

## THE RECEPTION OF GREEK TRAGEDY IN THE “OLD” AND THE “NEW” SOUTH AFRICA\*

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Reception studies in Classics are, as Lorna Hardwick (2003:iii) remarks in the preface to her recently published survey, changing rapidly. They include the study of translations, adaptations and performances of ancient Greek and Latin texts. This article concentrates on the reception of only one genre of Greek literature in South Africa and cannot pretend to deal with it exhaustively. Nevertheless the examination of a substantial number of translations, adaptations and productions of Greek tragedies in this country in the twentieth century reveals a continuing fascination with these classics. It also discloses aspects of the social, cultural and political circumstances of the milieu in which they were reinterpreted.

Greek tragedy is part of the legacy of the Dutch and British colonial powers in South Africa. It was thus not surprising that some people feared that it would prove unwelcome in post-1994 democratic South Africa with its emphasis on an African Renaissance. Indeed, there was a pessimistic expectation that in the “new” South Africa such performances would probably be seen as “Eurocentric” (Conradie 1999). However the pessimists have been disappointed, for the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first years of the third millennium have produced a good crop of performances of Greek tragedy — in English or Afrikaans translation, some multilingual versions and a number of adaptations that grapple with issues prominent in the newly democratic South Africa. Since 1990 there have been five new versions of *Medea*,<sup>1</sup> two of the *Bacchae*,<sup>2</sup> three of the *Antigone*,<sup>3</sup> and at least five more based on the ancient dramas dealing with the aftermath of the Trojan war.<sup>4</sup> This indicates that far

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1. In chronological order: 1990 *Demea* by Guy Butler, produced at the Grahamstown festival and in Johannesburg and published; 1994-1996 *Medea* by the Jazzart theatre company directed by Mark Fleishman and Jennie Reznick with a text workshopped by actors and directors, the script has not been published; 1996 *Medeia Ballade* by Ben DeHaeck produced by him with his Breughel Theatre company, an amateur group aimed at developing theatre amongst previously disadvantaged South Africans, the script has not been published; 2002-3 *Mamma Medea* by Tom Lanoye, translated into Afrikaans by Antjie Krog, published, and performed under the direction of Marthinus Basson, in Potchefstroom in 2002, in Stellenbosch in March 2003 and in Oudtshoorn in April 2003; and also March 2003 a production called *Medeia* written by Oscar van Woensel, directed and designed by Brett Bailey with students of the Wits School of Arts at the Sub-station in Johannesburg.
2. 1996 directed and choreographed by J. Pather with the students of the Drama school of the University of Natal in the Elizabeth Sneddon theatre in Durban, adapted from Euripides and also drawing on Soyinka; 2002 directed by Roy Sargeant at the Dionysus festival at the Kirstenbosch National Botanic Gardens in Cape Town.
3. 1999 *Antigone?* written and directed by Fred-Benbow-Hebbert for the Barnstormers, an amateur group in Cape Town; 2001 *Vuka Afrika! Vuka Antigone!* adapted and directed by Zoë Parker for the Drama school of the University of Natal in Durban; July, 2001 *Giants* written and adapted by Sabata Sesiu, directed by Warwick Grier and produced at the Nico Theatre in Cape Town.
4. 1992 *War-Play* adapted, directed and designed by Mervyn McMurtry from Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* and Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* with the students of the Drama school of the University of Natal, Durban; 1998 *In the City of Paradise*, based on Greek mythology and incorporating ideas and extracts from various Greek dramas, (See M.Mezzabotta, "Ancient Greek Drama in the New South Africa" at <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/CC99/mezza.htm>, accessed 02/04/01); 2000 *Electra* adapted from Sophocles

from being regarded as “Eurocentric” and foreign to the present concerns of South Africans, Greek tragedy is accepted by a significant number of playwrights, directors and actors as a fertile source of themes reflected in our contemporary society.

The reception of Greek tragedy in South Africa is inextricably connected with the history and development of dramatic performance in the country. Not until the 20<sup>th</sup> century did theatres become a permanent part of life in the cities. Hauptfleisch and Steadman (1983:239) cite a production by Muriel Alexander of Euripides’ *Trojan Women* in 1928 in the Pretoria Town Hall as the “first production of a Greek play in S.A.”. This claim is incorrect as the *Oedipus Rex* was performed in Potchefstroom in 1927, and in Bosman’s history of the South African theatre (1980:144)<sup>5</sup> there is mention of numerous burlesques of Greek tragic drama in Cape Town in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless the real history of Greek drama in South Africa commences in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In tracing this the researcher is handicapped by the lack of a reliable central archive of theatrical productions and has to look for the incidental mentioning of such productions in the few works on the history of the theatre in South Africa. The records of theatre companies, performing arts boards, drama schools and reviews in the media are also important sources. However, fine combing them is a hugely time consuming exercise and thus the present paper is no more than a report of “work in progress” on this fascinating topic.

Researchers agree that the theatre in South Africa developed on segregated lines.<sup>6</sup> This was due to cultural differences, in the first place the difference in language, but also to social factors such as the segregation of the races even prior to the legal constraints that were introduced after the coming to power of the Nationalist government in 1948. Three strands of development may be discerned: White English theatre, White Afrikaans theatre and Black (mainly) Anglophone theatre.<sup>7</sup> These three groups had vastly different material and cultural resources available to them. This division was reinforced by laws that made it almost impossible to embark on multiracial ventures. In terms of the Group Areas Act of 1965 racially mixed casts and audiences were prohibited, but there is plenty of evidence that even prior to that date it was difficult for Black theatregoers to attend performances in White areas. Black actors had to obtain permits to perform in White theatres and in the townships, superintendents of township halls had to approve plays presented there. It was only in 1977 that theatres were opened to all races and from then onwards there is a trend towards multiracial, multicultural and multilingual shows that are today also evident in many productions of Greek dramas.

I shall examine first White Anglophone theatre’s interaction with Greek tragedy, then that of White Afrikaans theatre, next, Black theatre and finally some examples of multicultural theatre.

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with additional material from Aeschylus and Euripides by Mervyn McMurtry with students of the Drama school of the University of Natal, Durban in the Square Space theatre; *Aars* by Peter Verhelst and Luk Perceval, translated and directed by Marthinus Basson at the Aardklop fees in Potchefstroom in 2001 and in the Spier amphitheatre in Stellenbosch in March 2002; an adaptation of Aeschylus’ *The Suppliants* by Tamantha Hammerschlag, directed by Oida Smit at The Nunnery Theatre at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg in August, 2002.

5. An example of the kind of burlesque is *Medea or the Best of Mothers with a Brute of a husband* performed in 1858. For further examples see Bosman (1980:147, 231, 232 and 236).
6. For instance Hauptfleisch 1997:8, 29-43, Pretorius 1995:29 and references there.
7. Pretorius 1995:29.

