Remembering an Oral Performer, Yiorgos Haridimos, Karagiozis Player, 1924-1996

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Remembering an Oral Performer,
Yiorgos Haridimos, Karagiozis Player, 1924-1996

by KOSTAS MYRSIADES

Yiorgos Haridimos’s early morning of puppet-making was followed by a simple lunch, consisting almost exclusively of greens cooked in olive oil, and then a nap, which he took in preparation for his evening performance. At around 4:00 in the afternoon he boarded a trolley for Athens and his Plaka theatre. There he swept the stage, cleaned the theatre of debris from the night before, watered the pebbled floor to cool it, dusted the chairs, and set out the puppets in the order in which they were to appear in the evening’s performance. His first wife had accompanied him to the theatre each night to put the house in order and prepare the tickets. His second wife, by contrast, stayed home with the twins. Haridimos complained that she did not have a passion for Karagiozis, nor did she understand his love for the performance. His art was, for her, merely a means of securing a livelihood.

After the performance, around 10:00 p.m., Haridimos put his important puppets (usually his father’s) in an old suitcase he carried with him and took the bus home. Lesser puppets he locked in a trunk behind the stage at the Plaka theater; several break-ins had resulted in the theft of these figures. By 11:00 he was home for a light supper. He spent a little time entering new ideas into the notebooks he carried in his suitcase and then went to bed to dream of new tricks for Karagiozis, tricks that awoke him in the middle of the night to be entered in the notebooks beside his bed.

KOSTAS MYRSIADES is Professor of Comparative Literature at West Chester University, West Chester, Pennsylvania and editor of College Literature.
I first met Yiorgos Haridimos one evening in 1965 at his Shadow Theater in the Plaka district of Athens. Having already spent several months gathering Karagiozis scripts and attending performances whenever I could find them, I discovered during an evening stroll past the pillars of the Temple of Olympian Zeus a well-kept, whitewashed building with Karagiozis figures painted on it. The sign in front of the door said that performances were given nightly at 7:30 and that the program changed every two days. The following evening I arrived for the performance with my wife Linda. The woman at the window who sold me two 15-drachma tickets eyed us suspiciously. We entered a doorway covered with a curtain and were met by a middle-aged man, stout and exceptionally thicknecked. He wore an old gray sweater, although it was already June and hot. He smiled, greeted us as he took our tickets, and told us to sit in any of the hundred or so chairs available. The puppet booth itself was no more than a small stage under a white sheet set in a pebbled outdoor yard surrounded by a high wall. The stage acted both as a screen and as a storage space to house the performer’s tools and puppets. It was the only part of the theatre with a ceiling. A little office built into the right side of the stage served as a ticket booth: a small window in the wall was used to dispense the tickets.

Just as the performance was to begin—some 25 to 30 people were seated in the audience—the woman who had sold me our tickets came rushing to our seats in the front row, screaming and pointing at my hand, in which I held a small recorder. “No, no,” she said in Greek, “it is not allowed.” On hearing the commotion, the stout, jovial man who had earlier greeted us came from behind the stage to see what was happening. The woman was still shouting, pointing to the recorder, while the man tried to calm her down. Interceding, he introduced himself as Yiorgos Haridimos, the Karagiozis performer; the distraught woman was his wife. I identified myself and Linda as students interested in studying Karagiozis. The recorder, I tried to explain, would help us remember the performance. Haridimos informed us that cameras and recorders were not allowed in his theater. His wife referred to a bad experience with an Englishman who a few years earlier had come to “steal” Karagiozis from them. This was my first encounter with Haridimos.
We returned to Plaka in 1969-1970 and 1973-1974 and continued to attend Haridimos's performances, without cameras or recorders. We would often talk with him before the performance, and on a few occasions we were invited behind the stage to watch him perform. By now his wife recognized us and would smile whenever we arrived. We were becoming regular customers. Nevertheless, it was obvious that both still felt uncomfortable with us, and they volunteered little about the Karagiozis form. Haridimos preferred to address his remarks to me rather than to Linda. Although he was polite, he treated women other than his wife with a certain amount of indifference. His indifference turned to disregard when the conversation involved the male-dominat-ed performance itself, putting me in the position of having to conduct most of the interviews.

