

# The National Herald

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## With Apologies from Simonides, Socrates Shows How to Live

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TNH File Photo

Not just the participants, but the ancient spirit of the Hellenes speaks when The Readers of Homer present the Odyssey and the Iliad in places like the Island of Kos above.

NEW YORK – Nobody knows what to expect when they first attend The Apology of Socrates, the one man-show by actor and scholar Yannis Simonides based on Plato's Dialogue about the trial of his mentor Socrates. At one point the buzz of the audience tones down as a man dressed in a white robe like the ancients is seen walking down the theater's center aisle, seemingly talking to himself. The striking mask makes it clear that this is as much a visitation as a presentation: Socrates is alive! And Hellas is alive, four millennia after its birth, not only due to the power and beauty of the timeless and compelling creations of the ancient Greeks, but thanks to the efforts of Hellenes and Philhellenes today. The works of Plato, Euripides and their like will never disappear from the libraries of the world, but men like Simonides bring Hellenism fully to life, and hammer home the continued relevance of the Greek mind to the modern world. In The Apology of Socrates, he resurrects the great sage in all his annoying and enlightening glory. And just as the original relished his role as a gadfly to sting his fellow Athenians into action to save his city – his fellow citizens rewarded him with the death penalty but history's verdict boomeranged on them – Simonides relishes his role in bringing the wisdom of Socrates and his student and 'apologist' Plato to bear on the great

challenges of the modern world – even issues such as the Arab Spring and the death of bin Laden. In the spring of 2008 he found himself and the custom-made mask in the image of Socrates “before a sea of young Moslem students, dressed in veils and chadors. I could only see their eyes...” he said of the women. He could tell he stood before “The creme de la creme of the Middle East.” Their English was excellent, but he explained that in such transcultural situations, “You either connect with them completely or not at all. “You either do the best performance of your life, or your worst - you cannot be mediocre.” You fly or crash.

He said he knew by then – he had done the Apology dozens of times before foreign audiences – they were there to have an encounter with the ungainly man who brought brilliant minds to a standstill and struck fear in the hearts of politicians – but there was nothing Simonides could take for granted. “Every time was different,” he said, an artistic and intellectual challenge. “ I didn’t know what would happen, but within three minutes I saw they were with me. You could hear them get the irony and the humor. You hear them giggle. When you do that to an actor, he is flying,” he said. This is a new generation of Arab youth, hungry for something-they-knew-not-what. They vaguely knew the ancient Greeks had something their souls and minds hungered for, and Simonides was the chef and entree. The presentation of the Apology of Socrates, which is essentially a monologue delivered by the philosopher to the jury who condemned him to death, is only one half of the equation.



Socrates’ words and gestures, brilliant and madenning, outrace most actors but nimble and passionate Simonides keeps pace.

## THE ETHICS OF LIFE

“There is always a discussion after each performance: ethics, political science, philosophy, history,” he told The National Herald. “Socrates was a great thinker and teacher, who “insisted on clarity and definitions, but tried to keep things simple so that the people in the agora and even the slaves could grasp his

thought,” Simonides said, but it’s not academic philosophy that he presents. Not these days in places like Dubai. “It’s applied ethics, governance,” he said of issues that have suddenly come to the fore of ‘ life in the Middle East, with a force more powerful than has been seen in decades. “Socrates told us not just how to think, but how to live.” There were 850 people there from all over the Middle East. Usually, only a few people stay, but on that day 600 people stayed for a two-hour discussion. “There was a tall woman,” he said. “She was covered in black from head to toe” but he could tell she was beautiful, from her eyes and her bearing. “But she was trembling, and her voice was trembling. She said, “Professor Simonides” – the program referred to his days as an NYU professor – I am a devout Moslem and you’ve just told us things that I thought existed only in my Holy Book. And you posited they pre-existed it, by over a thousand years, in a pagan culture, nonetheless.” And then with words that made it one of the most beautiful moments in Simonides’ life she asked, “Could be ever so kind to help me marry the two in my heart?”

In such moments the torrent of words of the Western news media slip down the drain. Simonides said he felt a deep appreciation for his education, which gave him “The resources to be able to respond to such noble challenges,” he said. “These were devout Moslems and my words and ideas (in response) had to be of the most powerful kind and had to be chosen wisely.” He added: “I could not ignore the fact that the Koran was the foundation of their society and any government that could be built upon it,” and any future they might imagine. He said he realized in a flash that, “Even in the most dogmatic system of thought, there can be dialectic,” there must be discussion, statements pro and con, reasons respectfully requested and thoughtfully given, “Because that’s what keeps it fresh and moving forward rather than stuck in the past.” They went into a deep discussion that day, sometimes detouring even further East, examining Oriental art and philosophy as they explored the notion of social change in profoundly conservative societies. In that setting, he could not encapsulate Socrates, as usual, in the simple and powerful mantra “Think – Question- Change,” but by showing that he appreciated their culture, he could credibly talk about their lives and what Socrates had to say to them, returning the treasure of Hellenism to the depths of the Middle East, which the West forgot once was dotted with Hellenistic cities, though the Arabs and Iranians remember.

