Introdução

Primadonna assoluta Maria Callas (1923-1977) and actor and stage director Alexis Minotis (1898 or 1900-1990), whose age placed them one generation apart, both delved with great enthusiasm and perseverance into the past of their respective theatrical fields. Cretan-born Minotis’ contribution to the revival of ancient Greek tragedy in the thirties, first as an actor and later as a stage director, left its mark indelibly inscribed in this archetypical theatrical art form, while Callas’ contribution to the bel canto revival of the fifties is considered the most important element in the restoration of this early 19th century musical art form.

As the music critic of The Observer (London), Peter Heyworth, wrote about Callas’ love of the forgotten bel canto operas, when he saw the Covent Garden production of Cherubini’s Medea in June 1959, after she and Alexis Minotis had already inaugurated their collaboration in Dallas in 1958:

“Unlike most of her kind, Maria Callas has never been content to subsist on a diet of Butterflys and Ariadnas; her singing is essentially too creative for her to be satisfied with mere repetition of well-worn successes. During the past few years her search for new fields to conquer has led to the revival of a number of almost forgotten works, and notably those lying in that shadowy and deserted trough between the decline of eighteenth-century opera seria and the rise of Verdi and Wagner. [...] Madame Callas is much nearer to ancient Greece than to revolutionary France. While Cherubini trundles out his clichés she storms the heights with Euripides. It must indeed be many years since a singer has given so compelling a dramatic performance”[1]

1. Alexis Minotis and the revival of ancient Greek tragedy at the National (Royal) Theatre of Greece

As it seems, both Callas and Minotis participated in revivals of forgotten theatrical wonders before they even met. Minotis developed his acting skills under the guidance of stage director, Fotos Politis,[2] of the National Theatre of Greece, from its initial performance in March 1932 to Politis’ early death in 1934. Politis was succeeded by Dimitris Rondiris (1899-1981), a German-educated stage director who had attended the Reinhardt Seminar and become an assistant to Germany’s greatest interwar director, Max Reinhardt, at the Salzburg Festival and the Deutsches Theater in Berlin. Reinhardt was experimenting with ancient Greek tragedies presented in circuses, because they were the closest theatrical architectural forms to their open-air ancient Greek counterparts, instead of the closed Italianate European theatres.

It was Politis and Rondiris who were responsible for the revival of ancient Greek tragedy, creating what came to be called “the tradition of the National Theatre of Greece”. A number of attempts were known both in Greece and abroad beginning in the 19th century up to poet Angelos Sikelianos’ 1927 and 1930 Delphic Festivals, where Aeschylus’ Prometheus Bound and The Suppliants were staged respectively at Delphi. However, it was stage directors Politis and Rondiris and the theatre’s general director Costis Bastias, who established in the thirties a systematic, theatrical tradition that besides the Athenian Odeon of Herodes Atticus, dared to use for the first time since antiquity the hard-to-reach ancient theatre of Epidaurus in 1938, presenting Sophocles’ Electra, to an audience of 2500!

Epidaurus, Ancient Theatre, 19 June 1960: Actor and stage director Alexis Minotis as Oedipus in Euripides’ The Phoenician Women

It is at this time that Minotis becomes Greece’s top actor, especially after the National (Royal) Theatre’s 1939 tour of Oxford, Cambridge, London, Frankfurt and Berlin, in June and July, two months before World War II broke out in Poland. He appeared in Hamlet, a role he had methodically studied in depth, as was his way with everything that had to do with his...
performances. It is interesting that in 1936, the Theatre had sent him to Germany to familiarize both himself and Bastias and Rondiris back home with the German theatrical scene. In one of his many letters to Athens, he relates that he saw twice performing and also met Gustaf Gründgens, Germany's greatest Hamlet, studied his every motion, and believed that the Greek troupe had nothing to fear from the competition. He was not wrong. Minotis was also lucky to see in Athens the Old Vic troupe (29 March - 2 April 1939), which staged Hamlet with the young Alec Guinness in the title role, gaining much valuable knowledge of the British way of putting on a Shakespearean tragedy. At Minotis’ performance of Hamlet at ‘His Majesty’s Theatre’ in London, Alec Guinness was in the stalls watching this new Greek Hamlet. It was his turn to see another Hamlet. The London Evening News summed up the impression left by Alexis Minotis’ Hamlet in prewar Britain as follows: “A Hamlet who, in turn was cruel, cunning, generous, sympathetic, hysterical, and yet remained the most lovable of men – a Hamlet unforgettable. Alexis Minotis was this astonishing character. Even if you have counted your Hamlets by the hundreds you might very well place this one at the top”.

His participation in the National Theatre (1932-1941), under the guidance of Politis and then Rondiris, gave him the opportunity to appear in many other Shakespearean roles including Mark Anthony in Anthony and Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, Shylock in The Merchant of Venice, Richard III, Henry IV, and Edgar and later Lear in King Lear. At the same time he appeared in ancient Greek tragedies like Aeschylus' Agamemnon and Sophocles' Oedipus Rex. But, most important, he was on stage or followed rehearsals closely, watching Rondiris’ exhausting teaching methods and interpretations of the ancient texts and realizing the many problems like the role of the chorus, the movement of the actors and their gestures, innumerable speech exercises, face expressions, the rhythm of the performance and others.

In 1941, during the German occupation, Minotis escaped from Greece and joined his wife, the actress Katina Paxinou, who was in the U.S., where he spent the next ten years acting in Hollywood movies. His repertoire included Prometheus Bound, Agamemnon, The Persians, Oedipus Rex, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone, Philoctetes, Hecuba, Medea, The Phoenician Women, and Hippolytus. And his best lady was his equally famous wife, Oscar winner and tragedienne Katina Paxinou.

