**Letter from the President**

For us at the Onassis Foundation, Culture is more than the arts, and Education is more than academic degrees, in the same way that the City is more than just a town. After all, in Greek as well as in Latin the word civilization is derived from the word for city—civitas in Latin, and πόλις/πολιτισμός in Greek. Essentially, we regard both Culture and Education as core vehicles for social solidarity, paths for demonstrating that values such as democracy, human rights and social equality should not be taken for granted.

The Birds by Aristophanes is about building a utopian community that gives humankind the form of a free bird. Utopias are not real. They express the dream for an ideal city and society. We will never reach them, but it is our duty as citizens—and, for us, as leaders of a Public Benefit Foundation—to pursue them. We cannot change the world, but we must do whatever it takes to make it better, inspiring others to do the same.

When the Onassis Cultural Centre Athens (Stegi), staged The Birds at the Ancient Theater of Epidaurus (and later in Athens), a totally new approach was sought. Consequently, the selection of Nikos Karathanos seemed like a natural choice. The performances were enthusiastically received by the public and critics alike, and were all completely sold out.

Today, the Onassis Foundation is delighted to present The Birds in New York at St. Ann’s Warehouse.

Aristophanes is considered to be the foremost exponent of the classical Athenian comedy. All his comedies are distinguished by a narrative superstructure that covers, thinly, a serious undercurrent. Aristophanes was conservative but profoundly democratic. He loved his city and its institutions deeply, but his love did not preclude him from seeing its flaws and the issues arising from how the democratic Athenian ideals were actually implemented. In The Birds satire, hyperbole, foul language and cynical criticism combine to showcase the tension between “what is” and “what should be.” Other possible, but equally valid interpretations of the play will depend on the personal, philosophical and even theological questions facing any modern Athenian: love, faith, the essence of humanity are issues addressed here directly. To the question, “What is God, what is not God, and what is in between?” Aristophanes proposes a facetious answer: the birds stand between gods and mortals. But what do the birds represent?

The Birds, as initially written, is a deeply political play. Two Athenians, fed up with the body politic of their city, its leaders and philosophers and their perennial squabbles, decide to seek refuge in an ideal place inhabited by simple souls: “the city of the Birds.” They find such a spot and eventually subvert it, betraying their own ideals to create a dystopia.

Karathanos presents his equally valid personal interpretation. Love and the essence of humanity are dissected and exposed in a moving, comic and deeply thoughtful way.

Alongside the play itself we are staging a series of events comprising Birds: A Festival Inspired by Aristophanes. The Onassis Foundation this season invites the New York audience to explore themes ranging from political satire to democracy to social and political awareness, through art, talks, concerts, film programs and children activities, and to revel in what we hope represents the long endurance of the Greek thespian tradition.

Birds: A Festival Inspired by Aristophanes would have not been possible without the fruitful collaboration, first and foremost, of St. Ann’s Warehouse. We wish to thank Ms. Susan Feldman and her team for making this journey of The Birds to New York possible. We know they took a risk but feel confident it was worth it. We also wish to thank the American Museum of Natural History, the Brooklyn Museum, Metrograph, the New-York Historical Society, The New York Public Library, and Stella Adler Studio of Acting, who have all enhanced this festival by partnering with the Onassis Foundation to create unique programs, and by generously sharing their talents and venues.

A warm thank-you to the festival’s curators and to the Greek and American artists who contributed their original works to the visual art installation at St. Ann’s Warehouse.

Moreover, I wish to thank the teams of the Onassis Cultural Centre in Athens as well as New York, in particular Karen Brooks Hopkins and Afroditi Panagiotakou, Violaine Huisman and Amalia Cosmetatou, for their enthusiasm and dedication in organizing a festival that, by taking into account the values and issues at the core of a Classical Greek play, reminds us of the relevance of our common humanistic heritage to our society and times.

Finally, it is worth noting that The Birds is not the first Onassis Cultural Centre Athens production that transcends the Greek borders and spreads its wings into the global cultural scene. More than 40 Greek productions so far have succeeded in winning over the global audience and in presenting the fresh, new wave of Greek theater, dance and music to the world.

This becomes a solid demonstration of how the Onassis Foundation’s vision, which is about portraying Greece at its best, is consistently and systematically brought to life.

Dr. Anthony S. Papadimitriou
President, Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation