

Athens's Theatre Culture as a Theatrical Tourism Product

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Abstract: Athens, Greece is home to the birthplace of modern theatre. That is how theatrical tourists perceive Athens. This reputation has grown since people began learning about drama and theatre. Therefore, theatrical tourists come to this city to learn and gain experience, as well as to attend and visit as many productions and theatre venues as possible. This paper will examine theatre-related activities in Athens that are able to support the tourism industry. Data for this study was collected through observation, document analysis and interview. Observation in the field is used to gather information about a theatre production, a theatrical event like a festival or tour, and support services such as ticketing and transportation. Data collection and analysis based on the eight characteristics of tourism products. During this study, Athens hosts the Athens Epidaurus Festival, which is run annually between June and August. A festival like this was a bonus for the city, beside the regular or scheduled theatrical activities and performances. The consistency of scheduled productions and the annual theatre festival are among the best products for a theatre city to offer the audience and theatrical tourists.

Keywords: Athens, festival, ticket, theatre production, theatrical tourist

1. Introduction

Athens was known as a city of theatre and has played an important role in the history of modern theatre development [1]. This statement has been supported by plays that have been spread, studied, and performed all over the world, and ancient theatre sites that can still be visited until today. There are a few ancient amphitheatres that are either still functioning or under renovation. All these venues or sites were part of Athens and its culture, geography, economy, and history. This is how this city builds its reputation as a place that is very related to drama, theatre, and the performing arts. Athens is the capital city of Greece; it is home to the remarkable Theatre Monument that is not only important to the theatre but also to the history of the country. Several theatre sites have been designated as UNESCO World Heritage sites, including The Odeon of Herodes Atticus, The Theatre of Dionysus on the Acropolis, and The Amphiareion of Oropos, Oropos. [2]

Only The Odeon of Herodes Atticus is currently open for performances and will be one of the venues for the Athens Epidaurus Festival 2022. The National Foundation of Research has listed a hundred monuments in Athens until 2003. Four of them were theatre buildings: Athinon Theatre, Topos Allou Theatre, National Theatre, and Vlachoutzis Mansion, which was turned into National Theatre's School of Drama, until today. In 2014, there were 152 theatre halls recorded as having been built in Athens. [1] This does not include the 30 open-air or open theatres that are scattered throughout Athens' urban area. The capacity of these theatre halls ranges between 150 seats and 1000 seats, while for open theatre, the capacity is 1000 to 10,000 seats. Both open and hall theatres offered a variety of theatre productions for the audience to choose from: modern to classical plays, experimental, musicals, opera, and other new forms of theatrical performances. That is Athens's, with its theatre scenario and landscape that can be expected by local and international audiences for decades. Plays, playwrights, directors, and theatregoers are always there to light up the theatre industry as a part of Athens's culture.

2. Background of Studies

Alex-Michael et al. [1]:

“Theatrical activity in Athens represents a large part of the cultural scene, as evidenced by the sharp increase in the number of theatre venues. This trend boosted theatrical mobility and the sector’s resistance to the socio-economic crisis. New forms of theatre have been imported in recent years -such as musicals and costly blockbusters hosted in major theatres that were built during the past decade. Thus, it seems that in the last few years, Athens has been experiencing its “theatrical heyday” and its cultural capital has been reinforced. This, however, has not been strategically capitalised yet for tourism purposes.”

There are a few points in the citation above related to Athens’s theatre culture and theatrical tourism that will be studied, described, and discussed in this paper. The first point is a theatrical activity; the second is the theatre venue; the third is the genre or types of theatre; also, terms "theatrical heyday" and theatre as a tourist product of Athens. Theatrical activity in this study means any activities in Athens that can be related to the theatre, like play production, festivals, forums, workshops, and theatre tours. "Theatre venue" means the place, location, area, or building that is used to hold a theatrical activity. Genre or theatre types refer to the form, concept, or style of production that is performed within the duration of this study or observation.

