" staging. If it were not, he (*ibid*.) went on, for the acting excellence of three of the seven women actors on stage and the semi-adequate performance of two others, it would be an utter failure. Despite his rather positive views on Georgiadi's translation and Michalitsi's music, the review is overall negative and sees little merit in the performance. Pagourelis (*ibid*.) stressed right from the beginning that the National Theatre's "friends and foes were disappointed."

Feminism and whether *Top Girls* is a feminist play or not seems to have concerned almost all, if not all, of the reviews studied. The review by Apoulios (a pseudonym) published in *Mesimvrini* newspaper under the heading "A Feminist Performance" discusses the steps taken by Marlene to achieve success in life and criticizes the choices she made to be "free" (Apoulios 1983). Apoulios (*ibid*.) points out that Churchill is "fanatically feminist" and frowns on the fact that the play consists only of women: "There is no male actor." As the critic (*ibid*.) stresses, Churchill's goal is to show that in a male-dominated world only "an exhausting fight between the two sexes can give women a glimpse of hope and success." The critic (*ibid*.) concludes this paragraph in a misogynistic tone claiming that "women can only climb the social ladder if they cruelly devour men." Nonetheless, Apoulios (*ibid*.) notes that Rialde's "direction was enticing" and that she has once again met the expectations of the audience. Besides underlining that Rialde is the first woman to direct at the National Theatre, Apoulios (*ibid*.) argues emphatically that Greeks should be happy with Rialde. Equally positive is the review regarding the seven actors. This cannot be said, however, for Georgiadi's translation, which is characterized as "lacking language excellence" (*ibid*.).

Under the heading "Feminist misunderstandings: 'Successful Women' at the National Theatre", Tasos Lignadis wrote a review published in

Kathimerini newspaper on December 28, 1983. The opening lines are equally striking given that Lignadis (1983: 7) describes *Top Girls* as "an antifeminist play which goes against the spirit of the time. Let alone, when this play is a choice by the National Theatre which dared staged Successful Women at the New Stage." These two sentences reveal, on the one hand, that the early 1980s was a period of feminist activity in Greece with larger conversations about feminism taking place, which is partially true as seen above, and, on the other hand, that the National Theatre was conservative in character, something that Rialde herself also remarked upon. However, Lignadis (*ibid.*) thinks it was Georgiadi's mistake that, despite offering "a good translation in proper Greek", she has provided the audience with a "neither complete nor clear" note in which she defines the play as feminist, "unintentionally trapping viewers in this belief." As the critic (*ibid.*) explains, he certainly does not maintain that this play is "anti-woman" because its aim is to "raise questions instead of claims." Yet, the play does both: it urges women to challenge their role and position in society, to question what is expected from them, to raise awareness and claim success on equal terms to men. Churchill believes women can be(come) successful without turning into men. And though Lignadis is right when he (*ibid.*) notes that the main theme of the play is a change in sex roles which requires a change in the social order, his description of the programme as "a silly pink leaflet" which "suffered from the terror of its emptiness" (*ibid.*: 8) adds to the overall negative review of the performance. For, even when Lignadis (*ibid.*) underlines that it "made a positive impression", he turns against Rialde and the seven actors for failing to confirm the "reckless argument" in the programme about the necessity for "a renewal at the old-male-dominated National Theatre." His critique, nevertheless, needs to be examined within the context in which it is situated; Lignadis had served as president of the artistic committee of the National Theatre from 1974 to 1980 and in 1984, only a few months after the premiere of *Top Girls* in Athens, he was assigned the artistic direction of its Drama School. Thus, it comes as no surprise that he wrote in defence of the men dominating the National Theatre.

Much like Lignadis, Yiangos Andreadis in his review for *Exormisi* newspaper also disagrees with *Top Girls* being seen as a feminist play and

he even goes on to suggest that "thankfully it is much better than…a feminist play" (Andreadis 1983). Following Andreadis (*ibid*.), it is "an important tragic play, the play of a woman who nevertheless unites the two sexes, the two fronts." He (*ibid*.) praises the National Theatre: "Bravo to the National Theatre. Bravo for the selection of this play. Bravo for its actors", naming all seven actors and congratulating them on their performance. As for Rialde, he (*ibid*.) argues that she "should be commended first for her decision to let the talent of the actors loose and then for respecting the rhythm of the text." No reference is made though to Georgiadi's translation. The review ends with Andreadis stressing that the performance is "good", the play is "powerful" and that "hopefully" this is "a good omen for the year ahead" (*ibid*.). This sentence can also be read as his vote of confidence in the National Theatre since it is the theatre that selected this play and to which he offered his services as president of the Artistic Committee. The fact, however, that in the subheading of the review he opts for a question mark next to the word successful, which is also placed between parentheses – "The loneliness and uprising of a (successful?) woman" – indicates his opinion that women may rebel but they will be alone and may never become truly successful, thus guiding the audience's interpretation of the actions unfolding on stage and serving as a narrative comment on a woman's course of life when she decides to resist and go against social norms and conventions.

