

# Aegean Festival raises a glass

Summer event on Syros unites opera with theater, classical music and dance

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**ERMOUPOLI** — As raised glasses heralded the "Drinking Song," the signature "La Traviata" toast set the tone — both on and off stage.

Directed by Italian choreographer and newly appointed artistic director of the Greek National Opera Renato Zanella, the popular opera served as the curtain raiser of the 7th Annual International Festival of the Aegean, taking place in Ermoupoli on Syros, the capital of the Cyclades, until July 25.

Standing at the orchestral podium, the festival's founder, Peter Tiboris, conducted the Pan-European Philharmonia Orchestra, as Giuseppe Verdi's "Brindisi" led Violetta (soprano Natalia Ushakova) into the arms of her Alfredo (tenor Israel Lozano).

The mood at the Apollo Theater, also known as La Piccola Scala due to its resemblance to Milanese theater, was festive — and with good reason. Once again, the annual event brings to the island high-caliber artists — among them Academy Award winner Olympia Dukakis — giving the local community and its visitors a chance to attend classical music and oratorio concerts as well as theater and dance performances. While private initiative has always been a pivotal player in the arts, this takes on greater meaning at a time when cultural matters are stuck at the bottom of the list of priorities in this country.

For Tiboris, a Greek-American conductor, music director and concert producer boasting a 30-year-old successful run in New York City alone, the establishment of a summer event in Greece has a twofold dimension, both sentimental and creative.

"My 'giagia' [grandmother] came from a village outside Megalopoli, in the Peloponnese, a place with a strong Orthodox tradition," Tiboris told Kathimerini English Edition prior to opening night. "I have been coming to Greece for 30 years and what happens here is really important to me. It's difficult but there is



**Peter Tiboris (above), the founder of the International Festival of the Aegean. Right: A scene from 'La Traviata' at the Apollo Theater.**

light at the end of the tunnel."

What makes Syros a good location for an international festival?

"The opera house. It was built by the Italians and the acoustics are wonderful. It's elegant and has a great history; it's the real deal," he said, adding that the island's location, a short distance from Myconos and Santorini, is also a plus.

Besides the action at the noble Apollo, festival events spill into other parts of Ermoupoli, including the Orthodox Cathedral of St Nicholas and the central Miaoulis Square, where Carl Orff's "Carmina Burana" and Mikis Theodorakis's "Zorba Suite" will be interpreted tomorrow.

With a final performance of "La Traviata" taking place this evening, the festival is set to continue with multi-award-winning American actress Olympia Dukakis in a staged reading of "Rose," written by Martin Sherman and directed by Nancy Meckler. In the one-woman play, the Ukrainian-Jewish 80-year-old Rose tells a gripping personal tale of life throughout the 20th century. Dukakis performs at the Apollo Theater on July 19 and 20.

Another highlight is "Medea's Choice," the world premiere of a ballet based on the opera by Mikis



Theodorakis, as conceived and directed by Zanella, also the festival's dance director. Performances take place on July 22, 23 and 24 and will feature Maria Kousouni as Medea and Danilo Zeka as Jason. The festival's finale on July 25 looks into the future with the second annual Greek Opera Studio Gala Performance, a summer singing program directed by Finnish soprano Eilana Lappalainen, the festival's artistic administrator and Tiboris's wife.

Spearheading the festival financially is Tiboris's MidAmerica Productions, a company whose achievements includes being the largest independent concert producer at New York's Carnegie Hall. MidAmerica is covering 85 percent of the festival's budget (which includes sponsors), with the Municipality of Syros picking up the remaining 15 percent of the tab and Syros-based sponsors aiding with accommodation, for instance. In addition, the festival is proving to be a major boost to the local economy. Besides attracting visitors to the island, the event's 500 guest artists this season are also acting as tourists in return.

"I was after working in a manageable environment, looking for a place accessible to performers," noted Ti-

boris. "While the festival runs for about two-and-a-half weeks, my wife and I live on Syros for about 14 weeks a year. We also get major support from the community of Syros."

The love affair with the island continues and Tiboris and his team are already working on a landmark Apollo Theater anniversary. On Easter Sunday in 2014, Verdi's "Rigoletto" will return to the theater 150 years after its debut on the Syros stage.

While a friend once referred to the Cycladic festival as the "Salzburg of the Aegean," Tiboris is quick to point out that the event has a long way to go before reaching that kind of status. In the meantime, however, internationally acclaimed artists continue to come to the island to perform and more and more visitors are making plans according to the event's program — coming up next year are Shakespeare and Ibsen plays as well as a tribute to Mahler.

"Right now we're running at high levels artistically and making plans in advance is key to making things run smoothly," noted Tiboris. "We are making sure that there is variety and strong performances."

For more information on the event, go to [www.festivaloftheaegean.com](http://www.festivaloftheaegean.com).