Notes:
2. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fotos_Politis
4. This letter (10 October 1936), as well as many others by Minotis, is kept in the Costis Bastias Archive in Athens.
5. “This Hamlet will be all Greek to him”, Daily Mail (London), 20 June 1939.

2. The Dallas Cherubini Medea (1958)

As Minotis worked on his tragedies in Greece and elsewhere, another Greek performer, the world’s most famous soprano, Maria Callas, was making a name for herself internationally. One of her favourite operas, Medea by Luigi Cherubini, had been in her repertoire since she first sang it at Florence in 1953, staged by Margherita Wallmann with maestro Vittorio Gui conducting. She also sang it at La Scala the same year with the conductor Leonard Bernstein. In 1958, she opened at La Scala on 9 April with five performances of Anna Bolena and on that same evening Alexis Minotis and the National Theatre of Greece opened in Paris at the Théâtre des Nations in the historic Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt, with Euripides’ Medea.

Callas had never met Minotis officially, but she remembered him when she was hired for the first time professionally by...
Dallas, 6(?) November 1958, State Fair Music Hall
Costis Bastias at the National Opera of Greece in 1940. Minotis was then the star of the National Theatre of Greece, which coincidentally also housed the newly found Opera, while she was an unknown. Now, he was also the stage director with new staging methods and interpretations that people were talking about. Callas decided to use him to stage the Dallas Medea.

That same summer of 1958, Callas closed the agreement with the Dallas Civic Opera for two performances of La traviata staged by Franco Zeffirelli and two of Medea in early November, but said that for the latter she would soon choose her own director. She called Minotis and suggested that he undertook the stage direction. Minotis was surprised and replied that such an offer was an honour for him but added:

“I have no idea about opera. I have never directed this type of theatre. And please forgive me Mrs. Callas, but I don’t even like it.”

Finally, Callas overwhelmed him and even agreed to send maestro Nicola Rescigno to Athens to guide him through the score. Rescigno, who would conduct the opera, stayed for a week, but a new problem arose when Minotis had read the libretto. He discovered many alterations to Euripides’ original myth which he demanded that they be restored. The problem was that Callas wasn’t singing the original French opéra-comique Médée by François-Benoît Hoffmann, but an Italian version translated from a German version. To confuse matters even more, there were shorter and longer versions, with recitatives added that were not composed by Cherubini. Still, against the advice of the American producers and the Italian musicians, Minotis got his way. However, we have never seen a corrected version by Minotis and it seems that his corrections were finally minimal.

The next problem was that Minotis proposed the famous Greek painter, Yannis Tsarouchis, for sets and costumes. Callas was delighted, but the Civic Opera informed them that the local trade unions would not allow foreigners to replace their workers. Finally, a compromise was reached that all costumes would be prepared in Greece and sent to Dallas, ready to wear, while the sets would be prepared by local American workshops to scale models by Tsarouchis. Of course, Tsarouchis would follow Minotis to Dallas to guide his work and begin rehearsals, Minotis stopped working many times with her and every sign of originality to music critic Eugene Lewis by saying upon arrival:

“I believe that this will be the first time that the Cherubini opera has had an authentic classical Greek staging.”

The year 1958 was to be the Dallas Civic Opera’s first season with a full opera, in fact two, both with Callas. Its general director Lawrence Kelly and its artistic director and conductor Nicola Rescigno would become internationally known, and a new U.S. regional opera would be established that could compete with Chicago, San Francisco and even the austere ‘Met’ in New York. In fact it would often be referred to as ‘La Scala West’.

Upon arriving at Dallas, one more familiar face from the National Opera of Greece, who was now making a career at La Scala, joined them. It was the bass Nicolas Zaccaria (King Creon), whose Greek name was Zachariou and was born in 1923, the same year as Callas. As Minotis recounts, Callas enjoyed speaking Greek with her Greek colleagues during rehearsals and informal outings. According to the programme, she would first appear in La traviata, staged by film director Franco Zeffirelli on 31 October 1958 for two performances, and Minotis’ Medea would follow on 6 November for two more performances. The cast also included dramatic tenor Jon Vickers as Jason, American soprano Elisabeth Carron as Glaucce and mezzo-soprano Teresa Berganza as Neris and, of course, conductor Rescigno, who had coached Minotis in Athens.

Zeffirelli, with a most original brainwave, shows Violetta on her death-bed during the first-act prelude, and the rest of the opera seems like a flashback, until the conclusion comes round again to the death-bed. Minotis also pointed out his corrections, Callas was delighted, but the Civic Opera informed them that the local trade unions would not allow foreigners to replace their workers. Finally, a compromise was reached that all costumes would be prepared in Greece and sent to Dallas, ready to wear, while the sets would be prepared by local American workshops to scale models by Tsarouchis. Of course, Tsarouchis would follow Minotis to Dallas to guide his work and begin rehearsals, Minotis stopped working many times with her and every sign of originality to music critic Eugene Lewis by saying upon arrival:

“I believe that this will be the first time that the Cherubini opera has had an authentic classical Greek staging.”

Dallas, 6(?) November 1958, State Fair Music Hall
Notes:
2. Alexis Minotis, Distant Friendships (in Greek), pp. 113-120, Kaktos Editions, Athens 1981. In 1985, Tassos Lignadis, artistic director of the National Theatre of Greece, collaborated in a collective work in Greek, The Actor Alexis Minotis, where he also mentions how Callas came to choose Minotis as stage director of the Dallas Medea.