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As far as White Anglophone theatre is concerned, English translations of Greek tragedies were mostly confined to educational institutions. In addition there were some prestige productions by the performing arts councils established in the four provinces of South Africa in 1963. Records of productions of the University of Cape Town (Inskip 1972) show that every few years Greek dramas were performed in English. The meticulously kept archive of the School of Drama of the University of Natal indicates a similar pattern of frequent productions of Greek drama in translation. Clearly Greek drama was seen as important in the history of the theatre and as part of the training of South African actors and directors.

Significantly the performances of these drama schools in the last decade include a number of multicultural adaptations. This has become a hallmark of the “new” South Africa where productions often celebrate the inclusiveness of the post-apartheid era. Rather than a concern with giving an accurate reproduction of the Greek original, there is an attempt to explore its themes and to find parallels in contemporary society.

There were two notable examples of such versions from the University of Natal in Durban. The first was a 1998 production of the *Bacchae*, directed and choreographed by Jay Pather. He drew on Euripides’ tragedy as well as Soyinka’s version, but set the play in the contemporary rave culture with the hedonism and abandonment of the local club scene. This was a fully multicultural production crossing boundaries of language and gender. Pentheus was played by a woman. Pather tried to explain contemporary drug culture and its perils by comparing it to the Dionysiac frenzy of the Maenads.

Another approach to contemporary South Africa was adopted in Mervyn McMurtry’s adaptation of Sophocles’ *Electra*. He introduced a prologue where victims and witnesses of atrocities in South Africa and elsewhere, in the present and the past, testified to the destruction caused by war. It also featured video footage of testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Committee which was set up in 1995. The themes of vengeance and forgiveness in contemporary South Africa were thus explored through linking our recent experiences with those of the characters of Greek tragedy.<sup>8</sup>

Afrikaans, that developed from Dutch, became an official language of the Union of South Africa in 1925. The translation of the Bible into Afrikaans in 1933 confirmed that the new language could express the greatest literature and thought. Afrikaans literature began to flourish: novels, poetry and plays were published. Works were also translated into Afrikaans and in 1947, in the influential literary magazine, *Standpunte*, a review<sup>9</sup> of an Afrikaans translation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* noted that in every period of great creative writing in world literature, there had also been attention to translation. The translation of the great works of other literatures had always been an important means for poets to enrich themselves, their language and literature. Examples were 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century English literature as well as Dutch literature of the 17<sup>th</sup> century when “the great works” in Greek and Latin had been translated.

It was against this background of pride in the Afrikaans language and assertion of its parity with other world languages, especially English, that the series of Afrikaans translations of Greek drama should be seen. Another notable factor is that most of the translations were

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8. The information about the *Bacchae* and *Electra* was obtained from the material in the Archive of the School of Drama of the University of Natal in Durban. I wish to thank Professor Mervyn McMurtry for making it available to me.

9. P du P Grobler (1947).

by Afrikaans speaking professors of Classics, who were often eager to make the ancient works they loved accessible to their less fortunate compatriots.

The earliest example of a translation of a Greek tragedy into Afrikaans seems to be Professor L J du Plessis' version of Sophokles' *Koning Oidipus* which was staged in Potchefstroom in 1927 and published in 1928. In the preface Du Plessis states that he had several goals with this publication. It is worth noting these goals as many subsequent Afrikaans translators shared them. First he wanted to interpret the classical spirit for the Afrikaans public and for this purpose the *Oedipus Rex* was excellent as it contained valuable human wisdom ("leuenswysheid") and depiction of character. Secondly he included a short introduction to Classical drama that could be used in schools and at universities. Thirdly, there would be an Afrikaans version available for performance. Sadly there seem not to have been further performances of his translation as it would be superceded by another Afrikaans version within ten years. Du Plessis elected to use prose for the dialogue and wrote that in the choral odes he had tried to keep the original rhythm. An intriguing aspect is his reference to the musical accompaniment which was by P A van Westrheene and had been used in a production in the Netherlands in 1926. A photograph of those involved in the Potchefstroom production shows that the design and costumes were modelled on what was considered to be "classical". This conception would probably have served equally well for a Roman play.

The didactic emphasis of this translation and the desire to promote Afrikaans are factors common to most of the Afrikaans translations of Greek drama. Another Afrikaans translation of the *Oedipus Rex* was published in 1938. The translator, Theo Wassenaar, was a medical doctor, Afrikaans poet and great lover of Greece. His verse translation enjoyed great success. It was produced by the Afrikaans Volksteater-vereniging in Pretoria in the same year.<sup>10</sup> This group of amateur actors were ardent propagandists for the theatre and, in equal measure, for Afrikaans. The opening night was attended by the Prime Minister and several Cabinet members. Critics praised it as a great achievement of the Afrikaans language. This same translation was used for another prestige production in 1955 by the National Theatre Organization (NTO), which had been established in 1947. The occasion was the celebration of Pretoria's centenary. A Dutch director was invited to oversee the production.<sup>11</sup> It is noteworthy that both these productions apparently strove to achieve what was regarded as the "classical" style: slow, stately movement, dignified and clear diction. The overall effect was highly stylised.

The next Afrikaans translation of a Greek tragedy to make a considerable impact was the Stellenbosch classicist J P J van Rensburg's *Die Vroue van Troje*.<sup>12</sup> Van Rensburg wrote in his preface that he had been asked by an enthusiastic amateur actress in 1938 already to translate a Greek tragedy into Afrikaans for her group. The play was staged for the first time in Stellenbosch in April 1944. The production was a great success and caused a stir in Afrikaans literary circles.<sup>13</sup> The involvement of perhaps the most celebrated Afrikaans poet of the time, N P van Wyk Louw, lent added lustre to the event. His wife, Truida Pohl, was the

10. See Conradie 1999:15-17 for a discussion of the production and the views of critics.

11. For details of the production and reception see Conradie 1999:17-18.

12. An Afrikaans prose translation of Euripides' *Troades*.

13. See Conradie 1976:25-6 for discussion of this. It was also performed in Cape Town in June that year. *Die Burger* of 25 April 1944 carried a review of the production. Strangely this review, by A C Verloren van Themaat, is in Dutch. It does not comment on the wider implications of the themes of the drama, but confines itself to discussion of the costumes, acting, décor and movement. One sentence is devoted to the Afrikaans translation and the fact that it is sonorous ("klankrijk") when spoken as in the production.