Konstantinos Georgousopoulos, a writer and theatre critic (perhaps the best known in Greece ever since he wrote the first review for *To Vima* newspaper in 1971), also disagrees with the interpretation of *Top Girls* as feminist and denies its feminist politics. In his review published by *Ta Nea* newspaper on January 4th, 1984, he points out that "never before has a play been written, let alone by a woman, which is so pessimistic about the feminist movement" (Georgousopoulos 1984) and in the lines that follow he makes his views clear:

> All these women presented in the play are nothing more than a pathetic take-off of a male-dominated model, that is s u c c e s s f u l [sic] women in men's structures, in men's caverns. […] A successful woman is a castrated and turned-into-a man woman (*ibid*.).

For Georgousopoulos (*ibid*.), the only critical difference between women and men is motherhood, which women chose to "humiliate, hide or debase

in order to succeed; they negated their right to motherhood or exchanged it for fame." He (*ibid*.) also claims that "ancient Greek tragedians were thankfully rescued from the constellation of feminism and they did not distinguish between Clytaemnestra and Agamemnon. […] They both are at an impasse and trapped." Having thus described women as ruthless beings and as equal to men in terms of the sacrifices they need to make, and having stressed that only the first part of the play is good, while "if the second part was written by a Greek playwright it would have been rightly rejected" (*ibid*.), his negative views on Rialde and her work come as no surprise. As he (*ibid*.) notes, Rialde "has not quite understood what this play is about" and she "does not trust her actors" who vainly try to "save the day." This is an opinion he repeats: "Rialde lurches from one mistake to another" and the seven actors struggle to save themselves. Despite the fact, he (*ibid*.) adds, that Georgiadi's translation was "eloquent" and the set and costumes were "good", the performance ended up being "a scribble" because of Rialde's directing. This negative review ends with a postscript through which Georgousopoulos attacks Rialde's views on the National Theatre and its past choices, highlighting her "inaccuracies":

> a) there were no women directors, besides Rialde, to serve the National Theatre up until five years ago; and b) the Greek men directors working for the National Theatre were 10-15 years younger than Rialde when they were first assigned to direct a play for it. […] And they had all studied stage direction abroad or they had already proved their worth. Does, perhaps Ms Rialde mean "inexperienced" when she uses the word "young" to refer to the National Theatre's decision to "finally assign the direction of plays to young directors and women"? (*ibid*.).

This is clearly a personal, scathing attack on Rialde's capabilities as a director. To confirm that, he lists the names of several male directors (all younger than Rialde), all acclaimed ones, to prove himself right and Rialde wrong.

Five days later, on January 9th, 1984, a new review appeared in *Estia* newspaper. The anonymous critic, who signs their review with a capitalized T., condemns the National Theatre for choosing *Top Girls*. The audience, they (T. 1984) argue, need only watch this performance to confirm the lack of depth and obtrusive "feminist" character of both the playwright's work and of this play in particular. They even go on to attribute these

characteristics to the Artistic Committee of the National Theatre which, as they claim:

> kept bombarding the country's newspapers with press releases about the play, placing emphasis on the fact that "it is written by a woman, it is directed by a woman and all other members of the cast and crew are women"; something that "happens for 'the first time' at the National Theatre!" (*ibid.*).

Despite noting at first that the director of this "female play" is Rialde, known for her Experimental Theatre and her former remarkable work, they (*ibid.*) accuse her of now selecting "allegedly progressive" plays thus accepting to direct Churchill's play as "a reward for the present degradation of the theatre" – which can be read as a comment on Rialde's contribution to the "degradation" witnessed in Greek theatre. Additionally, much like Georgousopoulos, T. (*ibid.*) attacks Rialde and her views on the National Theatre, stressing that Rialde "is not that young" and that significant theatre practitioners had successfully served the National Theatre before her. T. (*ibid.*) goes on to criticize Rialde's directing of the play which, according to them, had a tremendous impact on the performance of the seven actors (named one by one), and they also express their disappointment with Georgiadi's translation which is described as "anti-theatrical." Equally negative is their view on Kentaka's sets and costumes, which are regarded as "unaesthetic", and on Michalitsi's music, which is seen as "indifferent" (*ibid.*). Everything, according to T. (*ibid.*), added to "a far-fetched women's contribution" leading to yet another "unsuccessful" staging at the National Theatre.