3. The London Cherubini Medea at Covent Garden (June 1959)
The Callas/Minotis Medea triumph at Dallas in 1958 uncovered a completely new Medea to the opera world and placed the new Dallas Civic Opera on the map. Italian-born Cherubini, the leading composer of French operas during the French Revolution, highly regarded by Beethoven, became fashionable again, while music reviewers throughout the U.S., but also in Europe, wrote in their columns with enthusiasm, save for a few remarks concerning Callas’ high notes. Offers arrived for exchange programmes from major and historic opera houses like the Paris Opéra and London’s Royal Opera House Covent Garden. Only two roles were changed in the London production — Neris was replaced by mezzo-soprano Fiorenza Cossotto and Glaucce by soprano Joan Carlyle. Part of the arrangement was for London to reciprocate, by sending their Callas/Zeffirelli production of Lucia di Lammermoor to Dallas. And since Callas would again be in Dallas for Lucia, it was decided that she would also have the opportunity to appear once more in Medea in November 1959.

The Medea opened to a full house on 17 June 1959, for five performances. It had not been heard at Covent Garden since 1870 and Maria Callas took twelve curtain calls “while the audience clapped and cheered for more than twenty minutes”. One of the most authoritative figures in the London opera scene, British music critic and opera director Andrew Porter (1928-2015), for over twenty years the lead critic of The Financial Times, wrote in his column:
“Her acting was fiery; her singing made its effect through superfine gradations of tone-colour-delicate shadings of particular words and lines drawn with the sureness and subtlety of a great artist. Her voice was in a beautifully responsive state, taking all the colours she played upon the phrases, and no unwanted or sour ones. Mme. Callas is not only superior, but essentially different in quality from other singers to-day. To her alone can we apply the kind of praises that once were lavished on Pasta, Malibran and Viardot. In performance she becomes a dedicated servant of the composer and his librettist, seeking everything of value that they put into their score.”

In an interview for The Times (London), Callas explains, with passion, that which is to sing and especially to act in an opera, something often forgotten both by the public and the singers. At one particular point she says:
“Let’s face it. We are used to hammy, stuck-together productions. People would love opera if given a chance, but there are singers who don’t act, who sing the notes and don’t bother about the sense. They think that singing notes well is enough, but it is just the beginning. There are mechanisms, such as phrasing, and on to floriture, legato, portamento, scales, trills. Then recitative, speaking in music, which is difficult because there is no exact indication, and the values are approximate. Still it is only a beginning. Some critics, even, don’t understand, are content with sound. It is not your own personal sound. You serve the composer, the period, the kind of music. The sound I make in I puritani is not the same sound as in Norma, though both are by the same composer.”

Alexis Minotis’ contribution to the staging of Medea was highly appreciated by the British music critics, who under-
London, 15 June 1959, Royal Opera House Covent Garden
stood that his work was very different than Margherita Wallmann’s. It stayed closer to the principles of ancient tragedy, which he knew so well, having played and staged innumerable tragedies before Callas decided that this was what she wanted for Medea. Already for the Dallas production, the previous year, music critic Jack Kilpatrick had noted:

“Minotis brought refreshing new concepts to the trite and tired traditions of operatic stage movement. Still, he did so without usurpation of the prerogatives of music and without distortion of proportions that must properly exist.”[4]

The Times (London) commented on Minotis’ work that:

“In Mr. Minotis, who is the foremost actor and producer in Athens and incidentally the husband of the great Mme. Paxinou, the opera has an authority on the production of Greek tragedy, and the whole staging of the work is on classical lines, even down to the right number for the chorus.”[5]

Still, it is strange that none of the British music critics ever realized that twenty years earlier, on 19 June 1939, Minotis had appeared on the stage of His Majesty’s Theatre in London, under the patronage of the Duke and Duchess of Kent, and played a memorable Hamlet. Theatre critic Anthony Squire wrote in his column, at that time:

“Let me begin by saying that this production makes every ‘Hamlet’ that I have ever seen in this country or any other look like the flimsiest amateur theatricals.”[6]

Maybe, twenty years is far too long for people to remember. However, when in the sixties I visited Minotis in his Athens apartment with a photographer, who was to prepare a photo for the cover of a magazine I was publishing, over a cup of coffee he told me a story about his audition with Alfred Hitchcock for the 1946 film Notorious with Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman. I feel I can digress a bit and let my readers enjoy the story. It seems Minotis was finding it difficult to be hired by the huge Hollywood studios, because his English was rather poor. He tried out at the Notorious audition and Hitchcock who was present in person chose him. After the audition Hitchcock asked him where he was from. “Greece,” said Minotis, “You must have great theatre in Greece,” replied Hitchcock. “Just before the War, I was in London and I attended a Greek representation of Hamlet. I don’t remember the name of the actor, but he was magnificent”. And Minotis replied timidly, “It was I.”

Notes:
4. Dr. Jack Kilpatrick, “For the first time in America, the Callas ‘Medea’ is heard”, Dallas Times Herald, 7 November 1958.