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director and Louw himself wrote an introduction to the published play in which he warmly welcomed this addition to Afrikaans dramatic literature. According to Louw the ancient Greek world was so far removed from ours and the religion and cultural associations so alien that it was fruitless for a modern director to attempt to recreate a Greek production. The director should rather concentrate on the essentially human aspects of the ancient drama.<sup>14</sup>

The more realistic interpretation adopted by the group appealed to audiences. Louw (1945:5) mentions that *Die Vroue van Troje* played to packed houses seven times. He also stresses that these were no prestige occasions but that ordinary men and women came to see and were intensely moved. (Among these were, according to Louw’s biography,<sup>15</sup> members of the Greek Royal family who spent the years their country was occupied in South Africa.) Louw marvelled at the power of Euripides’ words that showed that war did not lead to a better world and that military glory and fame were questionable concepts. He remarked that few of the countries participating in the war being fought at that time would welcome mass productions of the play. This was perhaps a reflection of his opposition to South African involvement on the allied side in the Second World War. Van Rensburg’s version was staged again in Pretoria the next year by the Volksteater.<sup>16</sup>

Two significant aspects of the reception of the performance of Van Rensburg’s translation of Euripides were thus that it was not only seen as adding to the status of Afrikaans, but that the universal human element in the ancient drama was strongly appreciated.

Van Rensburg became the most prolific translator of Greek literature into Afrikaans.<sup>17</sup> I shall however limit my discussion of productions of his translations of dramatic literature to the first production of his translation of Sophocles’ *Antigone*. This was in 1961 as part of an Arts festival in Stellenbosch. The director was the newly appointed professor of Drama at the University of Stellenbosch, Fred Engelen. He had previously visited South Africa with theatre companies from his native Flanders. Photographs from this production show that the play’s costumes and décor aspired to reproduce a certain idea of ancient Greece. There are no signs linking this production to South Africa, except the language.

In an editorial on 9 September 1961 *Die Burger*, the influential Afrikaans daily newspaper published in Cape Town, praised the Stellenbosch Arts festival because it presented “great works” of human civilization, “the cultural legacy we share with the nations of the west” and also indigenous South African works of art.<sup>18</sup> In a sense the production of *Antigone* united these two elements as it was part of the Western cultural legacy but was now for the first time performed in Afrikaans. The editorial went on that this festival would prove to participants and the public that “no human culture can ever become great in isolation”! The irony of this

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14. “Die moderne regisseur moet . . . veel meer die essensieel-menslike in die ou stuk onder die straallig bring.” In Louw 1945:19.

15. Steyn 1998:408.

16. Binge 1960:378 footnote 5. This translation was also used for the founding production of the Drama department of the University of the Free State and again staged by that Drama department in October 1994. In his programme note the director, Chris Fourie, declared his intention that the production should depict a universal meaning for theatre-goers of the twentieth century. The universality of the ravages of war is mentioned, and the fact that he mentions “Soweto” as well as Vietnam, Israel, Bosnia and Rwanda is an acknowledgement that the old regime in South Africa had in fact engaged in a civil war against their opponents. I would like to thank Prof Louise Cilliers for a copy of the programme.

17. The list of his translated works is impressive: Homeric epic: *Ilias* (1954), *Odusseia* (1963); further tragedies: *Iphigenia in Aulis* (1967), *Elektra* (1969), *Philoktetes* (1976), *Oidipus by Kolonos* (1979); Aristophanes’ *Lusistrata* (1970) and, published posthumously, Herodotus’ *Historiae* (1994).

18. The festival included performances of music and art exhibitions.

statement in the depth of the apartheid years is intensified by the mention, in an obscure paragraph, in the same newspaper in the same week, that the “Coloured” (mixed race) community of Stellenbosch had decided to take part in the festival and that their brass band would perform at such and such a time at outdoor venues.

In a review of this production of *Antigone* published in *Die Burger* on 13 September 1961, the poet and critic W E G Louw applauded the quality of the performance. In spite of it being staged in a school hall, (there was no theatre in Stellenbosch at the time), the direction, acting, costumes and lighting were excellent. His sole criticism was that an interval should not have been introduced. He recommended that the drama should be played without a break as the unbearable tension created from the opening scene had been lost and could not be re-established after the interval. Louw also praised the beauty and universal validity of Sophocles’ words that Van Rensburg had transformed into luminous Afrikaans. He pointed out that Antigone’s “disobedience” (“on gehoorsaamheid”) sprang from her duty to obey God or the gods rather than a human being. This view of Antigone’s stance is radically different to the heroic interpretation that Black theatre would soon give to it. The only hint that Louw might have understood some application to the South African situation was his remark that the depiction of Kreon’s intransigence had certain “overtone” that were just as compelling as the underlying myth (“oergegewe”).

Mention must also be made of the valiant role played by Professor T J Haarhoff in attempting to introduce his compatriots to Classical Culture. Although he held the Chair of Classics at the English language University of the Witwatersrand, he published scores of articles in Afrikaans and English in the popular press on topics from the ancient world.<sup>19</sup> Haarhoff was a recognized poet in Afrikaans and also translated Catullus and Vergil. His contribution to Afrikaans translations of Greek tragedy was published in 1946 under the title *Die Antieke Drama*. This volume contains Haarhoff’s versions of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, Sophocles’ *Antigone* and Euripides’ *Troades*. They had been made especially for radio broadcasting which, of course, ensured that a wide audience in all parts of the country could be reached. In an introduction to the published volume Haarhoff briefly outlined the true nature of Greek drama and refuted the notion that it was cold and cerebral. Each of the tragedies carried an introduction in which the background was sketched and the literary themes discussed. In spite of Haarhoff’s dedication to Classics and to the Afrikaans language he was not honoured by the Afrikaans Akademie in the same way as Wassenaar<sup>20</sup> and Van Rensburg.<sup>21</sup> He was not accepted by the Afrikaans establishment because of his liberal political views<sup>22</sup> and only received recognition from the Akademie near the end of his life. Haarhoff should be given his due as the most ardent propagandist for the Classics in South Africa. Through his writings and translations he tried to educate, also by drawing parallels between the ancient world and South Africa.

The early 1970s was a period when many and varied groups in South Africa were engaged in adapting, transforming and performing Greek tragedy. Two Afrikaans university productions of this time deserve to be recognized for their innovative approach.

19. Henderson 1986 *passim* for examples of Haarhoff’s scholarly as well as popular work. See also Smuts 1976 and Whitaker 1997 for Haarhoff’s passionate dedication to establishing a tradition of Classical studies in South Africa.

20. He received the prize for works in translation for his translations of *Antigone* and *Elektra* in 1977.

21. Van Rensburg received the prize for translation from the S.A. Akademie in 1948 for *Vroue van Troje* and twice subsequently (Conradie 1976:25).

