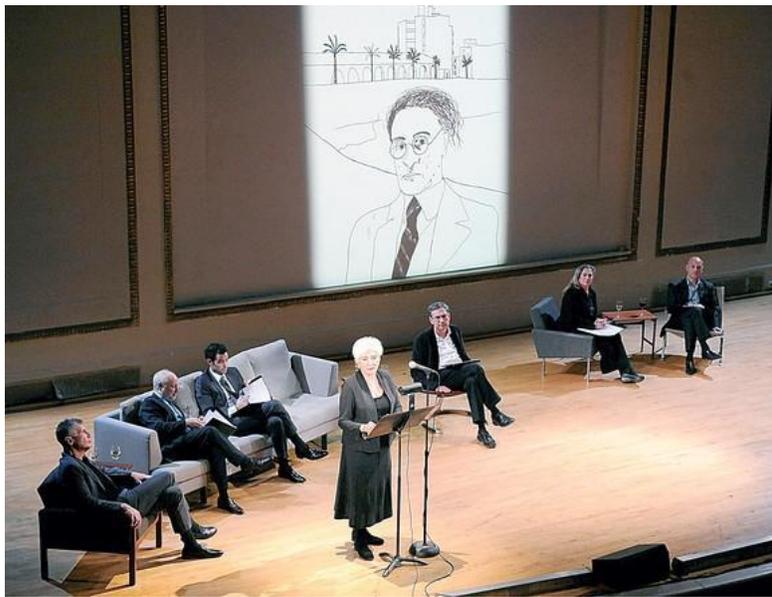


# The National Herald

## Manhattan Town Hall Filled for Cavafy's 150th

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NEW YORK – Once the audience, lovers of poetry and freedom, settled into their seats at Manhattan's Town Hall, the theater went dark, but soon it was filled with a familiar deep and resonant voice. Sean Connery was heard to intone "Ithaca," the great and beloved poem of C.P. Cavafy, the words floating on Vangelis' musical sea.



The PEN Tribute to C.P. Cavafy attracted a huge throng to Town Hall. Above, Olympia Dukakis recites one of her favorite poems, "The City." Kathleen Turner is also onstage along with translators Daniel Mendelsohn and Edmund Keeley.

The evening, a commemoration of the 150th birthday of the great Greek writer from Alexandria, was made possible through a major sponsorship from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, in conjunction with the Onassis Foundation and PEN American Center. ("PEN" is an acronym for playwrights, essayists, and novelists.)

It was a remarkable gathering. The venerable auditorium was filled with 1500 people, near Times Square, the crossroads of the world, to listen to words by

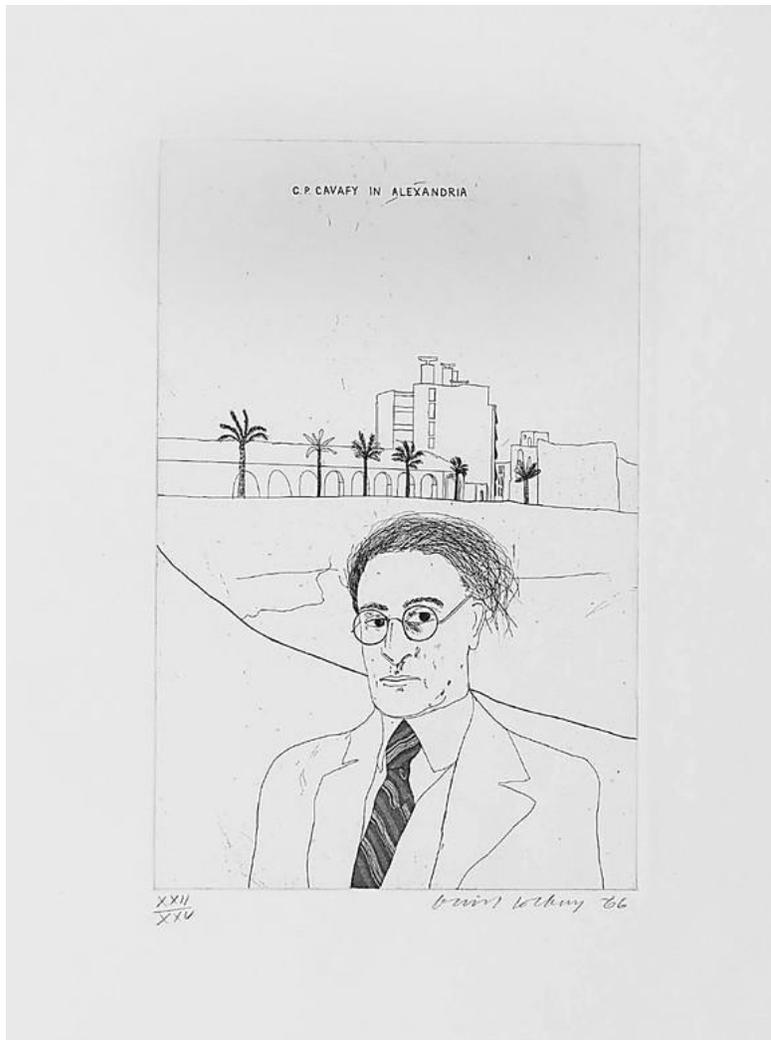
and about the man from those ancient crossroads whose Greek communities vanished long ago, the Alexandria of Cavafy's birth, and the Constantinople of his forefathers.