The first of these two phases are cited from the citation above. The first is "theatrical heyday." This term or statement means the glory moment of Athens' theatre that has happened to that industry, which may have happened a decade or century ago. According to Alex-Michael et al., this city has had experience where the theatre was reaching a golden era. That means this city also had its glooming season despite how tourists or world society embraced it as a champion of theatre. Greek theatre was unstable after the communist regime took over the region in the 1960s until 1974. There are many restrictions on playwrights and the theatre industry, such as heavy censorship, repressive legal and unstable political conditions. [3] Besides that, they finds that Greek theatre remains unknown to most of the European audience, and they think the theatre exclusively consists of an ancient drama performance. But after 1974, Greek theatre returned to its previous pace, even though with up and down conditions and dealing with the economic crisis, this industry rose back with 1700 shows in 2016 and most of the theatre activities were intended in Athens [4].

The last point that will be highlighted in these studies is "tourism product" that refers directly to the theatrical production and historical site of a theatre located in Athens that can be categorized as "theatre tourism" [5]. Bennet mentioned a few theatrical products and activities listed by the tourism industry, including productions of *The Moustrap*, *Mama Mia*, and *Cirque du Soleil*; and venues or locations such as *The Paris Opera* in France; the *Kabuki Theatre* in Tokyo; and the *Takarazuka Theatre* in Kobe, both located in Japan. For the tourism industry, theatre is an intangible cultural heritage that attracts tourists with its story (text), performance (product transformation), and venue of the final product (stage location). The crucial thing about theatre is to make it more tourist-friendly or to commercialize the theatrical product. In other words, to inform tourists about theatre productions that are ready for them to visit or to attend.

There are eight common traits that the theatre industry should consider transforming its product into a tourist attraction: language barrier, lifespan of production, type of play, container or venue, destination or location, consumer or target audience, marketing strategies including promotion and distribution strategies, and in-house services like transportation, guided tour, and merchandise or souvenir [6]. The objective of these studies is to describe Athens’s theatre activities based on the eight traits as listed by España [6]. All data was gathered through observation, document analysis and interview. This study is a sampling of the theatrical activities in Athens between July 3 and August 5, 2022.

3. Finding and Discussion

Within less than two months of observing and attending theatre performances here in Athens and Epidaurus, there are at least three patterns of productions that audiences or tourists can be expected to see. First, festival

productions such as the Athens Epidaurus Festival (AEF) 2022 organized by the National Theatre of Greece and the Papagou-Cholargos Festival (PCF) organized by the Municipality of Papagou-Cholargos; second, tour productions such as the Medea Bost Summer Tour (MBST) organized by the National Theatre of Greece and performed in several venues around Athens; and third, theatre productions or companies. Both festivals offered not only a theatrical performance but also other music and concerts, workshops, and dance. The festival is one of the important tourism products that can attract an audience to visit or attend the event. [7] The combination of various types of performances and activities is an advantage for a theatrical tourist looking to vary their experience while staying in Athens.

In terms of the time of the show, this study found that all the performances were scheduled at 9:00 pm, but with activities like discussion, forums, or workshops that may start earlier. The duration of the show usually takes one or two hours. Most of the shows were held at the open-air theatre because it was June, July, and August, which are summer for Athens and Greece as a whole. One of the venues for AEF 2022 is Peiraios 260. It is a hall that is divided into an open theatre and a small hall to cater to a production for a three-month festival. MBST is a part of the AEF 2022, but this production ended its tour on September 18, 2022, at the Theatre Heliopolis Grove "Dimitris Kintis." The extension of the tour for a month after the festival ends is a benefit to the theatrical tourists. This is because most of the theatre companies will start their productions in the early part of 2023. There is quite a big gap for tourists until they can attend a theatrical performance in 2023. Fortunately, theatrical tourists visiting Athens between November and January can expect to attend a winter theatre. According to Moustraki [9], based on the previous year, theatrical activities during the winter season in Athens are not much different compared to the summer season.