22. See the tributes to Haarhoff in *Akroterion* 16.4 (1971)22-28, especially Hugo:25

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The first was the 1971 production at the University of Pretoria of Sophocles' *Electra* where the Departments of Classics and Drama collaborated. The translation was provided by the Greek Department, notably Prof. P V Pistorius, while the Drama Department's Neels Hansen directed the play. He had invited the leading Greek actress Aleka Katseli to play the role of Klytaimnestra. She also trained the Chorus. This production was hailed by the press<sup>23</sup> as a memorable experience and there was unanimous praise for Ms Katseli's great interpretation, although she spoke her lines in Greek while the rest of the actors used Afrikaans. Another unusual feature of this production was that the costumes were in Mycenaean style. The actors and chorus thus wore Mycenaean robes modelled on depictions on ancient vases.<sup>24</sup> This production strove for authenticity in reproducing the ancient Athenian performance style and was at the same time designed as an educational experience, in the first place for the student actors, but also for the general public.

Another novel educational approach was adopted at the Rand Afrikaans University in 1974, where *Oedipus Roux*, an Afrikaans translation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* by Bill Henderson,<sup>25</sup> adapted and directed by Stephen Gray and workshopped by the cast, was staged. This production also aimed at educating the audience about Greek tragedy. The chorus was replaced by Mrs Roux and her two daughters who intervened between episodes to explain the dramatic action. Another didactic element in a choral interlude was the use of colour slides of Greek theatres to explain some of the background of Greek tragedy.<sup>26</sup>

Other classicists have published translations of Greek tragedies in Afrikaans<sup>27</sup> and some translations by non-classicists have been produced to considerable critical reaction.<sup>28</sup> Recently there have been some interesting Afrikaans versions of Greek tragedy at arts festivals. Two of these have been translations from Flemish. The rapprochement between Afrikaans speakers and the Dutch and Flemish, their linguistic relatives, is a result of the demise of apartheid and the dissolution of the cultural boycott of South Africa.

Since 1994, two Afrikaans arts festivals have been established to support the performing arts and Afrikaans culture in general. In terms of the new constitution, South Africa now has eleven official languages. In practice English seems to have become pre-eminent and there has been much agitation amongst Afrikaans speakers to ensure that their language rights are not ignored. The founding of the festivals at Oudtshoorn (the “Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees”) and Potchefstroom (“Aardklop”) aims to ensure that Afrikaans will still have a place in the performing arts now that the state subsidies provided by the performing arts

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23. Raeford Daniel in the *Rand Daily Mail* 10 February 1971, *Electra* with Aleka Katseli - Aula Pretoria; Isobel Roux in *Die Transvaler* 3 February 1971, *Elektra 'n Lonende Opvoering*; and 10 February 1971, ‘n Elektries belaaide Elektra; P Baneshik in *The Star* 10 February 1971, A Special Ethos in this Elektra.

24. The director, Neels Hansen, had written his MA dissertation on proofs that Mycenaean robes and not the Classical Greek chiton should be used in the presentation of Greek tragedies. (Phyllis Konya, *Electra* costume designs in the *Pretoria News* 6 January 1972.)

25. I would like to thank Prof Bill Henderson for a copy of *Oedipus Roux*.

26. This production was reviewed by Johan Murray in *Beeld*, 19 October 1974, *Tragedie van Oedipus kom sterk deur*; by Coenie Slabber in *Rapport* 20 October 1974, *Ideale Oedipus vir skool en universiteit*; by Thys Odendaal in *Die Transvaler*, 22 October 1974, *Studentepret 'n Vaal Spul*; and by Bill Edgson in *The Star*, 18 October 1974, *Oedipus RAU with folk song*.

27. For instance the classicist J A Ross published his Afrikaans translation of Euripides' *Hippolytos*, but I have not been able to find a record of it being performed. A further example is *Die Bakchante van Euripides* translated by Louise Cilliers.

28. For instance Merwe Scholtz's translation of Walter Jens' adaptation of the *Oresteia* in a production led by the German director Dieter Reible. See Conradie 1999:20-22.

councils have fallen away and Afrikaans has lost its privileged position.<sup>29</sup> These festivals are largely privately funded by sponsors. Amongst the new Afrikaans plays premiered at these festivals have been two adaptations of Greek tragedies. The first, *Aars!*, caused a furore in Potchefstroom in October 2001. Objections to the play were because of explicit sex, incest, violence and obscene language. The provocative nature of the play is announced in its title which is a homophone of the English word with the same meaning.

*Aars!* was translated from Flemish<sup>30</sup> by the director Marthinus Basson. It is an adaptation of the *Oresteia* in much simplified form. The action is centered in the family: Agamemnon, Klytaemnestra, Elektra and Orestes. Although they have the Greek names, the characters never address one another by them. They use terms such as “mamma”, “pappa”, “seun”, “sussie”. They represent the nuclear family. Themes of family violence, parents to children and vice versa, become a metaphor for the cycle of violence in the wider community. One would be hard put to connect this play to the *Oresteia* if it had not been for the programme notes.

However, this is not the case with the very recent production of *Mamma Medea* by Tom Lanoye. This play was translated into Afrikaans by the prominent Afrikaans poet, Antjie Krog, and again directed by Basson. The story of Jason and Medea as told by Apollonius Rhodius in books 3 and 4 of the *Argonautika* underlies the first two acts. Then, after an interval, follows the third act which is an abridged version of Euripides’ *Medea*.

In addition to the innovation that Jason kills one of the children and is thus seen to be as “guilty” as Medea, the theme seems to be the moral bankruptcy of the modern world where a married couple can kill their children and then sit down and smoke a cigarette. The most striking feature of the play, however, is the role that language has in depicting character. The Flemish original plays with the distinction Dutch/Flemish and other dialects. Krog has achieved the same effect by using different kinds of Afrikaans in her translation. Jason and the Greeks, who represent modernity in their costumes and equipment, speak a slovenly language studded with swearwords, while the Colchian innocence and simplicity are rendered by the slightly old fashioned, pure Afrikaans spoken by Medea, Aeetes and the rest of their family. Medea’s progressive moral decline is mirrored in her language. Her speech acquires some of the characteristics of Jason’s. This is a thought provoking play.

The third strand of South African theatre, Black theatre<sup>31</sup> in the early part of the twentieth century was mostly confined to amateur groups. I have found no evidence of productions of Greek tragedy in translation by any of these groups until the 1960s. In fact it may cause surprise that Black groups should have wished to participate in this predominantly Western and European cultural activity. The explanation may be found in the remarks of Herbert Dhlomo who is generally regarded as the first African playwright in South Africa.<sup>32</sup> “Dhlomo observed that Western and African drama stemmed from the same urge to re-create, through action, imitation, rhythm, and gesture, the sacred and secular stories of the community.”<sup>33</sup> He felt that in South Africa these two traditions should be brought together. It was to be some

29. For information on the privileged position of Afrikaans on the stages of the performing arts councils see Kruger 1999:100-103.