4. Aristotle Onassis invades Maria Callas’ serene life style

Few people realized that Callas’ extravagant life-style, with the world’s press, TV, and radio promoting her constantly, with
magazine covers hanging on newsstands in every country, with ‘La Divina’, as she came to be called by her millions of fans, taking curtain calls in the greatest theatres of the world, often with heads of state in the audience at gala performances, was actually a rather bourgeois existence, with many hours devoted to studying, memorizing parts, playing the piano, exercising her voice with an accompanist and rehearsing over and over again. For every performance, she would memorize not only her part, but every other part in the opera. She would expect from herself and everyone else participating to be well rehearsed, prompt and attentive and would express her disapproval in no uncertain terms when she felt that some people weren’t taking the business on hand seriously. For the years at Milan, where she lived with her husband Giovanni Battista “Titta” Meneghini on the Via Buonarroti and appeared at La Scala, after rehearsals or performances the Meneghinis would often go out to dinner with their friends, who were predominantly colleagues from the opera, conductors etc. Sometimes, after dinner they would return to the Via Buonarroti with them, because Callas needed more time to unwind. On such occasions, Meneghini would often ask to be excused, because he was tired and had to go to bed, while the others carried on till late.

Then, in 1957, she met international high life columnist Elsa Maxwell, who was syndicated all over the U.S., and everything changed. She was introduced to high society parties where the rich and famous were habitués and loved it, dragging Titta behind her, bewildered and speaking little English. On one such occasion, in early September 1957, the Meneghinis attended the Elsa Maxwell Venice party at the Excelsior Hotel on the Lido beach, followed by a party at the Danielli Hotel, which lasted four days. Maxwell introduced them to Greek shipping tycoon Aristotle Onassis and his wife Tina. The next time the couple met was at the Paris Opéra where, on 19 December 1958, Callas gave a gala concert in honour of the ‘Légion d’Honneur’ in the presence of the President of the French Republic. The Opéra was at its best, with uniforms, decorations and French glamour, as le Tout-Paris was present. Onassis was impressed and dazzled by the event, watching top French society applauding the little Greek girl from the Bronx. After the performance, he and his wife went backstage to congratulate their newly found friend and invite her and Titta to their famous yacht, the Christina, for a Mediterranean cruise. Callas was hesitant in view, amongst other obligations, of her upcoming London performances of Medea in June 1959. Onassis said that he knew Alexis Minotis well and his wife tragedienne Katina Paxinou and would be present on opening night.

Of course, arriving in London a few days before the performance of 17 June, little did he imagine that all tickets would be sold out. After being overwhelmed by Callas’ triumph in Paris, he felt he couldn’t appear at the Royal Opera House with just two seats for his wife and himself. He had to turn to the black market and pay through the nose to secure the seats he wished, unfortunately scattered in groups of two or three in the stalls and the Grand Tier boxes. Especially since he had started having other thoughts for the first woman he had ever met who was on a par with him, and whose fame internationally superseded his own. He would invite the best of British society to the opera, a party of 33 guests, to be followed by dinner and dancing in honour of Callas at the exclusive Dorchester Hotel, to be joined with an additional 160 impressive guests. Under the title “A scramble for tickets and twelve curtains for Callas begin the big night” (18 June 1959), William Hickey of the Daily Express covered the event at the Onassis party. Present were Lady Churchill, wife of Winston Churchill, her daughter Sarah Churchill, Dame Margot Fonteyn, Alexis Minotis, Mr. and Mrs. Douglas Fairbanks, Sir John Gielgud, Mr. and Mrs. Gary Cooper, Mr. and Mrs. Stavros Niarchos, Onassis’s brother-in-
law and rival, the Earl and Countess of Harewood, Cecil Beaton and others.

Many calls had preceded the London premiere, with both Aristotle and Tina Onassis insisting that Callas accept their invitation for the cruise. At the Dorchester party, ‘La Divina’ finally accepted and the following month, on 22 July 1959, the Christina sailed for Greek and Turkish waters, with the fated couples on board and various guests including Sir Winston and Lady Churchill. Though Callas was delighted with her affair with Onassis, that began during the cruise, and even hoped for marriage, the shipping tycoon never really understood her importance in the world of music and never appreciated her frail soul and her need for love. She was mostly another trophy to his many collections. In fact, he often insulted her talent and her profession. Still, he continued seeing her, even after his marriage to Jacqueline Bouvier-Kennedy, at her Paris apartment on the Avenue Georges Mandel in Paris, until his death in 1975.

5. The second Dallas Medea (November 1959) – “La Scala West”

John Rosenfield, “the cultural pontiff of the Southwest” according to Time Magazine, wrote in The Dallas Morning News, where for 41 years he was considered the cultural spokesman of Texas, about this second appearance of Maria Callas in Cherubini’s Medea, with the Dallas Civic Opera:

“[Callas] was there, in exceptionally good voice, for a role that lies well in her scale. This permits her to add tone-painting from an extraordinary palette to the creative enactment of a role larger, by far, than the opera or even the several adaptations of the Euripides play. [...] For the better part of the decade Madame Callas has sought to wrench Medea from Cherubini (1760-1842) and return her, with music, to Euripides (circa 431 B.C.). The concept reached ultimate flower last year and only with the Dallas Civic Opera, which engaged that scholarly classicist, Alexis Minotis, to stage it. Action both choric and choreographic and scenery by John Tsarouchis, went into a tug of war with Cherubini’s somewhat pedantic score. Cherubini has profusely wished solos, ensemble pieces and sonorous declamation on his heroin. And Madame Callas sang them with some tonal velvet and positively mezzo-soprano richness and variety in middle and lower register. [...] This production of Medea remains the most creative achievement of the Dallas Civic Opera. How was it received by the throng? With a standing ovation.”[1]

November 1959 was actually Maria Callas’ third visit to Dallas. She first inaugurated the Dallas Civic Opera with a gala concert performance on 21 November 1957, conducted by the Italian-American conductor Nicola Rescigno, and for this she was named its “godmother”. Rescigno also led the orchestra in the Medea performances with Callas and Minotis at Dallas in 1958, London in 1959 and again in Dallas in November 1959. His final collaboration with the Callas-Minotis team was at Epidaurus in August 1961. The Minotis production of Medea continued at La Scala in December 1961 for three performances and in May 1962 for two performances, but with Thomas Schippers conducting.