It had become apparent that anyone who wanted to study the Karagiozis performance effectively had to develop an intimate, long-term relationship with Haridimos. Not only was he widely acknowledged as the most accomplished surviving player in the tradition (his theater in Plaka had itself been designated a historical site) and the heir of one of the great masters in the history of the performance (Hristos Haridimos of Piraeus), but his knowledge of the state of the performance as nine-time president of the Karagiozis Players Association was invaluable. But such a relationship did not come without a price. Haridimos appreciated his standing and had made it clear that he felt he had no equal in the art of the Karagiozis performance. Questions about other players were met with impatience and mistrust. He felt slighted when he was compared with other players, and he let us know that drawing such comparisons suggested that we did not recognize the quality of his performances. And in the small world of Karagiozis performance in Greece, Haridimos would easily have discovered it if we had gone off to interview and study other players. The possibility of wounding his pride meant we would have to work exclusively with him, knowing that, in any case, we had access to a Harvard University collection of taped performances and interviews with 20 other players. Even so, we had to disassociate ourselves in the player's mind from a variety of previous collectors, including the "Englishman," Mario Rinvoluci, whose visits had caused Haridimos and his wife such

Remembering an Oral Performer
concern. My childhood in a peasant village on the island of Samos provided the kind of class and national background that would make the players comfortable, as did the informal conduct of the interviews and our decision not to collect texts until late in our relationship (when, in fact, the player himself brought up the issue and offered to open his performances to taping).

At this point, in 1973, I persuaded Deree, the American college in Athens where I was then teaching, to invite Haridimos to stage a classic Karagiozis performance. After some negotiating, the school allotted a handsome sum for such a performance, more than Haridimos had ever received or earned for a single performance. Determined to show himself at his best, he decided to perform the complete version of *Karagiozis, Alexander the Great, and the Cursed Snake* with live music (four musicians and a singer). The audience of Greek and American students and professors received it as the best Karagiozis any of them had seen. The performance over, we shook hands with both Haridimos and his wife, who invited us to their home in Piraeus. We had become friends. Our son and daughter, aged seven and three, were to accompany us. From that moment on, we were to see Haridimos and his wife often, both at the Plaka theater and at their home. He spoke on a variety of topics concerning Karagiozis but offered only material that we could easily find in articles written about the form. Moreover, he told us nothing more than he had told Rinvolucri. Nevertheless, our friendship was sealed by the time we left Athens in June, and we had agreed to correspond.

The venture at Deree convinced me not only of the relative hardship of a player’s life but of the proprietary nature of Haridimos’s role as a “keeper of the performance.” The exchange of money was a sign of respect not so much for his eminence as for the art of Karagiozis itself. He was assured at last that we were not to steal his art but to preserve it. We kept faith with this understanding on each future visit by sharing with him whatever rewards our research brought us. On one visit, it was proceeds of an article Linda had sold to a popular Greek magazine; on a second, it was part of a grant given by my university; on a third, it was a share of an honorarium for a book we had published together.

By the time we saw Haridimos again in 1979, his wife had
died and he had married a young woman from the neighborhood who gave him his first children, twin daughters. He was not only open to the most intimate interviews about the performance, but he also began to display his arhio, or personal archives, of Karagiozika. He unpacked the trunk of puppets he kept under his bed, brought out his two small notebooks in which he kept his "ideas," although he could hardly write, and resurrected important materials from storage at his brother's house. By now we were seeing him both socially and professionally every time we were in Athens. The most intensive and revealing work came in 1987, when, recorder in hand, I spent two weeks alone with him obtaining 18 hours of interviews on all facets of his work and life.