30. by Peter Verhelst and Luk Perceval.

31. This is a contested term, For the purposes of this paper the definition suggested by Hauptfleisch (1997:128) is accepted: “Plays written in English by black authors, dealing with issues pertinent to the black experience.” See Hauptfleisch’s discussion 125-131.

32. See T Couzens 1995.

33. Quoted by Walder 1995:xii.



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time (Dhlomo wrote in the 1920s and 1930s) before this was to happen. Initially, according to Hauptfleisch (1997:35), the “Anglo-European canon of dramatic works was simply appropriated as the South African canon for study and the models for emulation — even by the literate African population of this country . . .”

I have found evidence of only two Greek tragedies which were produced in translation and adaptation by Black theatre groups. They were *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*. I shall first discuss the *Oedipus* productions and then those of *Antigone*.

The first “Black” production of “Oedipus the King”, in the translation of Kenneth McLeish,<sup>34</sup> was by the African Music and Drama Association at Dorkay House in Johannesburg in November, 1971. Although this was an amateur group and there seem to have been only two performances, considerable efforts must have been made by the director, Sylvia Goldberg, and the whole group, if one takes the preparation of the chorus as an indication. The chorus was interpreted by the Johannesburg African Music Society under the baton of Ben Xtasi with songs especially written by J van Tonder of the University of the Witwatersrand Music department. Unfortunately the reviewers do not comment on the effect of this in the performance except that it “fitted well into the scheme of things”<sup>35</sup> and that the chorus “sing the written-in choral parts very well indeed”.<sup>36</sup> In the same sentence, however, the chorus are criticized for failing “entirely to give any evidence of interest in the centre-stage developments at other times.” It thus appears that they were present throughout but not engaged in the action except when performing the choral odes.

Both reviews of this play that I found comment on the rudimentary resources available to the troupe, (this is reminiscent of similar constraints on Afrikaans amateur groups well documented in various works on or by pioneers of the Afrikaans theatre), but that these limitations were overcome by the verve and enthusiasm of the players. Dennis Beckett, writing in the *Rand Daily Mail* reminded his readers that for many of the actors English would be “a second — or third — or fourth — or fifth- language”.<sup>37</sup> Both reviewers praise the stage presence and acting of Ben Mabaso who had the role of Oedipus, but have some criticism of the interpretation of some of the other actors. Nevertheless this seems to have been a theatrical experience first and foremost with few of the political over- and undertones that, not surprisingly, marked Black theatre of the period<sup>38</sup> when the state- subsidized theatre companies in the four provinces were closed to all “Non-Whites”.<sup>39</sup>

The second “Black” Oedipus was staged by the Imitha players founded in East London in 1970 by Skhala Xinwa and Rob Amato.<sup>40</sup> The radical alternative theatre magazine, *S’kets’*, refers in passing in its Summer ’72 issue to the “great success” of the Imitha players with *Oedipus Rex*, while Ian Steadman mentions that they toured the country with *Oedipus Rex*.

The Imitha players were one of several amateur theatre groups in the townships that were led by White liberals. The best known of these is the Serpent Players with whom Athol Fugard had a productive involvement in New Brighton in the 1960s and 1970s. In fact the

34. *The Star*, 19 November 1971.

35. *The Star*, 6 December 1971: R Whitaker, “Oedipus equal to his role”.

36. *Rand Daily Mail*, 6 December 1971: D Beckett, “Ben Mabaso is a great Oedipus”.

37. *Rand Daily Mail*, 6 December 1971: D Beckett, “Ben Mabaso is a great Oedipus”.

38. See Orkin 1991.

39. See Kruger 1999:100-103 for the Performing Arts Councils’ policy and agenda.

40. Larlham 1985. For more details about the Imitha (“rays of the sun”) Players, see Solberg 1999:50-55, 74-76, 139-140.

Serpent Players served as inspiration to the founders of the Imitha players and they also exchanged plays, i.e. one group would go and perform its play at the other's home venue.

Although they were a Xhosa group, the Imitha Players' first production was Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in English translation. This choice was Amato's as he did not "want to come with Shakespeare". Amato also explained his choice of *Oedipus Rex* positively:

"The reason I chose that text was because it was written two thousand years ago by somebody whose language I didn't know any more than did the people I was directing. It was a distant culture we were picking up. That was my logic. The fact that it was aboriginal to western culture didn't really occur to me. Perhaps it's not; perhaps it is so great that it is from everywhere."

He added that the drama was

"about things that the Xhosas understand very well; it is about the problems of taboos and incest, about power. It's about illusions of grandeur; it's about corruption in high places, causing corruption through the society. It was extraordinary in its resonances."

Amato was the manager of a textile factory and his wife made the Greek costumes for the cast from fabrics produced by his factory. The choral odes were treated in an unusual way. According to Amato the nucleus of the Imitha Players was a Handel choir led by Cyril Mjo. In their performance of the play they replaced the choral passages by the music of Handel. Amato contended that the choruses were the weakest part of the Greek play because they were obscure to modern audiences. Consequently the Imitha Players simply dropped them and replaced them "with just emotion . . . pure sound, with these wonderful voices in harmony singing this Africanised Handel, it was extraordinarily beautiful."<sup>41</sup>

This production, "black Xhosas speaking English. wearing Greek costumes and singing Handel without words" was very well received in East London by mixed audiences. It was illegal to perform for mixed audiences but the way in which many groups got around the law was by calling a performance a private function and issuing invitations to attend. The guests would then give donations to the club after the performance. The local press gave this *Oedipus* glowing reviews and two of the actors won awards.<sup>42</sup> However, when it was taken to Johannesburg and Pretoria, the production had a lukewarm reception from most newspaper critics.<sup>43</sup>

One of the reactions this troupe encountered when it took *Oedipus* to the Ndantsani township near East London, was as a result of the ordinary people's lack of familiarity with theatrical conventions. Amato recounts how the local population were amazed at someone they knew as the dignified headmaster of the school appearing barefoot and pretending to be an old man, at the beer salesman as Kreon and a well-known local beauty as Jocasta: "they just laughed every time an entrance happened, because they recognized everybody and shouted and laughed".<sup>44</sup> Amato recounts how Julius Mtsaka who played Oedipus eventually subdued the audience who were taunting him with cries of disbelief and laughter when he entered with his eyes covered in tomato sauce, by simply standing over the ringleader and

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41. Solberg 1999:52.

42. Melody Kose was chosen as "actress of the year" for her portrayal of Jocasta; Mtunzi Noganta as actor of the year for his role as the priest and Rob Amato was named director of the year.