Callas had to arrive early in Dallas to appear first in Donizetti’s Lucia di Lammermoor – as agreed between the Dallas Civic Opera and the Royal Opera House Covent Garden – on 6 and 8 November, and then in Medea on 19 and 21 November 1959. In between the two operas she flew to Italy to appear at a hearing in Brescia, where her husband Meneghini had filed suit for legal separation, as well as property, jewels, art works etc., that all had to be settled. Among other things, she was awarded their Milan home on the Via Buonarroti. The next day, she flew back to Dallas just in time for the dress rehearsal of Medea.

Closing the 1959 season, Rual Askew, assistant editor of The Dallas Morning News, under John Rosenfield (see above), summed up the 1958 and 1959 seasons, where a new U.S. regional opera had had such spectacular success with Callas, Minotis, Zeffirelli and a thrilling array of artists, by writing:

“Yes, Dallas Civic Opera has been fortunate beyond even its own wildest dreams in having the incomparable talents of La Callas at its disposal, but it has responded in kind by providing the most exciting artistry in depth of an American opera stage today, in our considered opinion.”[2]

Notes:
Dallas, 19 or 21 November 1959, State Fair Music Hall, dressing room
Maria Callas and Alexis Minotis – Part II

An engaging collaboration for a Norma and Medea in Greek style

John C. Bastias


In Antiquity, pilgrims arrived from all over Greece to worship the god of health, Asclepius, at his shrine at Epidaurus. Later, the theatre was built, the most magnificent theatre of the ancient world with the most wonderful acoustics. Lost through the centuries, excavations began in 1881 and are still ongoing having revealed, besides the main theatre, a multitude of shrines, a smaller theatre, temples and other buildings.

When the Greek National Opera booked Maria Callas to appear at the open-air ancient theatre of Epidaurus in 1960, it was considered quite a coup. The Greek Opera, founded in 1939 by Costis Bastias, its first Director-General, originally began its performances in March 1940, as part of the National Theatre of Greece, housed in the 1900s neo-classical theatre to plans by Austrian architect, Ernst Ziller. It was Bastias, who had been Director-General of the National Theatre since 1937, who dared in 1938 to use the remote Epidaurus theatre, for the first time since Antiquity, to stage Sophocles’ Electra with stage director, Dimitri Rondiris, and tragedienne, Katina Paxinou, in the lead role. The theatre was not to be used again until 1954, because of World War II and the Greek Civil War, and from then on it would only be used for ancient tragedies.

Bastias had to convince the government to approve his request to stage an Italian opera in the most sacred ancient theatre of Greece, against strong protests both from the National Theatre, which now had the monopoly of its use for summer festivals, and from the press, part of which considered such representations a sacrilege. He also had to convince Callas, whose last visit to Greece in 1957, for a concert at the ancient theatre of Herodes Atticus at the foot of the Acropolis, had been turned into a political scandal by the opposition party because of her fee, which they considered exorbitant. At that time, she had said that she would never sing again in Greece.

But she had a weak spot for Bastias, who was the first person to recognize her talent after an audition in 1940 at his home, arranged by her teacher, veteran coloratura soprano Elvira de Hidalgo. She was immediately hired.

Bastias was again appointed Director-General of the National Opera in late 1959, when the Opera was now appearing in its new building on Academias St., and immediately met with Minotis who was now with the National Theatre, as an actor and stage director, especially for ancient tragedies in the theatres of Herodes Atticus and Epidaurus. Bastias was interested in Cherubini’s Medea to be staged by the Greek National Opera in Epidaurus with Minotis directing, after its triumphant representations in Dallas and London in 1958 and 1959. He first secured the Prime Minister’s approval and Minotis’ agreement and then contacted Callas. His argument was that an opera had never appeared at Epidaurus, one of the most important historic theatres in the world. Callas would be the first soprano to sing at...
a theatre with the most perfect acoustics ever. It would be front-page news everywhere. He also suggested that Callas offers her fee to the Greek Opera to inaugurate a scholarship fund for young singers to travel abroad to perfect their voices and gain valuable training. Callas finally agreed but told Bastias that she preferred Bellini’s *Norma* to Cherubini’s *Medea* because it was “more *bel canto*.”[2] They also agreed on three performances in August 1960.

Maria Callas arrived in Athens on 9 August 1960, and the next day a press conference was held at her hotel, the Grande Bretagne. She explained how the agreement between her and Bastias came about and when she reached the question of her fee, she turned to him and said: “Do you want to say it better, Costis? To explain it better then I?” And Bastias continued explaining for the first time how the Maria Callas Scholarship Fund would be set up.

Opening night was the evening of 21 August 1960, and the whole country, sensing that something of outstanding importance was taking place, felt great pride and joy. Using every possible means, including cars, busses, trains, even ships to a nearby port, 15,000 spectators crowded into the serene, Argolic plane to attend the performance at this most elegant and ancient theatre with the perfect acoustics – Epidaurus! Though everyone had heard of Callas, most had never seen or heard her on stage. But the gods were not to be kind to the humans on this exceptional evening. A heavy downpour rained out the performance, a little before the opening, something very rare in August. People scrambled to their cars or gathered under trees seeking protection, as Callas was driven to the port of Epidaurus, where Onassis had sent his yacht’s tender to bring her on board.

