In 2007, theatre scholar Dimitris Tsatsoulis observed the absence of a meaningful academic exchange which, he suggested, hindered the development of the study of contemporary theatre in Greece (20). Ten years down the line, the growth of publications on and the increasing internationalization of Greek theatre practice provide an opportune moment to expand and participate in this emerging dialogue. In response to Tsatsoulis’s provocation, this special issue contributes to this burgeoning field by focusing on the trope of change; ‘change’ here serves as our conceptual anchor that allows us to evaluate changes occurring in the Greek theatre landscape.

In the midst of an era of austerity that appears as the final act of the political dramaturgies of Metapolitefsi, ‘change’ – a key determinant of socio-political processes in that period, best exemplified in the socialist party’s (PaSoK) electoral campaign in 1981 – is uttered with an uneasy feeling that reflects current political disaffections. During Metapolitefsi, Greece underwent a process of political, economic, institutional and cultural transition, which was yet experienced as a period of certainty and stability. A chief factor channelling those transitions and consolidating narratives of stability was Greece’s accession to the European Economic Community in 1981, which bore the promise – and to a certain extent,
the experience – of modernization and affluence.\(^3\) Since the eruption of the debt crisis and the first memorandum of understanding, signed between the Greek state and its creditors in 2010, Greece (as a state formation, a community of people and an identity) entered another period of seismic economic and socio-political restructuring. Change, then, emerges as an integral yet ambiguous trope of history, undermining linearity and disturbing attempts towards periodization.

Such socio-political changes are reflected and deflected by and through a range of theatre and performance practices. Since the 1980s, Greek theatre (particularly theatre produced and staged in Athens) evidences a rich activity: the consolidation of more centralized cultural policies in the early 1980s saw the exponential increase of new theatre troupes and venues, a parallel expansion of theatre audiences, the gradual establishment of regional theatres and general aesthetic renewal.\(^4\) This rich field of activity lasted throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century; after 2010, the number of productions kept growing\(^5\) rendering the field of theatre ‘paradoxically the most advanced artistic form’ (Theodorou 2014: 9). Yet, the suspension of state subsidies, the closure of theatres and a more general devaluation of production standards and intensification of precarious labour conditions for theatre makers demonstrate that theatre has not been immune to the crisis (Theodorou 2014: 11; Patsalidis and Stavrakopoulou 2014: 10).

In this post-1980s landscape, and although a large part of Greek theatre production continues to rely on residual forms of representation with a particular emphasis on social realism (Sampatakakis 2014: 149; Rosi 2014: 21), the field of theatre has been significantly marked by a renewal of aesthetic strategies: the emergence of ‘director’s theatre’; the development of contemporary dance practices; experiments with documentary and reality theatre and more generally, a turn to postmodern and post-dramatic theatre practices (Tsatsoulis 2007: 43–94; Sidiropoulou 2014: 121–33; Ioannidis 2016). Greek new writing evidences a plurality of themes, authors and forms (Mavromoustakos 2014: 19), whilst the roles between writers, actors and directors have eroded (Rosi 2014: 22–24; Ioannidis 2016: 78–79; Pefanis 2017: 14–17). There is also a noticeable increase in the number of theatre groups experimenting with devised theatre and performance art vocabularies through collaborative work. Furthermore, during those 30 odd years, Greek theatre practice converged with international aesthetic trends in ‘an unprecedented manner’ (Mavromoustakos 2014: 16), further fuelled by institutional frameworks such as the Athens and Epidaurus Festival, the National Theatre, the Cacoyannis Foundation and the Onassis Cultural Centre (OCC). Such developments have familiarized Greek audiences with a global festival circuit whilst offering platforms to new playwrights and collectives to showcase their work. Smaller venues like BIOS: Exploring Urban Culture have also played a significant part in shaping alternative theatre economies and performance work, whilst keeping in dialogue with developments in other (mostly European) theatres.

The above brief and partial account of the transitions Greek theatre has been part of comma raises questions of periodization. On the one hand, Savas Patsalidis and Anna Stavrakopoulou argue that ‘the problem with periodisation is to decide on what basis to establish the boundaries between one period and the next’, recognizing the cultural specificities in such endeavours (2014: 7); George Pefanis, on the other hand, proposes a methodological shift towards what he names ‘the regime of historicity’, which ‘asserts the dynamic relationship between temporal/historical layers and their reproductions in the present […]’. Mapping and periodizing theatre is therefore necessarily and closely related to historical consciousness’ (2017: 7–8). Drawing on Pefanis’s approach, we suggest that any attempt to construct a narrative about the trope of change

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3 For a critical discussion on the transition from the post-war condition to the current moment of crisis in Greece, see Tsoukalas (2012); Liakos (2014: 13–56); for more specific accounts on Metapolitefsi, see Clogg (2002: 166–238); Avgierds et al. (2015).

4 Mavromoustakos offers a detailed and well-documented account of these changes (2005: 169–264.) Between 1994 and 2000, the number of theatre productions per year rose from 281 to 434 (Mavromoustakos 2005: 229).

5 According to many accounts, the number of performances in Athens per year range from 700 to 1000 (Patsalidis and Stavrakopoulou 2014; Ioannidis 2016).
Dramaturgies of change in the context of contemporary Greek theatre is bound to blur temporal boundaries. Hence, instead of tracing such boundaries, this issue explores how change as a work in progress is shaped by institutional, economic, political and aesthetic conditions and develops arguments as to how such changes in the field of theatre echo wider changes in the social space.