43. P Baneshik in *The Star* 7 April 1972 "Greek Tragedy African Style"; *Rand Daily Mail* 6 April 1972, "Little Scope for Oedipus" by Raeford Daniel; but a much more admiring account in the *Pretoria News* 5 April 1972 where Diana Gordon headlined her review: "Black and beautiful Oedipus".

44. Solberg 1999:53.

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crying “as if saying, ‘Mama, I am talking about pain, I am talking about man, I am talking about ancient things’”. Mtsaka succeeded in rescuing the performance by this improvisation.

The Imitha Players went on to perform Soyinka and Sartre. Their activities, and especially *Oedipus Rex*, the first of their performances to travel to the townships and smaller towns in the Eastern Cape,<sup>45</sup> stimulated awareness of serious drama amongst Africans in that part of the world.

Various township theatre groups were involved in staging productions of *Antigone* in the 1960’s. In 1966, in Soweto near Johannesburg, the Soweto Ensemble that performed mainly in Black areas planned to perform Anouilh’s *Antigone*. It was one of the plays Athol Fugard was rehearsing with the Serpent Players, a group in New Brighton outside Port Elizabeth. They were constantly harassed by the police and often members were arrested.<sup>46</sup> Fugard did eventually succeed in producing the *Antigone* with the Serpent players in 1965 but he was unable to attend the performance as he was refused the permit needed by a White person to attend a Non-white gathering.<sup>47</sup>

Norman Ntshinga, who was about to play Haemon in the Serpent players’ production when he was arrested,<sup>48</sup> eventually put on a two-man version of *Antigone* with another Serpent player, Siphon “Sharkey” Mguqulwa, in prison on Robben Island. They used workshop techniques and relied on their memory of the play they were rehearsing before their arrest.<sup>49</sup>

This was not the only time that the *Antigone* was performed in the prison on Robben Island. In his autobiography former President Nelson Mandela recounts his role as Creon.<sup>50</sup> Mandela’s criticism of Creon’s fatal flaw, his inflexibility, and his statement that a leader should “temper justice with mercy” were to be put into practice when he, as President of South Africa after the first fully democratic elections in 1994, followed a policy of reconciliation. Significant too is his judgement of Antigone: “she was, in her own way, a freedom fighter, for she defied the law on the ground that it was unjust”. This view of Antigone as a heroine in the struggle for justice encapsulates the interpretation of this role by Black South African theatre in the decades between Sharpeville and 1990. In scholarly debate about Sophocles’ *Antigone* there have been many differences about whether Antigone’s act of

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45. After a while the cast knew the play so well that they translated their dialogue into Xhosa as they went along. This was probably the first time Greek tragedy was played in one of South Africa’s indigenous languages.

46. Walder 1992:xxiv. M. Benson 1997: 23 writes that Fugard wrote to her and asked her to send him copies of the “Penguin version of *Antigone*”. This was probably the volume “Sophocles The Theban Plays” with translations by E F Watling, first published in 1947 and often reprinted.

47. Pretorius 1995:231; Benson 1997:104 quotes the following extract from a statement of Sir Robert Birley in support of opposition to the cultural boycott against South Africa: “Was it wrong for Athol Fugard to produce Sophocles’ *Antigone* with an African cast in New Brighton township, thereby on the face of it accepting the rules of apartheid? Certainly the security police thought it was. They refused him permission to be present when it was performed.” This is in the context of Fugard being attacked for not supporting the cultural boycott against South Africa.

48. Fugard 1983:123-127 relates how he attended Norman’s trial in Cradock and how bitterly he resented the injustice of his 5-year sentence for furthering the aims of the banned African National Congress. Some of Norman’s stories (150-153) about prisoners’ survival tactics on Robben Island told to Fugard on his release after two years, were to be adapted and incorporated into the dialogue of *The Island*.

49. Walder 1992:xxviii.

50. Mandela 1994:441-2.

defiance was right or wrong, but in the Black South African productions she was constantly presented as a martyr and heroine.<sup>51</sup>

Not all South Africans saw *Antigone* in the same light, however, as is evident from the 1970 production by Carel Trichardt for the state subsidized Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal's Youth Theatre.<sup>52</sup> From the reviews<sup>53</sup> and the programme it appears that this was an attempt to show the universal application of the *Antigone* theme. The theme was interpreted in a very specific way. In a newspaper interview<sup>54</sup> before the opening of the play, Trichardt outlined his conception that the conflict between *Antigone* and *Creon* was as valid as 2 500 years ago. He saw *Antigone*'s revolt against *Creon* because of his moral error as similar to the contemporary youth's conflict with the state in their quest for individuality. He had tried to emphasize the universality of the play by means of décor and costumes, while images of war and destruction accompanied by the sound of gunfire would be projected on a screen at the back of the stage. Trichardt's conception and its execution were lambasted by the critics. While Brewer and Dommissie based their criticism on aesthetic and theatrical considerations,<sup>55</sup> Baneshik had graver grounds for his condemnation:

“*Creon*'s type of authoritarian rule through the ages is heavily pointed up throughout the production. The set . . . is dominated by a stylized Big Brother eye of which the pupil is a modified swastika. And in his notes in the programme the director, Carel Trichardt is at great pains to point out that *Antigone*'s revolt is against 'unjust law'. It is all the more intriguing therefore to observe how the production directs all attention away from the play's appositeness to the contemporary South African scene and towards the Nazi era in Europe, the Soviet system, today's agony in Vietnam and possibly (if a picture in the programme is anything to go by) the Hungarian episode. Everybody else's unjust laws but our own . . .”

Baneshik remarked that pointing out the mote in other people's eyes without noticing the beam in one's own was in this case either naïve or tendentious. The former seems hard to imagine, and the latter would imply that this theatre company was implicitly supporting the South African regime of the time by not even hinting at its injustices. Baneshik challenged the director rhetorically: “How about equating *Creon*'s tyranny and *Antigone*'s defiance of it with South Africa's own internal conflict, Mr Trichardt?”

Although the portrayal of the conflict in the play thus did not reflect the tension in the country, a review such as that of Baneshik would have served to alert some of the all White public to such an interpretation. This was, of course the view that, not unexpectedly, the Black theatre community shared.

At this time most politically committed theatre groups were systematically persecuted and destroyed by the authorities.<sup>56</sup> Their leaders were often arrested, detained and charged with political offences. In Natal, a Black theatre group, strongly influenced by the Black

51. For the theatre of protest see Hauptfleisch (1997), Pretorius (1995), Kavanagh (1985), Orkin (1991).

52. It was produced in Pretoria in July and in Johannesburg at the Alexander theatre in December (Botha 1972).

53. B Brewer *Sunday Times* 13 December 1970, “Exciting PACT season - then damp squib”; H Dommissie *Die Transvaler* 10 December 1970, “TRUK se *Antigone* weet nie waar klepel hang nie”; P Baneshik *The Star* 9 December 1970, *Antigone and Satyrs* '70.