The theatrical festival's core or anchor is plays and theatre production. There are 24 theatre productions prepared for AEF 2022, to take the stage at four main venues: Peiraios 260, Odeon of Herodes of Atticus, Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus, and Little Theatre of Ancient Epidaurus. Among the plays listed were "The Other Sides of the Tempest: An imaginary encounter between Orson Welles and William Shakespeare's world", "The Seven Madmen: Based on the novel by Roberto Arlt", "Dusk: Based on the film Dogville by Lars von Trier", "Antigone by Sophocles", "The Persians by Aeschylus", "Hugo de Ana Tosca by Giacomo Puccini" and "The Wanchun File by Elias Maglinis, after Euripides' Alcestis". The combination of plays by either Greek or other European playwrights is an advantage for theatrical tourists to choose their preference. A few classical pieces have been produced in new form because the organizer wants to give more chances for theatre-makers to interpret, reconstruct, and insert new ideas into a piece by a classical playwright such as Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus without forgetting the audience's chance to attend a staging of an original piece of the play. For the local audience, the original classical pieces are invaluable and always highly enjoyed, but they are always open to a new interpretation and style of performance to gain some different experience.

The second festival running during this observation is the Papagou-Cholargos Festival (PCF) at the Papagou Garden Theatre, Papagou. This venue, located in the residential garden, is an open-air theatre with 150–200 seats, and this festival has been at least since 2018. If visitors or audience members want to eat their food there, there is a ticket counter, a stall, a table, and chairs, or they can eat it at their seat while waiting or watching the performances. There are a variety of types and genres of theatre performances and other genres of performing arts that also cater to a show for a young audience, at least at the age of 3 years old and above. All the performances are in Greek since the venue of this festival is in the local area and focuses on the Greek-speaking audience, but the staff at the venue is always ready to make tourists comfortable. The second pattern of theatrical product offered in this observation is the Medea Bost Summer Tour (MBST). This theatre roadshow presented a modernized version of Mentis Bostantzoglou's classic play Medea at multiple venues. The audience needs to check its details carefully because there will be different dates, venues, and subtitles prepared for a different performance from the website that you can easily find with keywords 'Medea Bost'. There are two main websites for theatre tickets and other related information. The first is Ticket Services, and the other one is put under the National Theatre of Greece, www.n-t.gr. [8]

Other traits to discuss are the venue and the facilities provided during AEF 2022. This festival was held at four venues, two of which are in Athens. The other two venues are Epidauros Ancient Theatre and Little Epidauros Ancient Theatre. Both amphitheatres were in Epidauros, which is about two and a half hours by car or bus from Athens. In the case of AEF 2022, perhaps for the previous festival as well, the organizer has arranged a coach or bus to transport the audience to those venues. All the information can be found at the website or ticket counter. This kind of facility is very helpful for tourists to reach the venue on time and hassle-free. The trip to Epidauros from Athens was more interesting because the coach would stop at the tourist area known as the Corinth Canal for passengers to have some rest and food and enjoy the scenic view of the canal that crosses the town. Normally, the announcement will be made in two languages, Greek and English, to inform passengers from time to time about the trip. Theatrical tourists can also have their food, drink, merchandise, and use the washroom in that town. Other venues in Athens include one that is situated at the Acropolis, an archaeological site, and the Odeon of Herodes Atticus. Compared to other venues that are listed under the festival, including Peiraisos 260, this venue is more focused on music and concerts and opera.