A new opening was announced for 24 August, and, in spite of the previous disappointment, another 15,000 spectators attended the new opening. This time without a hitch. They were not to be disappointed this time. It was a magnificent performance. Minotis worked very hard with Callas to bring Bellini’s masterpiece closer to the rules of ancient Greek tragedy, as he had already done with Cherubini’s *Medea* in Dallas and London. As the performance began, the public sitting in the tiered semi-circular cavea could see the Argolic hills in the distance beyond the stage, as if they were part of the set, and they could hear Norma’s father, Oroveso, chief of the Druids, sending them there to wait for the new moon. Both the stage director, Minotis, and the set designer, Tsarouchis, showed respect both for the sternness and simplicity of this natural set and for the ancient theatre, and adapted their interpretation accordingly.

Years later, during one of their conversations on what it was like to direct Callas, Minotis told her biographer Stelios Galatopoulos:

“I never ceased to be amazed by her instinctive ingenuity and resourcefulness. Certain movements that took us years in the theatre to improve and develop, were performed by her quite spontaneously. They simply came to her naturally. I cannot explain Maria’s dramatic instincts, her genius, better.”[3]

But Callas had also discussed with Galatopoulos her movements on stage in the two operas that Minotis had directed her:

“Even though my acting springs from the music, instinct does play a part. It must be the Greek in me that speaks, as I have done nothing outside the operatic stage. I was quite surprised when once I watched...
Epidaurus, Ancient Theatre, 24 August 1960: Norma,
above: with Ferruccio Mazzoli, Tullio Serafin and Mirto Picchi; below: with Mirto Picchi and Ferruccio Mazzoli
the Greek actor-producer Minotis rehearse the Greek chorus in Cherubini’s Medea that I was appearing in. Suddenly I realized they were performing the same movements I did as Alceste a few years before. I had never seen Greek tragedy performed. When I was in Greece it was mostly during the war and I was studying singing. I did not have much time or money for anything else and yet my movements as the Greek Alcestes were similar to those of the Greek chorus in Medea. It must be instinct.

It seems, however, that Minotis had also studied the Druids to discover if there was any connection between them and Ancient Greece. And, in fact, there was. Influenced by the teachings of the philosopher and mathematician, Pythagoras, they or their contemporaries even used Greek characters to write about the Druids, since it was forbidden to pass on their knowledge in written form. In his article about the staging of Norma, published in the Epidaurus performance’s playbill, Minotis has written:

“The Druids... were influenced by the teachings of Pythagoras. All the texts they left are written with Greek characters. Such information and other similar sources, have facilitated us to present the characters of the opera and its environment with a much restrained primitiveness, [...] and to bring them somewhat closer to an imitation of the ancient classical style, that blends with our own amphitheatre.”

Typical of the way Callas worked and of her attention to detail is Minotis’ description of the rehearsals. Since it was the first time that she or anyone else had sung in the theatre of Epidaurus – and it was an open-air theatre, making it easier for sound to escape, she wanted to test the acoustics and pinpoint the exact place from were the famous arias, like the ‘Casta Diva’, would be sung. I quote from Minotis’ book (in Greek), Distant Friendships:

“The rehearsals, with the whole cast every evening, were not enough for her. At about to every morning, she would want me to escort her to the theatre, as the sun was beginning to bake the marble, so she could search for the right spot for the ‘Casta Diva’, testing the acoustics. We wore wide-rumed straw hats to protect us from the sun and stayed in the amphitheatre for long hours, while Callas tested her voice and her steps on Tsarouchis’s inclined sets.”

Dionisis Yatras, the music critic of the major Athens daily To Vema, wrote in his Saturday column about another aspect of the performance.

“The many complications that surface whenever an operatic work, created for a closed theatre, appears in an ancient amphitheater were solved by Alexis Minotis in such a convincing way that they became invisible. And thus, a new advantage was added, which does not exist in the closed theatres. The ancient theatre imposed itself in such a way as to allow the best possible use for the performance.”

But things were not that simple. There was much concern and there were differences of opinion, not so much about Callas’s feat and interpretation, but about the very use of an open-air ancient thea-

No. 77 – March 2016

Maria Callas Magazine
tre for a musical masterpiece composed at another time by a composer who wrote it when theatres were no longer in the open. Cherubini never imagined that *Norma* would be performed at Epidaurus. He was composing for the theatres of his time. Belgian-born Greek composer and music critic, Marios Varvoglis, stood up against the use of ancient theatres, amphitheatres or arenas, not because a sacrilege was taking place against a specific people and their traditions, but for purely musical reasons. He wrote in his column:

“I am confident that no other open-air theatre in the world could transmit with such fidelity even the very last note of Norma, to the last listener sitting at the highest row of the cavea at the vast theatre of Epidaurus. But I’m just as confident that despite its exquisite acoustics, the ancient theatre cannot compete with any one of the closed theatres. We must finally realize that music and song are adversely affected when exposed to open spaces.”

**Notes:**

1. For a detailed account of Maria Callas’ career in Greece see: John Bastias, “Maria Callas’ Greek Adventure. The story of a strained relationship and the man who stood by her”, *Maria Callas Magazine*, No. 70, November 2013;

2. Following the above article in the *Maria Callas Magazine*, the Athens press conference by Maria Callas and Costis Bastias was translated into English in the same issue (pp. 38-41), and published complete for the first time; in it, Callas relates in her own words the agreement she reached with Bastias.


