

# TDR Comment

## Theatre and Dance in Greece Is in Danger

*Leda Koutsodaskalou*

On 17 December 2022, the Greek government released Presidential Decree 85 signed by Greek President Katerina Sakellariopoulou announcing that all graduates of higher education drama schools, dance schools, music schools, and film schools are to be considered workers categorized as having completed solely secondary education. In other words, the diplomas and degrees of performing artists of public and private institutions alike were henceforth considered meaningless. These graduates no longer have the labor rights accorded to college graduates. In addition to its obvious ethical, artistic, and professional consequences, this decree is the official tombstone marking the nearly 30-year fight of Greek artists to reform their education and to have their professional rights recognized.

In fact, since 2003 upper-tier education for artists has been abolished in Greece. Since then, the government—even as it boasts internationally that Greece is the “cradle of civilization” and the “birthplace of theatre”—has purposely created a Kafkaesque institutional gap where there is no intention to offer or recognize university or its equivalent education for the performing arts. As I write this, thousands of performing arts graduates face a grim future.

Because these artists’ college degrees are considered equal to a high school diploma, they do not have access to MA programs in their discipline. Individuals who hold an MA or PhD from a foreign university find upon returning to Greece that these degrees are not recognized, that they have access only to the lowest tier of unemployment benefits, and that overall, their salaries have been reduced. The decree not only reduces performing artists’ income, but more importantly undermines their very identity.

In response, beginning on 22 December 2022 and continuing, artists are protesting and participating in massive strikes. Students in all of Greece’s national theatres and in the National School of Dance have occupied the school buildings. Furthermore, actors, students, and artists have occupied the stages of the national theatres, halting all performances. The Hellenic Actors’ Union has met with political leaders to no avail.

In support of their students, the professors of the National Theatre of Greece Drama School announced on 24 January 2023 that they would resign on 8 February if this situation was not resolved. With no concessions from the Greek government, more than 35 of the country’s most esteemed actors, directors, and professors quit the National Theatre of Greece Drama School on 8 February. The school ceased operating for the first time in its history. Neither the occupation by Germany during WWII nor the seven-year military junta dictatorship in Greece from 1967 to 1974 forced the school to close.

On 15 February, after two months of struggle, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis agreed to meet with the artistic directors of the national theatres and union representatives. The outcome was a pledge by the government to submit a legislative regulation that would undo the damage caused by Decree 85. Instead, what was issued was a draft Ministerial Decision, which is less powerful than a law or presidential decree, hence extremely vulnerable to appeals before the Council of State. The Ministerial Decision does not even remotely satisfy the demands of the protestors. The notorious Decree 85 was not withdrawn.

*Leda Koutsodaskalou is a Greek actor. She holds a BA in Acting from Greek Art Theatre Karolos Koun and an MA in Performance Studies from Tisch School of the Arts, NYU. She has worked with the National Theatre of Greece, the National Theatre of Northern Greece, the Athens and Epidaurus Festival, the National Theatre of China, and the Greek Art Theatre Karolos Koun, among others. lk2899@nyu.edu*



*Figure 1. Solidarity Concert outside the National Theatre of Greece, with the audience chanting “Now you’ll hear us.” Athens, 10 February 2022. (Photo courtesy of Spyros Chatziaggelakis)*

Consequently, the artists and educators now demand: 1. the immediate withdrawal of Decree 85; 2. a definitive solution to the problem of the status of artistic diplomas; 3. a generous increase in public funding for the arts; and 4. collective agreements for both the municipal and private theatres.

Artists, media, and arts organizations from all around the world continue to send messages of solidarity and support to the artists’ unions, as well as reports on actions protesting the decree; the degradation of art is an issue that cannot be confined within the Greek or any other borders. “We have not been in the streets for three months for a few Euros, we are not fighting merely for allowances and income support, we are fighting for our rights, for the recognition of our studies, for our dignity,” states the Hellenic Actors’ Union.

Unfortunately and outrageously, as of 15 April 2023 Decree 85 has not been withdrawn and that is why the struggle continues, adapting its form according to the needs of society. Greek artists would like the support of the global arts community. Disseminating what’s happening to Greek artists can mobilize international support and hopefully lead to the withdrawal of Decree 85. For more information or to send messages of support, please contact the Hellenic Actors’ Union at [hellenicactorsunion@gmail.com](mailto:hellenicactorsunion@gmail.com) or the Dancers’ Union of Greece at [Sexwxo@gmail.com](mailto:Sexwxo@gmail.com).