In 1989 Haridimos retired as a performer, separated from his young wife, and moved into a one-bedroom apartment in Piraeus surrounded by what he has always considered his true family, his Karagiozis puppets. When I arrived in Athens in August, I called Haridimos from the hotel below the Acropolis where we usually stayed. Haridimos's self-enforced exile had made him anxious. Why had we taken two years to return? Was the recorder in good working order so that what he had to say would not be lost? Before I left, Haridimos offered me his two notebooks, a source which I had previously examined only in his presence. "I'll copy them and return them to you tomorrow," I said. "No hurry," he replied. "Take them with you to America, and bring them back next time you're in Greece. We're friends, aren't we?"

While Haridimos was an active performer, his entire life centered around Karagiozis. Early in the morning he would spend his time cutting Karagiozis figures from cardboard and plastic or drawing posters of various sizes depicting scenes from his favorite performances, which he would then display in his theater for tourists. He also placed a number of these puppets in tourist shops, and from these he made a little money. For himself, he painted Karagiozis figures on his lamps, dishes, chairs, and walls. We ourselves had brought him a polished stone paperweight from the seashore of Samos. When we visited him at his home that Easter, he presented us with a heavy object wrapped in newspaper. We waited to return to our apartment before we unwrapped it; it was our Samian stone, on which he had drawn a scene from
Linda's favorite Karagiozis heroic performance, Katsandonis, with the words Kalo Pascha (Happy Easter) below it. A generous, if poor, man, Haridimos was never aggressive about marketing these various forms of his art. He was perfectly happy to make them for friends or hang them in his own apartment, whose walls were covered with Karagiozis paraphernalia.

On several occasions over the years I had asked Haridimos to let me buy a puppet or a poster to bring back to the States. Each time Haridimos gave us gifts of figures he had made for tourists as gifts, or he would create new ones for us. He never sold or gave away the large figures he used for his performances, even when he had three and even four copies of the same puppet. His method was to make his performance puppets, the largest almost three-and-a-half feet high, from lambskin and use them for a number of years. He would then retire them to the trunk under his bed and create new ones to replace the retired puppets. In some cases, as with those puppets most often used (Karagiozis, Barba Yiorgos, Hatzivavatis), he would retain several in use at the same time so not to overlook a particular puppet. Those puppets he had inherited from his father he would use only on special occasions. He kept these at the bottom of his trunk and was reluctant to allow anyone to see or photograph them. These were his inheritance, as he told me on many occasions, "my real family." His favorite among these was the tallest puppet in his repertoire, his father's Barba Yiorgos, the old man from the mountains of Roumeli. Not only was this puppet, according to Haridimos, one of the best ever made, but it had been used throughout his father's career and throughout most of his own. Furthermore, Barba Yiorgos held a particular place in Haridimos's heart because it was the puppet that had required of him the greatest concentration and study, and it was the puppet that more than any other stood for the Greek spirit, the unbending, stubborn, driving force of the common Greek peasant, o laos, the people. During my last interview with him in August 1989, Haridimos pulled his trunk from under his bed and reverently placed each figure on a white sheet on the floor. While I photographed each figure, Haridimos spoke about them and reminisced about the performances in which he had appeared. Finally, at the bottom of the trunk, he came upon Barba Yiorgos, somewhat bent and chipped from the long
years of service it had rendered his father and himself. Tears came to his eyes as he held it up in the light for me to photograph. "This is my favorite," he said. "It's part of me. This is my true family. Many have asked me for these puppets. They want to put them in the museum, but I can't let them go. How can I put a price on these things? You've asked me for a performance puppet. Take Barba Yiorgos. I know you'll take good care of him." I paid an effusive tribute to the puppet, the player, his father, and the tradition, knowing that I had just been offered an opportunity he had never before extended, and to my knowledge never again extended, to anyone outside the performance community.

I made my last trip in 1993. This time I had a piece of Karagiozika I could offer Haridimos, what I hoped would be a fitting personal comment on the nearly three decades he, I, and Linda had shared. I brought him copies of the second book on Karagiozis we had just published: a translation of his Baker play accompanied by a study of his art. My last thought of Haridimos is of having returned to him the art he was so certain "collectors" were stealing from him and of honoring a man to whom Greece itself rightly owes a great debt, a debt to one who, through his art, breathed life into its people.