54. *Die Transvaler* 1 July 1970, “Trichardt oor *Antigone* - Aanbieding met jeugboodskap”.

55. They both found the range of costumes, from ancient Greek, through Renaissance to modern, meant to be “timeless”, unconvincing and distracting and the young actors unequal to the task.

56. International Defence and Aid Fund 1977:57-63.

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Consciousness Movement was formed in 1969. This group, known as TECON (The Theatre Council of Natal) in 1971 staged<sup>57</sup> a free adaptation, *Antigone in '71*, in which the

“theme of resistance to unjust government was given a strong South African background by means of a stark introduction simulating a hanging, newsreel film of slum housing, and a chorus of black women. The theme of the play became the black confrontation with apartheid, and its impact was great, particularly when TECON took it on tour through Natal, often playing to audiences who had no previous experience of theatre, and who were immediately and strongly appreciative of drama which held such political relevance to their own lives”.<sup>58</sup>

S’Ketch’, the magazine that represented the viewpoint of the Black Theatre wrote in its Summer 1973 edition: “With the emergence of Black theatre groups all over the country, it has become clear that the prevailing notion of art is not that of ‘art for art’s sake’. To the black artist of today, art is there to serve the cause. It is there to inform, unite, inspire the people and expedite the ‘arrival’. It is a vehicle”.<sup>59</sup>

Antigone’s defiance to unjust authority was thus harnessed to the struggle against apartheid. The most successful example of this was in a play which is also a forerunner of the multicultural plays that were soon to become a feature of the South African theatrical landscape, namely *The Island*,<sup>60</sup> devised by Athol Fugard in collaboration with John Kani and Winston Ntshona, and first presented in 1973. The definitive moment in the play within the play, *The Trial and Punishment of Antigone*, comes when Winston, a black man, playing Antigone, a role he had earlier scornfully rejected as “a bloody woman” and a Greek legend, totally identifies with what he has realized she represents. This identification of the struggle against the oppression of apartheid with the struggle for the freedom of conscience represented by Antigone was a potent reminder to every theatregoer of the universality and endurance of the themes of Greek tragedy.

In another way too, *The Island* prepared audiences for other multicultural plays to come. The coarse, everyday language of the play, often mixed with Xhosa and Afrikaans words, was a far cry from the elevated stylised presentation of Greek tragedy hitherto experienced in South Africa.

*The Island* was an immense hit internationally and took its message all over the world. It seems also to have stood the test of time, because, even although the unjust regime against which it was protesting has been eliminated, it has continued being performed. It has in its own way become a classic.

An English version of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, directed by Barney Simon, was performed at the Market Theatre in May, 1975.<sup>61</sup> Simon subtitled this production “A play of our time”. Newspaper critics speculated on the meaning of this. Raeford Daniel wrote in the *Rand Daily Mail*<sup>62</sup> that Simon’s reading of the *Antigone* was “the calamity that comes to man through his own perversity”. He thought that this interpretation had a particular relevance to “here and now”, in other words, South Africa and its political and social dispensation, and that “it reverberates with Antigone’s cry: ‘Your decree does not come from God — it offends the

57. According to the *Natal Mercury* of 29 June 1971, Miss V Mashalaba would play the role of Antigone with Saths Cooper as Creon in the National Drama Exhibition at the Orient Hall from 5 to 9 July 1971.

58. International Defence and Aid Fund 1977:58.

59. p.43.

60. Fugard 1995:193-227. Much has been written about *The Island*. See for instance Mackay, E A 1989 Antigone and Orestes in the Works of Athol Fugard. *Theoria* 74:31-43. See also Wertheim 1987.

61. Schwartz 1988.

62. 16 May 1985.

laws of God and heaven.” At last the White Anglophone South African stage was also waking up to the parallels between Antigone’s plight and that of the oppressed masses in the country.

One version of *Antigone* apparently took the identification with the South African situation a step further. This play, called *Igazi Lam (My Blood)*<sup>63</sup> was directed by Peter Se-Puma and “transposed the story into a hypothetical post-civil war South Africa”. In reality civil war was fortunately averted. When the political situation in South Africa changed dramatically in 1990, most of the political prisoners were released. In 1994 South Africa had its first fully democratic elections and now, with a new constitution, it would not be possible for the state to act arbitrarily against an individual. It is thus of some interest to look at how the conflict between the individual and the state is treated in the new South Africa. Two new adaptations of Sophocles’ *Antigone* provide new answers.

The first, by an amateur group in Cape Town, called the Barnstormers, was produced in 1999 at a community theatre festival. It turned the title into a question: *Antigone?* This implied doubt about the relevance of Antigone’s defiance. The play, written by Fred Benbow-Hibbert,<sup>64</sup> reconsiders the theme of the rights of the individual in relation to the state in the context of an authority which, rather than destroying its dissenters, might seek to convert them into ideal citizens of the modern democratic state.

The second is an example of a new kind of theatre. The impetus given to indigenous theatre by plays of the theatre of protest led to a stream of multicultural and multilingual performances, known as “crossover theatre”. Hauptfleisch defines this as an indigenous hybrid: “all the varied strands of convention, tradition and experimentation somehow seem to get tied together in a hybrid form of performance which is uniquely South African”.<sup>65</sup> An adaptation of Greek tragedy that exemplifies this new style was the Jazzart Company’s impressive and original *Medea* that was first produced in 1994.<sup>66</sup> Another good example of this new kind of theatre is provided by *Giants*, also based on Sophocles’ *Antigone*. It was written by Sabata Sesi and staged in Cape Town in 2001.

*Giants* combined music (African drumming, African jazz, choral singing and solo clarinet accompaniment to dialogue scenes), a half chorus, inspired partly by Greece, partly by Africa, dancing, mime, African storytelling, (a choryphee or narrator dressed in African mask and buskins) and scenes of dialogue.

Sabata blended Sophocles’ *Antigone* with an African legend to create his new version. This version also bears a political message. It warns against the dangers of dictatorship and, by implication, commends the new South African constitution with its guarantee of freedom and equality for all citizens.

The Creon character becomes Makhanda, the king of an unnamed African state. He is treated as an African chief and, at public appearances, a praise singer celebrates his greatness. Nontombi, or “young woman” has the Antigone role. Her two brothers, Sizwe and Sechaba,

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63. Reference is made to this adaptation in Kruger 1999:235 footnote 3. I have not been able to find out more about it.

64. I would like to thank Mr Benbow-Hibbert and Mrs J Fletcher for kindly providing me with a copy of the unpublished script of the play.