8. See http://www bach-cantatas.com/Lib/Varvoglis-Marios.htm

7. The Epidaurus Medea (August 1961)
Cherubini's Medea in 1961 was better understood by the Greek public than Bellini's Norma in 1960. After all, it was originally a Greek tragedy by Euripides, whose plot even Greek children knew. Consequently, it was much more popular, and Bastias felt that it would help establish his dream to present another major opera at Epidaurus every summer. The public – not the opera goers, but the general public, very few of whom had ever seen an opera – were carried away by Callas's fame and the fact that her parents were Greek, went wild with excitement and anticipation about her arrival. Finally, on 3 August, at 1 pm, Onassis' yacht docked at the old port of Epidaurus, where Costis Bastias and Alexis Minotis were waiting to board for brunch with Callas and Onassis. Afterwards, Callas, Bastias and Minotis drove to the ancient theatre, and the small Xenia hotel annex next to it, where La Divina could rest for two hours, following Minotis' directions, and be at the theatre at 6 pm for the first dress rehearsal. In the meantime, Onassis sailed for the seaside Athens suburb of Glyfada, next to the airport, to catch his plane for Egypt.

In the dressing room, Minotis, Tsarouchis, who was responsible for sets and costumes, and eight seamstresses were waiting to start the fitting for Callas' costumes. Then the sandals didn't fit well and Minotis sent a car to Ligourgio, the nearby village, to bring back the shoemaker to take measurements for two new pairs of custom-fit sandals to be ready by the next morning. Callas entered the theatre with

Epidaurus, 4 August 1961: Medea
left: with Alexis Minotis, Nicola Rescigno and Costis Bastias, right: with Alexis Minotis, Costis Bastias and Yannis Tsarouchis

Epidaurus, 4 August 1961: Medea, during dress rehearsals, with Nicola Rescigno and Giuseppe Modesti
Epidaurus, 4 August 1961: Medea, during dress rehearsal
Epidaurus, 4 August 1961: Medea, during dress rehearsals, with Jon Vickers (a.l.), Kiki Morfoniou (a.r., b.r.) and Giuseppe Modesti (b.l.)
Bastias around 8 pm and they climbed several rows up the cavea waiting for Callas’ cue. She was not in costume, like everyone else, but had changed into a simple print dress. The Italian-American maestro, Nicola Rescigno, looking very tanned and athletic, raised his baton and said “Avanti”. The orchestra began the Introduction. Ten minutes later, Callas was on stage.

Besides the above, credit should be given to the chorus master, Michalis Vourtis; the choreographer, Maria Hors, under the supervision of Minotis, who died this year, Canadian tenor, Jon Vickers (Jason); Italian bass-baritone, Giuseppe Modesti (King Creon); Greek soprano, Soula Glantzi (Glauce); Greek mezzo-soprano, Kiki Morfoniou (Neris); and many others.

The next day, Friday 4 August, the final dress rehearsal started after a 20-minute delay because the singers and the musicians refused to begin unless BBC TV withdrew its cameras as no agreement had been reached on the BBC’s rights. The rehearsal took place in the presence of a few tourists who had sneaked into the huge theatre and some villagers from nearby villages who sat very quietly, full of awe, admiration and respect at this wonder of human cultural achievement that was taking place before them. Journalists and photographers had also started arriving for the big event on Sunday. Sitting apart with his cameras was one of the 20th century’s greatest photographers, Henri Cartier-Bresson, who spent a whole week taking photographs before dress rehearsals had even begun until after the first night.

On Saturday, Callas rested her voice to be in shape for the Sunday performance. Opening night was Sunday 6 August at 8 pm, but there had been a festive atmosphere since the early afternoon as more and more people arrived and sat down outside the theatre in small groups, some having picnics. As the parking area began to fill up with the 2500 automobiles, 200 busses and 80 diplomatic cars belonging to embassies and foreign missions that would eventually arrive, the public started congregating around the theatre’s entrances to catch a glimpse of the celebrities. One of the first was Callas’s father George Kaloyeropoulos, escorting his other daughter, Jackie and looking very proud. Other guests included the Prime Minister, Constantine Karamanlis, with his wife Amalia; the Vice-President, Professor Panayiotis Kanellopoulos; most of the Greek Cabinet; Greek international pianist, Gina Bachauer; society columnist, Elsa Maxwell accompanied by Prince Pierre (father of Prince Rainer of Monaco); Arturo Toscanini’s daughter Wally Toscanini, her daughter Emanuel Castelbarco, Duchess of Acquarone; and another 16,000 people, eager to see and hear La Divina. A second performance took place the following Sunday 13 August.

Music critic and violinist D. A. Hamoudopoulos, who became Director-General of the National Opera of Greece in 1970, wrote in his column in the daily Eleftheria (Liberty),[1] about Callas’s major contribution to opera:

“If opera, vis a vis drama or symphonic music, is considered a ‘shallower’ art form, this is due to the ignorance of conductors and the lack of vision, especially of singers, who are only concerned with the brilliance of their voice, incapable to discern what is hidden deeper in the song and what is needed for its fulfillment, i.e., meaning, thought, emotion, expression. The art of opera has declined because consciously or unconsciously, from selfishness or ignorance, it has been mistreated by the experts and the connoisseurs. And this decline – alas! – has become ‘tradition’. Today, Maria Callas, clashing with this ‘tradition’, restores to opera what has been lost and what has been refused: of its real power and content. This is why Callas is great, great in the history of opera.”

Notes:
8. Medea at La Scala (December 1961 and May 1962)

After the Epidaurus performances of the Callas/Minotis Medea, the next and last step in this developing itinerary was Milan’s Teatro alla Scala. A whole year had gone by since Callas had last appeared at La Scala as Paolina in Donizetti’s Poliuto in December 1960, and her fans as well as her enemies were waiting impatiently to see this new interpretation of Medea in order to cheer or jeer.