Ticket prices are also a trait that needs to be discussed, especially the price range, package, and categories. This study takes a price range and package from the MBST website as a sample to understand the variety of ticket prices for theatres in Athens and Greece. There are many categories of tickets for theatrical tourists, to suit their age, budget, or status (see TABLE 2). There are no indicators or notes mentioning if the specific price and package are only for Greek citizens, therefore it may apply to all the audience regardless of nationality. Other traits of Athens’s theatrical activity have been summarized according to the Eight Traits of Tourism Product by Espuña [6] in TABLE 1 below:

TABLE I: Summarized of Athens’s theatrical activities as a tourism product based on Eight Traits by Espuña (2019)

Traits	Athens’s theatrical tourism product
Language barrier	All AEF 2022 international theatre productions with Greek and English subtitles PCF with no subtitles MBST with English and Greek subtitles General: information about the subtitles can be referred to on the website and pamphlet.
Lifespan of production	AEF has been an annual programmed since 1954, normally happening between June and August. PCF will be held between 23 June and 28 July 2022. Most of the production under AEF 2022 and PCF was staged two to three times on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. MBST began on July 8, 2022, and will end on September 18, 2022, weekday, and weekend.
Type of play	AEF and PCF: modern, classic, tragedy, comedy, opera, musical, Youth audience, international and local plays. MBST is a modern interpretation of the classical play, Medea by Bost. AEF and PCF: modern, classic, tragedy, comedy, opera, musical, youth audience, international and local plays. MBST is a modern interpretation of the classical play, Medea by Bost.
Venue	Open theatre, hall, open-air theatre, amphitheatre
Location	AEF 2022 was held at several locations in Athens and Epidauros. PCF is held at Papagou Garden Theatre (open air). MBST was performed in different locations, mostly in Athens.
Target audience	AEF-local and international; adult and young audience PCF-local audience; adult and young audience MBST—adult; international and local

Promotion	Website; posters and bunting in specific locations. International theatrical tourists may explore websites related to Athens and Greek theatre. Local theatrical tourists are informed by television. There are channels about arts and travel, and websites with a magazine concept ¹ that put together a theatre segment with other cultural topics like culinary and shopping.
In-house service	There is a company to handle a coach from Athens to Epidaurus and return. Tickets for performance, coach and festival activities can be bought or booked at the counter that is located at a tourist attraction area, Panepistimiou 39, or buy online at the National Theatre of Greece's website. Audience can choose ticket price suit with their status or categories (see TABLE 2) Cards and cash are acceptable for ticket booking and payment. A booklet and pamphlet can be found at the ticket counter. The staff are professional and helpful. Refunds and cancellations are handled quickly and easily. Merchandise can be bought at the festival venue.

TABLE II: Ticket Categories and Prices for Medea Bost Summer Tour 2022

Ticket Categories	Prices
VIP	50€
Zone A	45€
Zone B	25€
School students (up to 18-year-old)	13€
Persons with disabilities	5€
Upper Tier	20€, 15€, 10€
Unemployed	5€
Concession ticket package	Details at the website

Source: National Theatre of Greece [8]

4. Conclusion

Athens has theatre as a part of its culture, a special element that has contributed to the tourism industry. There are a few tourist attractions, including a theatrical venue. Some of the places are still active or holding a performance for an audience to experience the ancient theatre event. This study has been sampling a month of theatrical activity in Athens, and this city has everything to put its theatre product on the international tourism calendar. This perspective resulted from an evaluation of Athens's theatrical activity with a checklist of tourism product traits. Athens has a few products like AEF and MBST that can attract both international and local audiences. Athens's theatrical product has been fulfilling all the traits to become a competitive tourism product. The theatre festival that Athens has is very important to the tourism industry as a main attraction for tourists coming to the city. But the most important thing that this study can conclude is that the theatre culture among the Greek people is very impressive and natural. Attending a play production and sitting among at least 9000 of them at the ancient theatre of Epidaurus is like enjoying an intangible theatrical tourism product. Something was built for a hundred years.

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¹ Example: *Athinorama* at <https://www.athinorama.gr/>, Greece's most popular city guide (L.Karagiannopoulos, Economic crisis proves not tragedy for Greek theater, Reuters, August 9, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eurozone-greece-theatre-idUSKCN0QE09S20150809> 24 August 2022.

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