65. Hauptfleisch 1997: 60, 67-81.

66. This *Medea* has been discussed by various authors. See for instance the reviews by M R Mezzabotta and B van Zyl Smit in *Didaskalia* 1.5 (<http://www.didaskalia.berkeley.edu>) and the paper “Ancient Greek Drama in the New South Africa” by M R Mezzabotta (available at <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/CC99/mezza.htm>) and references there.

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have killed each other. The first, Sizwe, is the traitor who has led an attack on his country, while the other, Sechaba, has died defending his country. It is significant that both these names mean “nation”: “Sizwe” in Xhosa and Zulu, and “Sechaba” in Sotho and Tswana. The futility of the fraternal strife that results in destruction of what they both claim to hold dear is thus emphasized.

The conflict between Makhanda, a despot in the mould of Idi Amin, Mobutu Sese Seku or Robert Mugabe, and Nontombi is bitter and prolonged. An added dimension, which has no parallel in the Greek play, is physical violence and torture. Not only Nontombi, but also her sister are repeatedly assaulted and violated. In response to a question about why he felt such brutality was necessary, the director maintained that he believed that modern culture was visual rather than aural and that suffering had to be seen to be believed.<sup>67</sup> Whereas Sophocles’ *Antigone*, and also Anouilh’s adaptation, have provoked much debate about the merits of each side of the conflict between Antigone and of Creon, there can be no debate about who is on the side of right and justice in *Giants*. The Creon figure, Makhanda, is so unequivocally dictatorial, cruel and inhumane that no grain of sympathy is evoked for his cause. Nontombi, on the other hand is unequivocally a martyr to the causes of traditional justice and women’s rights.

The creation of productions such as Jazzart’s *Medea* and Sabata’s *Giants* with their blend of race, language, culture and performance styles shows how the theatrical scene in South Africa has changed. This change of course is a reflection of a wider change in South African society. Both these plays were staged in the theatre in Cape Town which, for two decades after it was built, was the exclusive preserve of White audiences and White actors.

A striking production of Greek tragedy was *The Bacchae* of Euripides at the newly instituted Dionysos festival at Kirstenbosch, the National Botanic Garden on the back slopes of Table Mountain in Cape Town in November 2002. The play was directed by Roy Sargeant and performed by an all male cast in an open-air stone amphitheater in the garden. The perfect acoustics and the magnificent natural beauty of the setting added to the excitement of the performance. In addition to the performances at night, there were two in the early morning (7am) as in ancient Greece. The director maintained<sup>68</sup> that he wanted to stay as true as possible to the original Greek style of production. For Roy Sargeant staging *The Bacchae* was the fulfilment of a long held desire instilled by his first reading of Mary Renault’s novel *The Mask of Apollo*.<sup>69</sup> The novel contains a description of the central character, Nikeratos, performing in Euripides’ *Bacchae* in Syracuse. Renault’s portrayal of this performance was to influence many aspects of Sargeant’s direction.

In contrast to most modern directors, and inevitably adaptors, Sargeant had no wish to stress any relevance to the modern world. He thought that the play stood for itself and that the sparseness of the production would highlight the richness of the text. In this way Sargeant aimed, like Mary Renault, “to tell the truth about the past”. The audience could draw their own conclusions about the themes of the drama: East and West, order and freedom, male and female, life and death. The parallels between Pentheus and some modern politicians who are

67. Personal interview with Warwick Grier. I would like to thank Mr Grier for a copy of the script of *Giants*.

68. Roy Sargeant gave a lecture “My *Bacchae*” to the Western Cape branch of the Classical Association of South Africa on 15 March 2003. Much of the information in the paper is based on this talk. The programme of the production provided additional facts. My description is also based on attending both an evening and a morning performance.

69. Sargeant read the novel in proof. At that time he was a producer of radio drama for the SABC and was to produce a serialized version of *The Mask of Apollo*.

smart but not wise and want to be in total control came out clearly; as did the violence that follows when repressed emotions break out and the high price paid for freedom. These are timeless themes of universal application. Perhaps seeing them encapsulated in the formality of the ancient drama did enhance their authority.

The English translation selected for the production was that by David Epstein because, in Sargeant's opinion, it captures the poetry of the original in language that actors can speak.<sup>70</sup> The wish to stay as true as possible to the original led to the decision to use three male actors, masks and a chorus of six young men.<sup>71</sup> The director divided the parts among the actors so that the first actor, Matthew Wild played Dionysos and Tiresias, the second actor, Tauriq Jenkins, played Pentheus, and Agave, while the third actor, Ralph Lawson played Kadmos, the first soldier and a herdsman.

The chorus who remained on stage from the parodos played a central part. Their foreignness was suggested not only by their costumes, masks and musical instruments, but also by the fact that they were males representing women. The six young men moved as one, in Sargeant's words "like a shoal of fish or a flock of starlings, connected yet disconnected". They were dressed identically and wore identical half masks. Passages of heightened emotion were sung, while weightier pronouncements were spoken. The music was all performed on stage by castanets, drums and tambourines.

The final words of the play:

"In vain man's expectation;  
God brings the unthought to be,  
As here we see."

were taken, not from Euripides' *Bacchae*, but from *The Mask of Apollo*.<sup>72</sup>

This production was well supported by theatregoers<sup>73</sup> and, accompanied as it was by a series of lectures on Greek drama, the god Dionysos, wine and wine-tasting of South African wines, made some impact on the public. If the festival becomes an annual event<sup>74</sup> it should make a great contribution to keeping the legacy of ancient Greece alive in Cape Town.

This brief, partial history of the reception of Greek tragedy in South Africa reflects some of the changes in the country's political, social and cultural life in the course of the twentieth century. There is a clear development from attempts to reproduce the great classics and thus paying homage to the past while proving that South African culture, be it Anglophone or Afrikaans, formed part of this legacy, to the confident appropriation of the Greek dramas performed in recent years. These new dramas have often changed not only the script, by blending in elements of contemporary life and local traditions, but also created a vibrant South African style of performance. This augurs well for a continuation of the bond the local stage has established with its Athenian predecessor.

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70. According to Sargeant this translation was modified by ironing out some "gross Americanisms" from the text.

71. The budget could not accommodate more than six! According to R S, but in my view a bigger chorus would have cluttered the acting space which is not enormous.

72. p.204.

73. The performance was reviewed by Julia Landau in the *Cape Times* of Wednesday, 20 November, 2002, by Rafiek Mammon in the *Independent on Line* (<http://www.iol.co.za/>, accessed 2 November, 2002).

74. The first step has been taken. Sophocles' *Oedipus the Tyrant*, again under the direction of Roy Sargeant, was staged at Kirstenbosch from 26 November to 21 December 2003. The production was reviewed by Wilhelm Snyman in the *Cape Times* on 2 December 2003.



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