

HISTORICAL AND DRAMATURGICAL CONTEXT

2nd “Spyridon Peresiadis” Playwriting Competition 2027

1901 – Hôtel de Patras – An Encounter

Historical and social context

Patras, summer 1901

The twentieth century has barely begun, and Greece enters it carrying the contradictions, disappointments and expectations of the preceding century.

The bankruptcy of 1893, the currant crisis, defeat in the Greco-Turkish War of 1897 and the imposition of International Financial Control in 1898 have shaken the Greek state’s economic and political confidence.

The country remains predominantly agricultural, with much of its population dependent on the land, local communities and family structures. Social inequalities are pronounced, while economic insecurity fuels emigration to America and elsewhere.

At the same time, cities are growing, social relations are changing, education is expanding, and newspapers and periodicals are multiplying. Literature and theatre play an active role in shaping modern Greek cultural identity.

Greece stands between tradition and modernisation, rural society and urban life, demotic Greek and katharevousa, national self-definition and European cultural influences.

The language question is at the centre of public life. A few months later, in the autumn of 1901, the publication by the newspaper Akropolis of a translation of the Gospels into demotic Greek will provoke the bloody “Evangelika” riots and lead to the resignation of the Theotokis government. That same year, the Royal Theatre and Konstantinos Christomanos’s Nea Skini (New Stage) begin operating in Athens.

Patras is a characteristic example of these contradictions.

Patras, a major commercial port and Greece’s gateway to Western Europe, is a city of merchants, currant exporters, shipping agents and foreign trading houses. British, German, Austrian and Italian communities coexist with an active local bourgeoisie, while the city has experienced substantial economic and social growth during the nineteenth century, largely thanks to the currant trade.

Its neoclassical buildings, hotels, clubs, cafés and the Apollon Theatre, designed by Ernst Ziller, testify to a city oriented towards Europe. Yet the currant crisis has severely affected Achaia’s economy. Behind urban prosperity lie rural insecurity, social tensions and increasing emigration.

In the streets of Patras in 1901, wealthy merchants, travellers, dockworkers, small farmers and people seeking employment or a ticket to somewhere else mingle.

Patras is not merely a provincial Greek city. It is a place of transition, a crossroads between the hinterland and the sea, between Greece and the wider world.

In this city, at this particular moment, we place two men of letters.

Spyridon Peresiadis and Golfo

The first is the Greek playwright Spyridon Peresiadis, born in 1854 in Mesorrougi, Aigialeia, creator of Golfo, a play that has already enjoyed remarkable success.

Golfo was written and first performed by amateurs in Akrata in 1893. On 10 August 1894, it received its professional premiere in Athens at the Paradeisos Theatre, performed by Dimitrios Kotopoulos's Proodos company.

This pastoral drama, set against Mount Helmos and centred on love, betrayal, social inequality and the conflict between individual feeling and family and social demands, resonates with a broad audience.

Its success is not confined to Athens. In January 1895 it is performed in Patras and, through touring companies, travels to Smyrna, Constantinople and Odessa, beginning to secure its place in the collective theatrical memory of Hellenism.

Peresiadis has already experienced something many writers seek but never attain: direct communication between their work and its audience. His writing draws on the language, customs, beliefs and emotions of rural Greece and transforms them into stage action.

By 1901 Peresiadis no longer lives in Akrata. He has been permanently settled in Athens since 1897, where he will die in 1918, and continues to "write": The Slave (1894), Esme (1896) and Morfo (1898) have already appeared.

There is, however, a distinctive aspect of his life: the playwright is blind. According to biographical sources, a childhood accident deprived him of sight in one eye, while a second accident, onstage during an amateur performance in Akrata, seriously injured the other. He dictates his works to relatives and friends.

According to oral accounts by residents of Akrata and members of his family, Peresiadis took particular care over his appearance; he was elegant and somewhat vain.

Beyond its biographical charm, this detail is dramaturgically suggestive. A man deprived of physical sight insists on participating in the visible world, attending to his appearance and, through dramatic writing, creating images for others.

Constantine P. Cavafy and his first journey to Greece

The second is Constantine P. Cavafy, aged thirty-eight, from Alexandria, Egypt.

The Cavafy of 1901 is not yet the internationally acclaimed poet. He is a writer systematically developing his own poetic voice and already moving away from more conventional forms of expression. Poems such as "The City", written in 1894, will wait years before publication.