Thanos Kotsopoulos (1984), in his review for *I Vradini* newspaper, was positive about Rialde and the seven women actors but not about Churchill's play, and by extension, the National Theatre's choice. He (*ibid.*) talks about another "crack" which "saddens" him as if these cracks were on the walls of his house. Why, he asks, should Greeks "water foreign gardens" (*ibid.*) and not their own? As he adds (*ibid.*), it is one thing for the National Theatre to "stage plays by significant foreign playwrights" and another to opt for plays by "unimportant and insignificant" ones, clearly alluding to Churchill herself. And "how does *Top Girls*", he (*ibid.*) wonders, "enable us to broaden our horizons? Are we introduced to a new form of art? I do not think so."

Diametrically opposed to Kotsopoulos's position on Churchill's play, but not entirely to his views, is Ninos Fenek-Mikelides's (1984) review published in *Eleftherotypia* newspaper. The very first words praise the decision made by the National Theatre to stage this play, a decision described as "truly remarkable" (*ibid*.). After providing the readership with key information regarding Churchill and the plot of the play, Fenek-Mikelides argues that the second act is not as good as the first and points out that Rialde "did not manage to guide actors on stage", who were left alone to "salvage the situation" (*ibid*.). Nevertheless, the "right job done" by other members of the crew, as he underlines mentioning Kentaka, Michalitsi and Georgiadi, contributed to a production that can be regarded as one of the good moments in the history of the National Theatre (*ibid*.).

The last two reviews considered here are those written by Perseus Athenaios for *Imerisia* newspaper (1984a) on January 12, 1984, and *Eleftheri Ora tis Kyriakis* (1984b), on January 29, 1984. Surprisingly enough the two reviews are the same but for the heading, the presence of a photo from the performance (appended to the second review), and the use of a different word referring to Churchill, which will be discussed below. In the first review, entitled "Successful Women", the critic begins with his "disagreement" over the "pervasive irony" in Churchill's text (Athenaios 1984a). For, as he claims, "nowadays there is no lack of women across the world who have succeeded in all aspects of their life" (*ibid*.). This is why the audience has to "deal with truly frustrating moments listening to women talking about problems and issues that are of no interest to them", notes Athenaios (*ibid*.), while providing information about the seven women characters. Considering the political developments in 1980s Greece which were thought to have benefited women, Athenaios's remark can be read within its context and the then dominant belief that there was no longer any cause for women to rebel and protest and/or to engage with activism and a strong feminist agenda. He does, however, consider this play a feminist one and highlights that it was Rialde's directing skills and the performance of all actors that managed to "make its staging bearable" (*ibid*.). Yet he is dismissive of Churchill and her play, which he (*ibid*.) believes lacks quality. And he critically asks:

> What does Caryl Churchill want to show? That the feminist movement progresses? That women have to fight hard against the status quo stamping on men in every way possible? Does she actually say anything new instead of proving the dominance of men once again? (*ibid*.)

If it were not for Rialde's "sharp wit", he adds (*ibid*.), for her "right interpretation of the play and her humour, one of her main traits, which helped her maintain irony", and if it were not for "the flawless translation of Georgiadi", it would have been "a complete failure." This is why Athenaios (*ibid*.) suggests that "this play should stay in the drawer." As far as the second review by Athenaios is concerned, its content is the same but for the use of one word, namely a quite pejorative term employed to refer to Churchill when Athenaios questions her aims and asks the questions cited above in a condescending tone. Hence, readers encounter the word κυρά 'missus or wifey' when Athenaios (1984b) asks: "What does missus Churchill want to show"? The deliberate choice of this word added insult to injury in what can be interpreted as quite a harsh, negative review of Churchill herself and her play.

4. Concluding Remarks

The reviews examined here reveal a tendency on the part of critics to compare and contrast women's work in the theatre with that of men. They show that many critics, among them some of the most well-known and revered in Greek society at the time, reproduced, deliberately or not, the stereotypical view of women being less competent than men, especially in the role of director. Framing the women's concerns of the play as dull trivialities which should not have made it to the stage as they are of no interest to anyone else but women themselves, they patronized reception. As Sakellariou argues, even in 1996:

> [t]he control of the Greek audience's reception by the domineering patriarchal gaze of male critics [was] still a major disconcerting factor for the development of women's theatre in Greece (Sakellariou 1996: 137).

Rialde was criticized both for her work and her views; to be more accurate, Rialde's role as an advocate for women in theatre and her personal

opinions regarding the management of the National Theatre of Greece are what made many critics turn against her.