According to many accounts, the troubled relationship between Greece and Europe appears as the root of (aesthetic and institutional) renewal: in its recent history, Greek theatre seems to abandon its assumed thematic and stylistic insularity, embracing ‘foreign’ aesthetic and other developments. Nevertheless, there is no particular consensus as to the starting point of this shift towards internationalization. Mavromoustakos traces such beginnings in the post-war years, although he argues that the country’s European integration accelerated this process (2014: 16). For Sidiropoulou, exchanges with European innovative practices become visible in the 1990s with the emergence of ‘director’s theatre’ developed by directors Theodoros Terzopoulos and Yannis Houvardas who had both studied abroad (2014: 121). For Grigoris Ioannidis, the turning point was the arrival of Yorgos Loukos at the Athens and Epidaurus Festival (2006–16) and Yannis Houvardas at the National Theatre (2007–13) as well as the opening of the OCC in 2010 (2016: 76–77); George Sampatakakis also proclaims this last decade as ‘a historic moment of redefining the relations between institutionalised Greek tradition and European examples’, thus enabling the application of new performance strategies (2016: 80). What becomes clear from the above is that during the last four decades, Greek theatre has been in a constant state of flux. At the same time, the desire to gain access to innovative practices taking place outside the Greek border is in line with national narratives of modernization gathering momentum since the 1990s. Here we suggest that another useful way of understanding change and divisions of inside/outside might be through paying attention to the distinction between the margin and the mainstream.

Despite postmodernism’s erosion of the above distinction (Patsalidis and Stavrakopoulou 2014: 9–10), we here follow Williams’ (1977) model of culture to draw attention to the consistent presence of an ‘emergent’ theatrical scene breaking away from ‘dominant’ forms of representation and challenging hegemonic institutions and ideologies. In other words, whilst acknowledging the internationalization of Greek theatre as a necessary and significant process, we would also like to apply pressure to the complex relations between dominant and emergent practices as a source of renewal. Change, in this schema, does not exclusively stem from outside national borders but may also arise from the cultural margin – a milieu that is always already in aesthetic, ideological and institutional crisis. Such a process is interwoven with the modalities of history, whereby change (and crisis) is the driving force. It is in this sense that we here propose a systematization of analytical approaches around the trope of change: not as a means of periodization but, rather, as that which unearths the disjointedness of historical time.

It is those changes, their archaeologies and impact on Greek theatre ecologies that contributions to this special issue trace and interrogate. In navigating the trope of ‘change’, the issue draws on interdisciplinary vocabularies and methodologies and aspires to build an archive of the present moment by forging forms of scholarly artistic exchange. We use the word ‘now’ rather than ‘contemporary’ to draw attention to theatre as an ongoing process operating beyond strict temporal frameworks. To this end, we do not aim to offer an exhaustive panoramic view of what Greek theatre now might look like; on the contrary, the issue is organized around the following areas that connect to our overarching framework: ethics and politics; identity and aesthetics; and conditions of theatre making. Our focus on Athens as a hub of this cultural
activity does not suggest ignoring work undertaken in the regions; however, it also gestures towards the asymmetrical relationships developed by centralized forces of power at play which place emphasis on Athens as a global city and a pole of attraction for its burgeoning artistic scene. At a time when crisis-stricken Athens is proclaimed as ‘Europe’s new arts capital’ (Sooke 2017) hosting high-profile artistic events such as Documenta 14 (2017), we ask who and what makes Greek theatre now and how does Greek theatre perform itself in the second decade of the new millennium?

To this end, we have divided the issue into two distinct sections: in the first, five academic articles interrogate change through an engagement with conceptual and theoretical vocabularies. Philip Hager traces institutional transitions that followed the ‘outbreak’ of the debt crisis in 2010. In doing so, he examines the complex interface between debt, hospitality and internationalization enabled by the appearance of new cultural institutions and the suspension of state funding. Marios Chatziprokopiou also applies pressure to notions of host and guest as well as the politics of embodying the migrant in the theatre. By analysing an international peripatetic production hosted by the OCC through an ethnographic approach, he reflects on processes and tensions inherent in theatre, which involve migrants and refugees. This strong interest in identity politics and its connections to renewal and the past is further explored in the next two articles: Lina Rosi focuses on the underexplored area of gender politics on the Greek stage. Whilst employing methodologies of categorization, Rosi also highlights the provisionality of such an approach by paying attention to how post-1980s women playwrights and directors engage with mythical and historical texts and contexts. Marilena Zaroulia looks at questions of temporality and nostalgia in relation to the National Theatre’s season ‘What is our homeland’ (2011–13). In this framework, Zaroulia particularly interrogates the role of the institution in imagining in-crisis national identities. The question of temporality and rupture is at the core of Natascha Siouzouli’s essay which develops a narrative around perceptions of inside and outside, despair and hope, certainty and precarity, against the backdrop of the 2015 Greek referendum and the space of a performance workshop in Terzopoulos’s Attis theatre.

The second part of this special issue further expands on the principles of change and exchange, aesthetics, politics and conditions of production through the voices of a range of Greek theatre makers. All contributors, varying from more established theatre companies to artists and curators existing in-between local and international spaces, belong to the ‘now’ of Greek theatre praxis; they doggedly navigate those precarious cultural and social spaces and engage in some way or another with ‘the outside’ whether this means ‘the marginal’ or ‘the international’. This exchange appears in the form of short manifestos or critical reflections that capture artistic visions and anxieties as well as conversations with academics whereby the above concerns are further unpacked in a dialogic form.

As two academics looking at Greece and Greek theatre from a distance and from our own precarious nomadic spaces, we hope that this issue addresses a call for engaging with Greek theatre now inside and outside Greek borders. Extending the provocation of a time past, the contributions here seek to challenge and be challenged.

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