He lives and works in Alexandria, a multinational and multilingual environment where Greek life co-exists with Arab, French, British and other cultural traditions.

His relationship with Hellenism differs from Peresiadis's. It is not that of someone living in the Greek provinces, rooted in their place and traditions, but that of a Greek of the Diaspora, experiencing Greek identity through historical memory, language, multiple cultural references and distance from the national centre.

In the summer of 1901, accompanied by his brother Alexander, Cavafy makes his first journey to Greece.

From 13 June to 5 August he keeps a travel diary in English, recording everyday incidents, meetings, routes and impressions of Greece at the time. He himself describes it as a diary of events rather than impressions or ideas, while adding that the opposite may also occur.

The handwritten diary, preserved in the Cavafy Archive of the Onassis Foundation, was published in 2024 by Patakis Publishers under the title *My First Journey to Greece* (13 June – 5 August 1901), translated into Greek by Haris Vlavianos.

It is an invaluable historical and literary document, allowing us to encounter Cavafy not through his later fame but as a traveller, observer and man of his time.

During his stay in Athens he meets figures from the worlds of literature and art, including Kimon Michailidis, editor of the magazine *Panathinaia*, the poet Ioannis Polemis, the painter Georgios Roilos and Grigorios Xenopoulos. Xenopoulos will later play a decisive role in introducing Cavafy's poetry to Greek readers through his article "A Poet", published in *Panathinaia* in 1903.

Nor is Cavafy unfamiliar with the theatre: his diary mentions Athenian theatres such as the Tsochas, where *Golfo* had been performed in the summer of 1895.

In late July he arrives in Patras, the last major stop on his journey. He observes the city, walks its streets and, in his entry for 31 July, sketches a rough map of its centre, marking the street names in Greek.

From Patras he travels by ship to Corfu and Brindisi, and from there returns to Alexandria.

Hôtel de Patras — An Encounter

Let us imagine, then, that the two men meet in the lounge of a hotel in Patras: Peresiadis, the already successful playwright with roots in the Achaean countryside, and Cavafy, the still relatively unknown poet from cosmopolitan Alexandria. The meeting is a deliberate theatrical invention, an exercise in poetic licence.

Its setting, however, is real: a historic hotel in Patras whose building survives to this day. The physical presence of the building lends fiction a tangible point of reference: a place that has endured through time is invited to host a conversation that never took place. A hotel is, moreover, a place for people passing through, and Cavafy knows this well: the manuscript of his diary is written on various sheets, including hotel letterheads from Athens, Phaleron and Patras.

What might they have said to one another?

Would they have spoken about their art? About theatre and poetry? About demotic Greek and *katharevousa*, shortly before the Evangelika riots? About the relationship between literature and its audience? About fame, success and obscurity?

Would Peresiadis have recognised in his interlocutor a poet with an unusual sense of history and time?

Could Cavafy have discerned, beneath the pastoral surface of *Golfo*, the play's deeper social and human conflicts?

Would they have discussed the Greece one knows from within and the other is visiting for the first time?

Alexandria, the Greek Diaspora and the meaning of homeland?

Europe, social change and the future of Hellenism?

And what if their conversation turned to more personal matters?

Love, desire, loneliness, bodily decline, memory, death?

Or might they have avoided all these subjects, retreating into seemingly inconsequential small talk, leaving what matters most unspoken?

Two worlds, two literary paths

In Peresiadis and Cavafy, two different experiences of Hellenism may meet: the world of rural Greece that runs through the former's work and the cosmopolitan world of the Diaspora from which the latter comes.

Not as a confrontation between a supposedly backward world and a progressive one, but as an encounter between two distinct cultural experiences, each with its own sensibilities, contradictions and creative possibilities.

Peresiadis draws his material from rural Greece, social conventions, folk traditions and human relationships within a relatively closed social environment. His works encompass both pastoral romance and patriotic drama, including subjects drawn from the struggles of Greeks under foreign rule.

Cavafy moves within a multicultural environment in which history, language and personal memory intersect with the experience of the Diaspora.

Yet both seek ways to express human experience through literature.

Patras provides the intermediary space for this hypothetical meeting. It belongs to the Greek state, but as a port it maintains open channels of communication with the Mediterranean and Europe. It is home to neither man: Peresiadis lives in Athens, Cavafy in Alexandria, and Patras is where their paths might cross.

It is more than the backdrop to their meeting. It can become a third dramaturgical presence, a place of transition, departure and return.