Maestro Nicola Rescigno returned to the States and another American conductor, Thomas Schippers, highly regarded for his work in opera, who died young in 1977, the same year as Callas, joined the Medea troupe. Besides tenor Jon Vickers, most of the other protagonists were replaced: bass Giuseppe Modesti (Creon) by the Bulgarian Nicolai Ghiaurov, Greek mezzo Kiki Morfoniou (Neris) by Giulietta Simionato, and Greek soprano Soula Glantzì (Glauce) by Ivana Tosini.

Opening night was on 11 December, 1961 and La Scala was packed from the stalls all the way to the gallery, where the younger generation but also the hired claques, that were a tradition in this most famous of all Italian opera houses, clapped or booed with enthusiasm or fanaticism. And thus, in the first act, where Medea is pleading with Jason, a note or two didn’t come out just right. The claques didn’t miss the opportunity to boo. Callas was pleading with Jason singing “crudel” (cruel man). According to the musical score, the orchestra stops for a moment and then the soprano repeats the word “crudel” as the orchestra starts again to play. Callas’ biographer Pierre-Jean Rémy, who seems to have been present, relates how Callas, furious, delayed the second “crudel”, with a long, suspense-filled pause:

“The music stopped. Everyone waited. Callas stared out at the audience [...]. When it came, her second ‘crudel’ was addressed to her audience. ‘Ho dato tutto a te’ – ‘I gave you everything’. She shook her fist at the audience and at the world. From then on there were only bravos and shouts of enthusiasm.”[1]

And thus, the thirty curtain calls that brought Callas on the stage again and again and established this performance as the “great evening” of that La Scala season, with Cherubini’s pre-Beethoven masterpiece, confirmed that the 1961-1962 Medea performances were Callas’ final triumphs at La Scala. She was not to sing Medea again at this temple of opera.

Milan’s foremost music critic, Franco Abbiati, who for 36 years worked for the Corriere della Sera, wrote in his column:

“For us, this Medea remains unique in the world for its intensely psychological penetration of the role, for its internal passion and for a touching, harmonious shudder.”[2]

And stage director Alexis Minotis told Achilleas Mamakis, theatre reviewer of the Athenian weekly Eikones, a copy of the French Paris Match, when asked what happened at Milan:

“Without question, hysteria. The whole La Scala theatre packed with an audience of 2400 mostly subscribers, i.e., both select and knowledge people, who were opera regulars, unendlessly glorified La Callas. All these spectators were standing and calling “Maria... Maria”, and for countless times the incomparable Greek soprano returned again and again on stage.”[3]

Sadly, Minotis’ enthusiasm doesn’t reappear concerning the Milan Medeas in books written by some of Callas’s most fervent supporters. Though for the 11 December 1961 première, most music critics in the press and writers in their biographies accepted that Callas was at the top of her form, the same did not hold for the following two performances on 29
Milan, Teatro alla Scala, ca. 10 December 1961: Medea, during dress rehearsals, with Jon Vickers
Milan, Teatro alla Scala, ca. 10 December 1961: Medea, during dress rehearsals, with Nicolai Ghiaurov (a.r.)
Milan, Teatro alla Scala, 11 December 1961: Medea, with Giulietta Simionato
May and 3 June 1962. Pierre-Jean Rémy, a diplomat, a member of the Académie française and a prolific writer, wrote in pain in his Callas biography about these two last performances:

“But now we come to those dreadful performances of Medea on 29 May and 3 June 1962 at La Scala. Physically her voice had never been worse. […] In Alexis Minotis’ monumental production […] Callas—Medea stood, her arm raised in a gesture which was never anyone’s but hers, trying in vain to stop time slipping through her fingers […] She prepared to say the words everyone feared. Who was this mysterious stranger, cloaked in black, defying Corinth and those who knew her? ‘Io? Medea!’ ‘I am Medea!’ and suddenly her voice cracked. Unbearably sad to watch, her voice on the point of giving out, she somehow struggled through the part but her voice was failing and would not obey her […] An outstanding achievement — this is what we remember when we listen to any of Callas’s recordings of Medea. It needed Callas to rescue Cherubini’s music from the century and a half of pompous dreariness into which it had sunk. […] But in Milan in 1962, it seems, only the ghost of a voice survived.”

Notes:

Bibliography
Books
• Ardoin, John and Fitzgerald, Gerald, Callas, a) The Art and the Life (Ardoin) and b) The great years (Fitzgerald), Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York 1974.
• Galatopoulos, Stelios, Maria Callas, Sacred Monster, London 1998.
• Rémy, Pierre-Jean, foreword by Lord Harewood, Maria Callas, A Tribute, New York 1978.
• Tosi, Bruno (ed.), The Young Maria Callas, Guernica Editions, Toronto 2010.

Articles
• Bastias, John, “Maria Callas’ Greek Adventure. The story of a strained relationship and the man who stood by her”, Maria Callas Magazine, No. 70, November 2013, Nuenen, The Netherlands.
• Leotsakos, Yiorgos, “Beyond her myth. Placing Callas in her epoch” (in Greek), newspaper The Sunday Vema (Athens), 25 September 1977.
• Minotis, Alexis, “Norma, Maria Callas” (in Greek), National Opera of Greece playbook (Epi-

Milan, Teatro alla Scala, 11 December 1961, after the performance of Medea, with Frixos Theologides, Katina Paxinou and Alexis Minotis