The Karagiozis Repertoire of Yiorgos Haridimos, 1924-1996

Transcribed and translated by Kostas Myrsiades from the performer's unpublished notebook, Shadow Theater Performances of Yiorgos Haridimos, 1987

KOMODIES
* Ο Καραγιώζης Προφήτης
* Ο Λήσταρχος Βέλιος
* Ο Καραγιώζης στη Διμοιρία Τρελλών
Oi Δύο Λόρδοι
Το Φαντασμα της Πόλεως
* Ο Καραγιώζης στη Σελήνη
* Ο Καραγιώζης Πιτράς
(oüte μιλάει, oüte λαλάει)

COMEDIES
Karagiozis Prophet
Brigand Velios
Karagiozis in a Mad Land

Two Lords
Phantom of Constantinople
Karagiozis on the Moon
Karagiozis Doctor

Remembering an Oral Performer 95
O Karagkióghi
'Ekatommuropíchos
'H Théia tou Karóloú
'0 Karagkióghi Psychás
'0 Mégas 'Alexándros
kai ta 7 Théría
'0 Aoxías ton Eudóvou
To Swotó elina Swotó
To Katarrcmén Phidi kai
'0 Mégas 'Aléxandros
'H Génνhisa tou Kollhtëriou
Xifomachia duo Prigkípton
Kólasis kai Parándezios

MIKRES KOMODIES
To Plousiópado
To Samári tou Gaitádrón
O1 Tréi Léxeis tou Pásá
'0 Karagkióghi Dímarshos
'H Briúia tou Belóh Gkekka
'0 Karagkióghi Mouasiko
'0 Karagkióghi Giaurtíás
To Oikóptedo
To Stoíkhtma
'O Pseútis
'H Kolokotía
To Odó
'0 Karagkióghi Tufldos

ERGA TΗS ΕΠΑΝΑΣΤΑΣΕΩΣ
ΤΟΥ 1821
'0 Kápteñan 'Atdónis
'0 Patríárxh Ghrívóris
ό Ε'
Tá Tría Soutlantópoila
'0 Kápteñan Ghría
'H Apokrefálisi tou
Dionvsíou
'0 Matríro tis 'Anatólis
'0 Géró Dímos
'0 Kápteñan Diamántis
O1 Mavromíkaloí kai
' Sperió tou Mánis
'0 Kápteñan Giasnikós
'H Stóli tou Mavromíkénou
Basilía

Karagiozis Millionaire
Charlie's Aunt
Karagiozis Fisherman
Alexander the Great and
the Seven Beasts
Evzone's Sergeant
Right is Right
The Cursed Snake and
Alexander the Great
Kolitiri's Birth
Two Prince's Swordplay
Hell and Heaven

SMALL COMEDIES
Rich Boy
The Donkey's Saddle
Pasha's Three Words
Karagiozis Mayor
Veligekas's Insult
Karagiozis Musician
Karagiozis Yogurt-Seller
Building Plot
The Wager
The Liar
The Pumpkin
Ouzo
Karagiozis Blind

WORKS ON GREEK
INDEPENDENCE, 1821
Captain Anthony
Patriarch Gregory V

Three Souliotis Boys
Captain Gris
Beheading of Dionysios

Anatolian Black
Old Man Demos
Captain Diamantis
The Mavromichalis Clan and
the Nereid of Mani
Captain Yiannakos
The Marble King's Clothes

Remembering an Oral Performer 97
Captain Panouryias
Karaiskakis
Christian Slayer
The Skull of Kostandinos
Paleologos
Markos Botsaris
Despo Liakata
Captain Karafotias
Captain Ambeloianis
Athanasios Diakos
The Skewering of Athanasios
Diakos
Turkish Municipality
Inn of Gravias
Esme the Turkish Girl
Eagle of Roumeli
Captain Invisible
Captain Astrapoyianos
Captain Vlahavas
Skaltsothimos
Brigands of Olympus
Theodoros Kolokotronis
The Orphan Girl from Hios
Pasha’s Slavewoman
Yenitsaros