In a sense, Cavafy was a freedom fighter – one of PEN's functions is to promote a literary culture and to protect freedom of expression – his courageous and pioneering presentation of homoerotic themes accounts for much of the overwhelming response of New Yorkers, but he is also revered by Greeks and Philhellenes alike for his evocation of ancient Greek and Byzantine worlds that still fascinate.

In advance of the event the audience was most curious about the warning that there would be full frontal nudity, and as the time and words flowed, waiting for the "bodies" evoked "Waiting for the Barbarians," one of the most favorite Cavafy poems.

The lights came up to reveal a set that looked like a huge living room: two large couches, five chairs.

Soon, the living room was populated by distinguished devotees, including his translators, Edmund Keeley and Daniel Mendelsohn, Orhan Pamuk, the Turkish writer who was born in Constantinople and won 2006 Nobel Prize in Literature, and actresses Olympia Dukakis and Kathleen Turner.



For much of the program, a huge video screen displayed the above line drawing of the poet in late middle age with his city's famous Corniche seashore sketched in the background.

Andre Aciman, Michael Cunningham and Mark Doty were there, too, joined by Architect Craig Dykers of the international firm Snohetta, who spoke about the modern rendition of the Great Library of Alexandria that they helped create.

Choreographer/Director Dimitris Papaioannou, renowned for his 2004 Olympics opening ceremonies, created a live dance performance and video works based on Cavafy's most famous poems.

The rich and extensive program served to open windows on both the man and his city.

Pulitzer winner Michael Cunningham read his piece titled “Cavafy before He Was Cavafy,” and “Longings” by Harry Kremmydas was translated and read by Mendelsohn. He mused “why are famous people remembered as old men?”

The readings, videos and photos shined a light on the young man who was the subject of the powerful feelings he later famously expressed.

The audience viewed “Prayer” is an extract of videos by Papadimitriou featuring 13 Cavafy poems, Pamuk presented his “Poet on the Periphery” and Aciman read his piece “Alexandria Irrealis.”

People responded strongly to the two actresses. Turner read the poem “Lovely White Flowers” and the “Mirror in the Entrance” and Dukakis gave a moving readings of “The City” and “The God Abandons Antony.”

They were joined by Kremmydas to read Cavafy’s poignant “Days of 1908,” which begins: “That year he found himself without a job. Accordingly he lived by playing cards and backgammon, and the occasional loan.”

Eventually, the house party came to an end and the stage was cleared.

But audience was still owed some nudity, apropos of the longing that permeates so much of the poet’s work.

After the audience had a few moments to themselves, to check their cell phones or share their thoughts with their neighbors, they looked up to see a stage hand dragging what looked like a huge piece black metal backed by plywood.

The metal board suddenly fell with a thud, revealing a naked youth.

One gathered that the clothed man, mustachioed and clad in black – it was Papaioannou, who created the piece and called it “Primal Matter” – represented Cavafy.

The meaning of what followed became a topic for discussion after the performance. The youth, the beloved, was first washed with a towel and water from a small basin.

The naked man sat on a rolling office chair, doing the relationship dance everyone knows, regardless of their orientation – the beloved comes near, goes far, bails out and sometimes returns. Some painful contortions reminded in Cavafy’s time the love he sought was forbidden and dangerous.

The sexual significance was obvious, but the dancers presented the other element of the erotic, the spiritual, illuminated for the Greeks in the audience by the Orthodox Christian marriage service and for the rest by the Song of Songs and by the Book of Genesis: “and they become one flesh.”

After a series of movements, the man in black loses his socks – and only his socks. He finds himself below the other, until, finally, the standing youth appears to have appropriated the other man’s legs, his knees joining the Cavafy figure’s calves, and after a final humorous but erotic move...the stage goes dark.

But the darkness is not merely an absence.

After the dancers disappear, the audience is confronted with absolute loss. They are face to face with perhaps the most formative force in Cavafy’s life: Death.

Earlier, Mendelsohn’s presentation “A Poet Transformed” was a fascinating examination of how one of Cavafy’s early works was transfigured from a fine poem into a great one after what he called “those ten cruel years,” marked by struggle and the death of one loved one after another.

“Sweet Voices” became, simply, “Voices.”

Power was gained through the loss of adjectives and adverbs, the very elements the “oi poloi” believe are the essence of poetic writing.

Genius bestows so much the world misses or forgets.

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