## PRESENTING UNIVERSAL HELLENISM

Simonides’ mission is “promoting Greek culture worldwide by expanding the spatial, temporal and social boundaries of Hellenic theater.” He and his colleagues can perform anywhere: the theater of Cambridge and the hills of the island of Kythnos. He founded The Greek Theatre of New York in 1979 to bring acclaimed productions of the classical, medieval and contemporary Hellenic repertory to Greek and English speaking audiences and has developed presentations of the great modern Greek poet Constantine Cavafy, the memoirs

of the Greek revolutionary hero Makriyannis and Smyrna, “An original docudrama exploring the themes of genocide and population displacement through the prism of the Asia Minor Catastrophe of 1922 and the burning of Smyrna. Survivors’ testimonies and the stories of their descendants are interwoven with arresting images and the haunting songs of the time.” Elliniko Teatro also provides close collaborative support to The Readers of Homer, founded by Kathryn Hohlwein, who present “multi-arts cultural events dedicated to the diachronic and universal epics of Homer. Each is a “marathon reading, (where) 150-300 people of all ages and backgrounds ... read, one after the other, each in their own way, the Iliad or the Odyssey. The pre-assigned passages are read or sung in dozens of languages...” Social barriers come crashing down in places such as Uruguay, where the President read, as did the superintendent of the theater building, next to a little boy who traveled 600 miles with his teacher to read three minutes of Homer.

“And most didn’t know who they were, nobody was announced, a celebration of egalitarianism,” Simonides said. At the November 27 2010 presentation of the Odyssey at the 92nd Street Y the audience was enchanted by a Homeric Feast, with food and beverages prepared according to scholarly research that gave them a real “taste” of the epic, and which was a hit again this past April 30 at the Getty Villa in Malibu, a museum dedicated to the study of the arts and cultures of ancient Greece and Italy. Simonides founded Greek Theatre International (GTI) in 2010 with his close collaborator Stephania Xydia, in Athens, Greece, as a sister organization. GTI aims to bring performing artists and works of Greek Drama and literature beyond national boundaries and traditional theatre spaces, into schools, universities, festivals, companies, communities and public spaces around the world. The Greek Theater of N.Y. and GTI share personnel and boards of advisors but have different boards of directors because both are non-profit tax-exempt organizations in their own countries. Simonides invites people to visit the web site they share; [www.ellinikotheatro.org](http://www.ellinikotheatro.org), which he notes, is “cutting edge, created by a new firm in Athens called WebOlution.”

He says he and his colleagues “are soldiers in something that is not just theater,” but even in theater they do not focus only on the classics but present Modern Greek plays and texts. Asked if Greek Americans are cheating themselves by not experiencing the latter he said, “Absolutely, though he said he agreed with the Cypriot musician Alkinoos Ioannides, who has called upon Greek and Cypriot Americans – not to be satisfied with everything that comes from Greece and Cyprus, but to develop the ability to discern and bring the best and also to develop your own and take it back to Greece. We are a Diaspora and we should be feeding off each other.” Simonides’ work is a testament to the power of the Greek mind; ancient and modern, to illuminate and enrich the lives of mature audiences and to fire up the imaginations and inspire the young. He told TNH of his visit to the distinguished Fieldston School in Riverdale. “I did the Homeric poems of Cavafy and the students flipped out – they loved it,

they got it!” He did a more formal presentation of Cavafy’s poetry Bellport in the Hamptons that included his portrayal of the writer who many believe was worthy of a third Greek Nobel for poetry – when he wears glasses Simonides is a dead ringer for Cavafy.

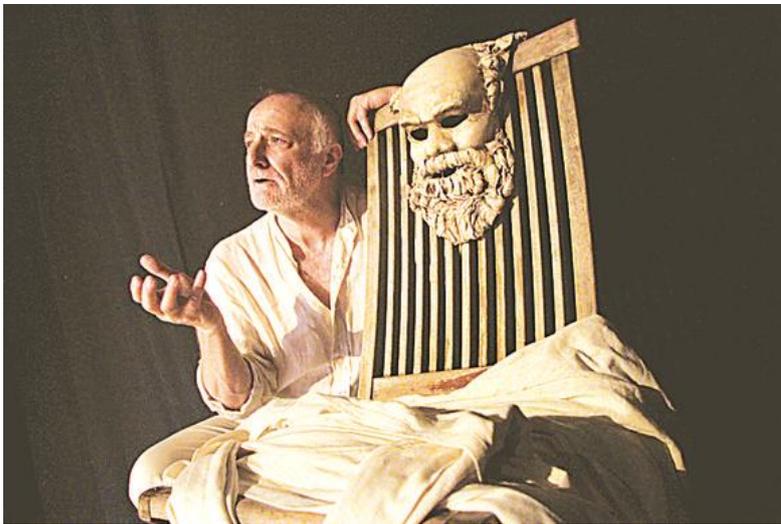
## REBIRTH OF SOCRATES

How do you bring Socrates to life? There is the material response: the white robe he wears, and the wonderful mask created pro bono - a gift to Hellenism and to Simonides by the late Theoni Vahliotes Aldredge, the Oscar-winning costume designer. And there is a lot of work, but informed by a reverence for the great sage that has not waned in 2500 years and manifested in our generation in Simonides and his fellow director, Loukas Skipitaris. “It was a collegial thing,” he said of the collaboration that led to *The Apology*. “We are both actors and directors but he is more of a director and I am more of an actor ... there are moments that are his that he suggested and I accepted, and moments that are mine.” He said there were arguments. “Oh yes! Many. He felt I was the most difficult actor that he ever directed.” But the theatrical gold that they struck requires more than conscious creative activity. Socrates is reborn almost every performance through an unconscious alchemy that emerges from the interaction of actor and audience. Simonides explained that the show has gone way beyond his exchanges with Skipitaris that began in 2003 because of the audiences he has been exposed to. “You cannot but adjust when you have over 200 performances (before perhaps 20,000 people) from the poorest ghettos of Chicago to Oxford and Delphi,” he said, adding that as an actor he has a conversation with a collective entity to which he is responding on the spot and upon reflection afterwards. He had been adjusting incrementally as he reacts to the audience. He makes mental notes such as, “That’s something new.” He told TNH the time has come for thorough re-examination - the translation and the whole presentation.

## THE LIFE OF THE PARTY

He made it clear that he tries not to cater to particular audiences, but he does make adjustments. If he is with “a bunch of kids who just want to find the funny moments then what you do is slow down and articulate carefully so they understand the words.” This is good point to mention *The Voice*, the sound well known to Simonides’ theatrical and radio audiences. The words articulate and resonant do not do it justice. It suffices to say that in his radio incarnation Simonides can make the offerings of a gyro stand sound like a banquet at the famed Palm restaurant. So even youths not destined to be philosophy professors pay attention, but to do justice to his gifts, he must take his craft seriously. He continues that with a light audience, “You focus on the humorous part to show it’s not just a joke, but you show there is more to it, and you invite them to participate at their best.” He warned that if an actor is not careful he can turn *The Apology* into a farce, which would destroy its value. The value is

high. The proof of the purity of the alloy that is forged is that invitations keep coming. At this time, all his projects together have invitations from about 40 countries. He has performed in front of the iconic ancient Library of Celsus in Ephesus, the Roman amphitheaters in Kos and Rhodes and is in conversation institutions in Japan, Australia, South Africa, the UAE and the Americas about bringing Socrates and Homer there. Simonides performs in Greek and English, and projected onto a large screen are texts in French and Spanish; translations are being developed for German, Russian, Polish Arabic and Turkish. They been invited take Socrates to Bogazici and Istanbul Universities, where there will be much food for thought as Turkey prepares for watershed elections this June and are in the midst of trials and investigations of the bizarre Ergenekon conspiracy that raises questions about who really governs in Turkey and who should govern – the Socratic questions pare excellence.



“Socrates” observes as Simonides makes a subtle point.

Simonides gives credit for the modern impact of his portrayal of Socrates to the “aliveness” of man himself.

