

# Greek farce: 'Mother' play satirizes corruption

**ATHENS** | A corrupt Greek minister tries to sell the Parthenon to the country's powerful Orthodox Church to develop into a casino. An enterprising young reporter reveals the ploy to widespread popular outrage, prompting the minister into a campaign of bribery to try to suppress the story.

Rather than a retelling of a notorious 2008 financial scandal implicating the Greek government and Church in a series of corrupt land deals, this is the plot of a ripped-from-the-headlines play titled "Mother Greece" that is drawing large crowds for its piercing send-up of what Greeks mournfully call "Elliniki pragmatikotita" or "Greek reality."

Last year was a difficult one for the debt-burdened European Union member. The barbed satire lampoons Greece's weak economy, renewed social and ethnic unrest, and a new center-left government charged with the Herculean task of ramming through structural reforms.

Several international ratings agencies downgraded Greece's debt rating in December to the lowest level in the Eurozone, prompting fears Greece will be the first EU member state to default on its debt.

In November, Greeks elected as prime minister George Papandreou, the half-Greek, half-American son of former Prime Minister Costas Papandreou. His leftist government in the 1980s demand-

ed that the United States dismantle its bases in Greece and cultivated close ties to Libya's Col. Moammar Gadhafi and the Palestine Liberation Organization's Yasser Arafat. His own father, George Papandreou Sr., was also a politician who served three times as prime minister.

The latest Papandreou government has more prosaic tasks and is trying to harmonize Greece's weak economy with EU norms. Greece's \$440 billion debt is about 13 percent of its GDP, far higher than the 3 percent required by the EU for its member states. The average Greek civil servant earns between \$1,000 and \$1,500 a month. Unemployment rose in 2009 to almost 10 percent from 7.7 percent in 2008.

"Greece is currently in the dumps and trying to improve its economic fortunes," said Solon Molho, a lecturer in finance at Global Training, a certification school in Athens. "Whether it'll succeed is anyone's guess but there are incremental changes in mentality happening."

A constant theme since the beginning of the credit crunch has been that the current generation — dubbed "the 700 euro generation" for the relatively low monthly salaries accorded to even highly qualified college graduates — will be the first in postwar Greece to face a bleaker future than their parents.

"We're lazy, nouveau riche and constantly complaining," said play director

and co-scriptwriter Giannis Sarakatsanis, of his compatriots' attitudes to politics.

"Everyone is looking for someone to blame just in order to get it over with, whereas I see a vicious circle that only ends with us."



The London-educated Mr. Sarakatsanis said he experienced a political awakening in December 2008, after the fatal shooting of a 15-year-old schoolboy by a policeman sparked

Greece's worst rioting since the restitution of democracy in 1974. He realized that being a member of a society was not just about receiving but about contributing too, he said.

"In Greece, the wildest thing could happen," said Vasso Kavalieratou, one of the actresses, smiling wryly. "So selling off the Acropolis to the Church is not such an extreme scenario. In a terrifying way, we're always expecting the next scandal."

The play mercilessly spoofs a fossilized political class that views its time in power as an opportunity for self-enrichment instead of social service. Taking this as its starting point, Mr. Sarakatsanis examines the glaring lack of trust in the social contract signed between the people and their rulers.

"The people know we will betray them which is why they'll betray us first," the wizened and corrupt minister instructs his attentive understudy in an opening scene.

Sending up Greek nationalism, a tabloid media-saturated television culture, the Church and even the foibles of the ancient Greeks, the play leaves no sacred cow unscorned.

A lineup of contemporary Greek character types parade across the stage: dotting mothers criminally negligent of their children's glaring faults; a sexually available nurse who zealously attends to her job security with a male doctor in an empty ward while her superannuated charge expires in an adjoining room; a sensationalizing tabloid journalist whose crusade to expose the corrupt minister has more to do with his past and her ex-husband than social justice; and an unfit police trainer who passes or fails recruits based on the heights of sycophancy they can scale.

The stage fairly drips with clientism and nepotism.

"I was intrigued by the idea that we the

citizens are at fault over what's happening instead of blaming the politicians," said Ms. Kavalieratou, one of the leads. "People are not likely to do their own hard lifting but blame others — it's easier!"

The action unfolds across a bare stage minimalistically decorated by a single symbolic prop: a shattered ancient Greek column hinting at the state of the nation today.

"It passes the message about the corruption of the Greek state and the lack of education available," said Alexandra Sentos, an audience member who attended the play a second time.

"This theater group has no political agenda beyond showing up Greece's social problems."

"Theater in Greece has leveled criticism at the state since the classical era," said Anna Stavrakopoulou, assistant professor at the Faculty of Drama in Thessaloniki's Aristotelian University. "Tragedies also criticized social conventions but the comedies of Aristophanis were far blunter in their censure and formed the basis for the contemporary epitheorisi (a lowbrow mixture of satire with farce)."

At the end of the second act, an actor appears to commiserate with the audience over the lack of a final act, noting that "in Greece there is never a third act."

The play climaxes with a surreal televised game show in which a hyperactive host shepherds the ancient Greeks, cantankerous priests and two mindless brats who symbolize the future through a competition to prove who is more Greek. Ultimately, the characters rip off their costumes, shed their identities and crowd onto an IKEA-style couch to munch pizza and listen to generic pop.

Perhaps the play's most disheartening message is Mr. Sarakatsani's ultimate conclusion: that ultimately "we Greeks like this state of affairs, we settle into an urban IKEA-manufactured dream of cheap, feel-good furniture and pizza."

Outside the theater, guests disperse through a lobby packed with an audience waiting to attend a crowd-pleasing musical.

"The most important task is that we change our mentality, otherwise things will become very dark," said Syvaris Lazaros, who holds a U.S. masters in business administration and works for a multinational in Greece. "We see on a daily basis what might happen if we Greeks don't start putting back into our society."

• *Iason Athanasiadis reports on Greece through a grant from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting in Washington.*