Sight and the unseen

There is another paradox, perhaps the most theatrically fertile of all.

One does not see. The other observes.

Deprived of physical sight, Peresiadis dictates theatrical characters, scenes and human relationships that take visible form before an audience.

Cavafy, with the acuity of an observer who records times and streets in his diary, seeks the historical and psychological significance beneath outward events.

Which of the two sees more deeply?

What do sight and perception mean?

What is the relationship between the visible and the unseen, between reality and its representation?

Peresiadis's blindness is not presented as a symbol of weakness, but as a starting point for exploring different ways of perceiving the world. Equally, Cavafy's powers of observation do not guarantee that he can understand what is happening around him or within himself.

A theatrical encounter can reveal affinities where at first we see only differences, but also tensions where we assume there is common ground.

The dramaturgical challenge

Through the 2nd "Spyridon Peresiadis" Playwriting Competition 2027, Golfo Festival invites playwrights to use this imagined historical circumstance as a starting point for creative freedom.

The aim is neither to recreate an actual historical episode nor to write a stage biography of the two authors.

What is sought is the invention of a theatrical situation in which these two personalities acquire dramatic presence, engage in dialogue, clash, and reveal or conceal aspects of themselves.

Entrants may move between historical realism and poetic writing, psychological drama and comedy, philosophical confrontation and the theatre of the absurd.

They may draw on biographical details, real events, literary references or even deliberate anachronisms, provided these serve their dramaturgical vision.

Theatrical invention is not confined to constructing a plausible dialogue. It encompasses character development, the shaping of relationships, the generation of conflict and the use of silence, pauses, gesture and stage action.

The challenge is not to guess what Peresiadis and Cavafy would actually have said, but to discover what two men who lived in the same era and represented different expressions of Greek creativity can say to us today through theatre.

For theatre does not merely reproduce what happened. It can give voice and form to what never happened, but might have.

An encounter unrecorded by History. A conversation for theatre to imagine.

Suggested sources

For those wishing to explore the two figures and their era in greater depth, the following sources are suggested:

C. P. Cavafy, *My First Journey to Greece* (13 June – 5 August 1901), Greek translation by Haris Vlavianos, Patakis Publishers, 2024.

The manuscript of Cavafy's diary, in the Onassis Foundation's digital Cavafy Archive (cavafy.onassis.org).

Spyridon Peresiadis, *Golfo*, Idyfono Editions, 2024.

Further bibliography on Greece, Athens and Patras around 1901

History and society

Konstantina Aroni-Tsichli, *The Currant Question and Social Struggles: The Peloponnese, 1893–1905*, Papazisis, Athens, 1999.

Thanasis Giochalias and Zoi Vaiou, *Athens in the Nineteenth Century: Images of a Journey through the Press*, Estia Bookshop, Athens, 2021.

Patras and Achaia

Alekos Maraslis, *Patras 1900*, A. A. Livanis Publishing House, Athens, 2003. Photographs, postcards and contemporary press reports.

Ch. A. Moulias, *The Currant Port: Patras 1828–1900. Trade – Industry – Banking – Insurance*, Patras, 2000.

Nikos A. Bakounakis, *Patras 1828–1860: A Greek Capital in the Nineteenth Century*, Kastaniotis, Athens, 1995. On the historical background of the commercial city.

Xenophon Papaefthymiou and Panagiotis Fotiou (eds), *Patras in the Early Twentieth Century through Glass Photographic Plates, Typorama / To Donti*, 2002.

Theatre and literary milieu

Chrysothemis Stamatopoulou-Vasilakou, *Greek Bibliography of Plays, Dialogues and Monologues 1900–1940*, 2 vols, Kostas and Eleni Ouranis Foundation, Athens, 2020.

Thodoros Chatzipantazis, *An Outline History of Modern Greek Theatre. On the development of theatrical life and genres*.

Digital archives and primary sources

National Library of Greece, Digital Library of Newspapers and Periodicals: search for 1901 issues, advertisements, theatrical notices and public debates ([via gov.gr](http://via.gov.gr)).

Library of the Hellenic Parliament, Digital Library: historical press, including the newspaper Akropolis in 1901 (digitallib.parliament.gr).

Municipal Library of Patras: local collection of newspapers, periodicals and publications from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The above titles and collections are offered as starting points for historical and dramaturgical research, not as constraints on fictional invention.