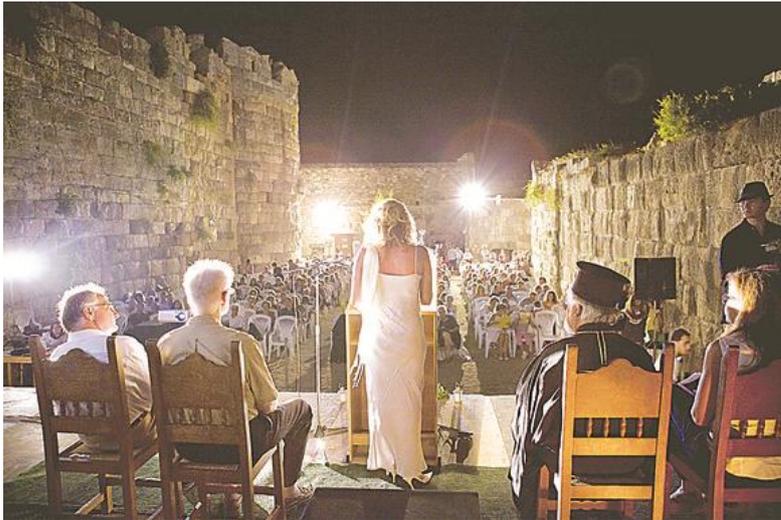
“He made people either totally amused or very angry. He was the life of the party,” he said of “this flesh and bones human being, who never wrote a word” and about whom we have only a few brief descriptions. “But he inspired such a growth of thought in Athens and beyond for 2500 years.” He told TNH he is most proud of the fact that his performances send young people who thought Greek philosophy was boring back to the text. And where he once encountered opposition to having translations of his projects for minorities in Greece, Greek officials “now see the of such initiatives. Simonides said he also knows that Socrates still resonates within Greece. If Greece defaults, it will have a shattering effect on Greeks with the rest of the world watching. He agreed with TNH that Greece needs a Socrates now. First and foremost, he saw things clearly and called them for what they were. In connection with the Apology, Simonides has made presentations on ethics to banks and medical, legal and governmental institutions because of the plays value calling for critical

thinking. He has been told: “We make life and death decisions here. We need this,” and said that 90% of the time, and the discussion is equal in importance to the performance, and preparing for them is also a great challenge, “to Withstand the intellectual curiosity of the audience and the questions the performance elicits.” He must read and reread Plato’s works and books, not to be prepared for the Oxford don but so that he can respond in an inspiring way even to the children who hear him.

## REBIRTH OF SIMONIDES

TNH asked what Socrates’ famous statement “The unexamined life is not worth living,” now means to him as he led more than a full life before he began to present The Apology. Simonides was born in Constantinople and was raised in Athens. He received a BA in Drama and Literature from Yale University and a MFA in Acting from the Yale School of Drama, served as professor and chair of the NYU Tisch School of the Arts Drama Department, and was executive director of HPR, COSMOS FM and GOTELECOM. “I can’t say that I don’t fail, but in the last four or five years of my life when I have taken actions about myself and my work, and my child, I don’t make decisions that are not balanced, fully examined.” He said things in his life that require a certain discipline, even asceticism come more easily to him after internalizing the spirit not just of Socrates, but of Cavafy, Homer, Makriyannis, the great men he brings to life. He returned to the phrase Applied Ethics, and said it’s about “How can we live a better life and become a better person, and how you make changes step by step, and accept that there will be steps backwards, where one must forgive oneself before moving forward ... the wonderful other thing is that I have become fearless, I’m not afraid to say what’s on my mind, but with grace and care and sensitivity.”

Socrates could have learned something about “making friends and influencing people” from his alter ego in the 21st Century, however. Simonides takes speculation about Socrates’ motivations at his trial very seriously. “He did not go to his trial with a martyr complex, or a desire to start a conflagration. He wanted to live, but he said ‘If you kill me, you will regret it for the rest of your lives.’” Simonides said, “Even though after he defended himself he went on the attack in criticizing Athenian institutions and gave them a lecture, he always hoped for the best, that he would persuade them and see the light and act at their best.” Simonides seems to be having the time of his life. “At 65, I’m surrounded by superbly educated colleagues in their 20s who see me as Applied Hellenism, so I’m a good mentor. Not only can I give them an artistic education, but I can give them lessons in ethics so they don’t fall into the usual traps” of life. Several Greek ministries and institutions are interested in his work and despite their funding crisis support him in symbolic ways because he presents a good face for Greece around the world and knows how to control costs – the best in Cultural Diplomacy. “Whenever they wish to go beyond the boundaries of Greece, even with other artistic groups, we can be of help.”



With readers who might be movie stars, presidents, bishops - or young students from poor villages, a reading of Homer can be an experience that is both leveling and uplifting.

As the head of such cultural endeavors much of his time and energy is devoted to seeking sponsors, but he says the key is not finding so-called “good or generous sponsors” but to approach people with intelligence and creativity. He deeply appreciates grants he has received from the A.G. Leventis and Maria Tsakos foundations to take his projects and thanks N.Y.-based backers like Travel Dynamis Intl., Titan Foods and Stellar Imports “for being most understanding of our efforts. Once they see the artists have a history of quality and excellence, they support them,” he said. The indefatigable Simonides and his colleagues are working on five projects, including a Homeric performance as part of the London 2012 Olympics in as many of the languages of the Olympic participants as possible. He recently had a string of performances that were enthusiastically received in Belgium, France and Luxemburg and will perform *The Apology* in Cyprus and Paros this summer. Simonides also told TNH he is in discussions about performances at the European parliament representing Greece and Cyprus . Visit [www.ellinikotheatro.org](http://www.ellinikotheatro.org).