Frankenstein’s Monster
Ghost of Constantinople

Gorilla
The Living Dead
Lion’s Shadow
Robert the Devil
Pinkerton Policeman

Death of Esme
The Devil as Karagiozis’s
Best Man
Dead Man’s Oath
The Devil, the Woman, and
the Bottle

Brigand Davelis
Brigands of Kalavrita

Βραχύλακας τής Κωνσταντινούπολεως
'Ο Γενίτσαρος
'Η Νεκρά Ζώσα
'Η Σκιά τού Λέοντος
'Ο Ροδέρτος Διάθολος
'Ο 'Αστυνομικός Νάτ.
Πίκελτον
'Ο Θάνατος τής 'Εσμέ
'Ο Διάθολος Κουμπάρος
tοῦ Καραγιώζη
'Ο 'Ορκος τοῦ Πεθαμένου
'Ο Διάθολος, ή Γυναίκα
cαὶ τὸ Μπουκάλι

'Ο Λησταρχὸς Νταβέλης
Οι Ανεταὶ τῶν Καλαθύτων

KOMODIES ΓΚΡΑΝ-ΓΚΙΝΙΟΛ
Το Τέρας τοῦ Φράγκεσταίν
'Ο Βρυκόλακας τής
Κωνσταντινούπολεως
'Ο Γορβάς
'Η Νεκρά Ζώσα
'Η Σκιά τού Λέοντος
'Ο Ροθέρτος Διάθολος
'Ο 'Αστυνομικός Νάτ.
Πίκελτον
'Ο Θανάτος τής 'Εσμέ
'Ο Διάθολος Κουμπάρος
tοῦ Καραγιώζη
'Ο 'Ορκος τοῦ Πεθαμένου
'Ο Διάθολος, ή Γυναίκα
cαὶ τὸ Μπουκάλι

ΟΙ ΑΗΤΕΙΑΙ
'Ο Λήσταρχος Νταβέλης
Οι Ανεταὶ τῶν Καλαθύτων
Remorseful Brigand
Black Chief Brigand
Teli Mehmet
Brigand Tsakitzis
Brigand Tromaras
Brigand Bekiaris
Brigands Kakarapis, Kalambalikis and Dathelis
Brigand Vousnakis

SOCIAL WORKS
A Mother’s Heart
General Lafazanis
Meeting After 20 Years
Poor Mary’s Injustice
Two Friends’ Sacrifice
Beggar King
Byron and the Flower Girl of Athens
Millionaire Thief
Two Orphans

PIRATES
Black Pirate
The Maharajah of Bombay and the Pirates
The Spanish Pirate
Pirate Woman Walks the Plank

FROM MYTHOLOGY
Hindu’s Tomb
Forest Dragon
Enchanted Nereid
Lion’s Shadow
Theseus and the Minotaur
Drosos and Astero
Captain Immortal
The Maharajah’s Sword

HISTORICAL WORKS
Exodus from Messolonghi
Judith
Gouras on the Acropolis
General Velisarios

Remembering an Oral Performer
99
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GREEK IDYLLS</th>
<th>WORKS ON THE GERMAN OCCUPATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maria Pentayiotisa</td>
<td>The Marriage of Hitler and Moussoulini</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golfo</td>
<td>Torpedoing of Ellis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty of Peran</td>
<td>A Gestapo Informer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brigand Spanos and Krino</td>
<td>The Bombardment of Piraeus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| WORKS BASED ON ALI PASHA | |
|---------------------------| |
| Captain Nikotsaras | Pavlos Melas |
| Leap of Death (Fotos Tzavelas) | Duel to the Death (with the German Fritz) |
| Captain Hronis and Ali Tsekouras | The Informer Nikolyiannos |
| Lady Frosini (and Old Man Drakos, the Souliotis) | Karagiozis Hostage at Haidari |
| Dance of Zalongos | |
| Hero Katsandonis | Revenge of the Katsandoneans |
| Revenge of the Katsandoneans | |
| Captain Vlahavas | |