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Like a Prayer (in Byzantium)

Abstract

Book review for *Performing Orthodox Ritual in Byzantium* by Andrew Walker White. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015 (ISBN 978-1-107-07385-2).

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For a theatre historian, attending the Divine Liturgy in an Orthodox Christian church is always a special experience, because one of the most evident elements is the performing dimension of faith. For a Western spectator, the ceremony has a very refined level, and some relevant factors – from the organization of the architectural space, to the musical practice. In general, the impact is increased by the rhythm and the emphasis of the ritual aesthetic.

This type of rite is never conceived as a simple form of entertainment. During the Byzantine period, the proof comes from the *Service of the Furnace*: this monograph analyzes its historical context, texts and iconography, in order to understand its realization and its possible modes of reception. The vitality of this public practice is also testified in early Imperial Russia, as a sort of cultural legacy from Byzantium:

«Although its exact beginnings remain unclear, eyewitness accounts confirm that the *Service of the Furnace* was performed from at least the late fourteenth to the mid fifteenth century. [...] Greek service books were routinely transmitted to

Russia, and it is likely that certain portions of the *Service* may have already been incorporated into services there. In the years after the fall of Constantinople we have evidence of an elaborate, highly theatrical variation on the *Service* performed in Moscow well into the 1600s» (pp. 140-141).

Taken from the Septuagint version of the Book of Daniel, the *Service of the Furnace* celebrates the salvation of three children from the martyrdom, with the help of an angel. The first hymn, “The Prayer of Azariah”, combines the imploration for God's mercy with the confession of the people's sinfulness. The second hymn, “Song of the Three Children”, comes after the arrival of the angel and is an exhortation to praise the Lord (in Western tradition, it is known as the *Benedicite*). The culminating moments are the descent of the angel and the final dance of the children, as an expression of joy for their salvation.

In the Appendix, there is a critical comparison among the texts of the *Service of the Furnace* in five manuscripts, in order to evaluate the importance of the choir for the spiritual and liturgical interpretation (original Greek texts with English translations). Moreover, there is a focus on the Russian *Furnace Play*, which is enriched by special fire effects and other elements not included in the Byzantine version.

Andrew Walker White, professor at Stratford University (Virginia), is the first American theatre historian who has deeply analyzed Byzantine performance. This monograph is the result of his long research, which includes the staging of the *Service of the Furnace* at the University of Maryland campus. I was glad to meet him at the International Conference *Theatre Historiography: Genealogies and New Directions* (Chicago, 10th-11th August 2011), organized by Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE), jointly sponsored by Theatre History Focus Group and Theory and Criticism Focus Group.

Our session was “Historiographical Migrations / International Transactions.” His paper was *The Question of “Byzantine” Theatre: Methods and Assumptions Along History's Orientalist Frontier*. He presented a passage of his research, whose interdisciplinary importance was immediately clear. Five years ago, listening his speech, I admired the erudition of Andrew Walker White. Today, I think that Ettore Lo Gatto – the first Italian scholar who wrote about the *Furnace Play* – would be happy to read his monograph.

PS: My paper for Chicago ATHE Conference in 2011 was *Russian Theatre Study in Italy: Roots and New Horizon*.