The fact that the press releases distributed by the National Theatre itself drew readers' and the audience's attention to the feminist character of *Top Girls*, and to the all-female production, indicates that the selection of Churchill's play and of the crew and cast was mainly political and not artistic. 1983 was a period marked by profound changes in Greece, which had finally signed and ratified the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (Several authors 1983g), and saw the formation of a new management at the National Theatre. Additionally, in the last week of performances, the Greek Union of Women, a socialist feminist group founded in 1976, ran an open discussion on the radical reforms needed. Therefore, the decision made by the National Theatre for the production of a play written by a playwright representative of feminist writing and dedicated to contemporary political theatre, and for its staging by Rialde was of symbolic value. In a way, as Lila Rosi (2020: 352) underlines, "it formalizes the role of Rialde as one of the first women directors" and the commitment of the National Theatre to open its doors to more artists, women included.

Most critics, as discussed above, praised the seven women actors stressing that they managed to overcome the challenges of a difficult text thanks to their talent, experience and professionalism. Nevertheless, few positively assessed Rialde's work, with most commenting on the mediocre outcome achieved. The "symbolic violence" these critics exerted through their negative critique was the only way they could disguise the need for their "domination", which Rialde challenged, "to be maintained" (Bourdieu 1977: 191). For, Rialde's agenda was feminist and it was political and activist. Although she may appear moderate in her discussion of the play, claiming that it equally concerned men and women (Rialde 1983: 6), her accusation of the National Theatre's former choices and especially her reference to the "old-male-dominance" became the subject of harsh criticism. She may have not stressed the feminist character of the play directly, as Georgiadi did in her note, but all her views can be interpreted as part of a feminist manifesto. The fact that almost all reviews refer to feminism proves that she achieved her telos. Critics did not share their reservations

or indignation about the artistic quality and aesthetics of the play; at least this was not at the core of their criticism. They rather expressed their ideological opposition and reaction to feminism and what it represented. This may explain the reference to Churchill by Athenaios as "missus." It is not solely that the National Theatre invested in staging a foreign play, but that this "other" was a female and feminist one. Based on the reviews analysed what can be inferred is that feminism, an elusive and hard to define term in 1983's Greece, was seen as the means for political claims and as a vehicle for women to try to dominate over men. In this vein, some of the reviews examined clarify that women's political claims cannot change the social order and cannot transform gender identities. The staging of *Top Girls* was seen as an insidious threat by those Greeks who sought stability in their gender roles and did not wish any playwright and/or director to open up new spaces for engaging with the contestation of norms and conventions.

Nevertheless, in Greece's changing social space, and despite the symbolic violence that major critics exercised against the production of *Top Girls* which reflects upon the institutional context within which their authority was being exercised, this could not be avoided. Rialde framed the gender/sex problem in the Greek context, she had women's issues discussed, claimed rights for her peers and made the headlines. Feminism was spotlighted, the gender gap in the theatre world was highlighted and the long-prevailing, traditional, male-dominated cultural and social paradigms of women's roles in Greek society and in the theatre world were questioned. Through Rialde's speech and Georgiadi's note, alternative discourses were articulated creating the space for further discussion of gender ideology at work and, by extension, in Greek society. She campaigned for certain rights for her sex showing her unwillingness to assume a male subject position that might enable her to succeed in the theatre world. Rialde's decision to stage *Top Girls* and Georgiadi's engagement with its translation can be seen as political meaning-making praxes in their attempt to challenge dominant power relations. It is true, however, that Greek women theatre practitioners had to learn to play by the rules to survive in a space defined by male authority. Even though it was due to the controversy surrounding her work that Rialde made a difference compared to her female peers, as Patsalidis (1996) suggests, her empowering discourse, long missing in the

Greek theatrical landscape, could inspire a dynamic reception of women's theatre and could contribute to fostering feminist solidarity while raising awareness of the need for non-androcentric, non-patriarchal and non-sexist ways of reception.

Yet, the story of Greek women directors and theatre translators is still largely untold. The striking absence of women in the Greek theatre world in the 1980s, an outcome of their marginalization and of the power relations between ruling men and serving, outsider women, therefore makes important the study of Rialde's staging of *Top Girls* and the metadiscourse that emerged. Rialde made apparent Greece's lack of will to support women in the creation of a "women's theatre" with a voice of its own in a theatrical landscape that was ambiguous in its aims and in a society that was unflinching in its hostility to independent, autonomous, powerful women and their fight to succeed in a world still not made for them. They may not have been radical feminists, but their work is worth exploring. In the Greek context, the translated text of Georgiadi engaged in a dynamic relationship with the performance, as staged by Rialde, and the resulting production offered the space for critical discussion. It made clear that the place of Greek women in theatre was a reflection of their place in the world. Through this dynamic process, Rialde's claim for more opportunities for women became sharper and clearer, openly challenging patriarchy and calling for change.

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