

EDITORIAL NOTE

THE GLO-C-ALITY OF THE GREEK CLASSICS

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Since the time of Plato and Aristotle, critics and practitioners have spent time arguing on what theatre can or cannot contribute to the maintenance of social order and state formation. Not all of them agree, of course, as to the degree of this contribution. Yet, what seems to unite them all is the idea that says theatre is work primarily embedded in processes, institutions, structures, and markets located first within national sovereign territories. What we pick out in the voice of the storytellers and the dramatis personae, “is the general disposition the writer has developed towards his ‘material’ and his audience” (Chaouli 325), that is, his world. In short: theatre is not a disembodied observation, a situation-free appraisal of the world; it does not exist in a void; it is directly affected by the vibration between different spaces (politics, economics, popular culture, aesthetics, and personal preferences).

In the mind of most people, only a bounded and not an immeasurable multiplicity can be represented on stage or elsewhere as a unity. And the question is: what happens when the nation-state is undergoing radical politico-cultural changes, when shifts and developments make the representation of people as a national body and as individuals very problematic? We may not have the answer to that; yet, one thing is certain: every time the world changes there is a change both in the way practitioners (and theorists) update, rework, appropriate, re-write, or adapt their material, modern or classic, and in the way viewers and historical communities receive them.

What is unique about our era is that the explosion of electronic and digital technologies has brought about many changes which are not like all the other changes that took place in the course of Theatre’s development. I dare say that they are to our age what Gutenberg’s innovative ideas were to the Renaissance. If we add to this the influence of women’s studies, ethnic studies, reception, cultural, postmodern, postcolonial, and performance studies, among dozens of recent trends and “-isms,” we could say that we are at the threshold of a second modernity, without, however, the certainties of the modernity of the nation-state. With national boundaries relativised and

national imaginaries and national subjects destabilized, it is only natural to wonder about the future of the Classics, whether there is still any room left for them to step in and make their presence felt, locally or globally; whether they can accommodate the growing diversity of a planet, in which millions of people are crossing boundaries doing business or running away from war zones.

Since the European appearance of the Greek tragedians, in the early years of the sixteenth century, with productions like Euripides' *Phoenician Women* by Lodovico Dolce (1549) and its English adaptation by George Gascoigne and Francis Kinwelmershe's *Jokasta* in 1566 (Gray Inn, London), there have been well over six thousand different versions/appearances of ancient Greek tragedy which, all together, testify to one simple truth: some readings or rewritings or recreations may look more convincing than others, but never so convincing that nothing remains to be said. In other words, the encounter of each generation of scholars and practitioners with the classic texts is a unique event, which may follow certain constants but not recipes of standardization. Christopher Innes summarizes the current situation very aptly when he says that the remaking of the Classics "has become such a common practice that it almost counts as an identifying mark of contemporary theatre" (248). Along similar lines, Edith Hall argues that over

the last three or four decades there has been a revival of interest in Greek tragedy, internationally, that has been completely unprecedented in scope and scale. All the plays have been performed, in every continent of the world, and dozens of new translations and adaptations are commissioned for productions every year. (329)

An increasing number of adaptations, performances and readings drawing on Chinese, Japanese, Korean and other Asiatic, Arab and African traditions (by Tadashi Suzuki, Ninagawa Yukio, Ariane Mnouchkine, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Brett Bailey, among others) have significantly contributed to the enrichment and widening of the field. Also, the closing of the gap between high art and popular art has opened the way for the Classics to enter popular culture, via Hollywood, Television, Cartoons, etc. As Hall maintains, ancient Greek theatre still provides food for thought and reflection; since it was "itself born in a moment of revolutionary change and late twentieth-century directors were galvanized by its political potential" (331). Erika Fischer-Lichte, on her part, argues that the performances of Greek tragedies have opened "a discussion on the relationship between textuality and performativity" (70). For Foley, Greek tragedy "permits a political response to irresolvable, extreme situations without being crudely topical. Set in an imaginary past that offers few specifics in the way of setting or physical description, it is also amenable to both changes of venue and to multiracial Casting" (2). American director Peter Sellars finds the power and importance of ancient Greek theatre in its participatory character; in its



Attis' Greek-Turkish production of The Persians (directed by Theodoros Terzopoulos, 2006) caused an uproar among certain critics and spectators, who claimed that the use of Turkish at the site of Epidaurus was a provocation. Photo: Johanna Weber

ability to transform the spectator from a consumer of an artifact to an active participant. Mac Wellman, another American user of ancient myths and plays, argues that although it is hard to do tragedy nowadays, for it turns into melodrama, it is still “an affront to one’s perception of the way things are in the universe” (58). For him the broken world of his remodified *Antigone* challenges Americans’ certainty that they live in a fixed world, “a world that is ultimately repairable and that all difficulties [have] a solution” (59).

Last but not least, Baz Kershaw’s reading offers yet one more thorny issue to consider: the commodification of art in a globalized economy. He discusses the promotion of intercultural theatre exchange (and the international productions of tragedy are part of that),

through the global merry-go-round of high-profile festivals, touring circuits, or ‘special events’ [...] at the very moment that such theatre tries to confound normative notions of identity and ownership by breaking through to zones of equal exchange or barter, it offers itself up to the hierarchical and divisive ethics of the international cultural marketplace. (66-67)

In this context, Kershaw asks, and rightly so, “how can intercultural performance hope to avoid being turned into a commodity, a hot property with little or no chance of resisting, displacing, let alone transcending the forces of commercialism that would turn it into an object to be owned, a piece of

cultural capital?” (66-67). Kershaw’s observations bring forward a number of pressing matters such as orientalism, imperialism, appropriation, domination, boundaries, all matters hotly debated in recent years, following intercultural and inter/multidisciplinary productions by Robert Lepage, Robert Wilson, and Peter Brook, and in Greece by Peter Stein, Theodoros Terzopoulos, Luca Ronconi, Michael Marmarinos, Dimiter Gotscheff, Mattias Langhoff, Yannis Houvardas, among others.

As mentioned earlier, there is no end to the available scholarship and practice. Dealing with the Classics remains an open project, which gradually develops in its own way in the direction of a more decentralized (global) model, more attentive to contact zones and artistic centers that represent more adequately local and foreign determinants. Ioannidou is correct when she writes in her interesting article “From Translation to Performance Reception” that classical reception has now developed “as a distinct area of both classical and theatre studies” (208). The intersections and interactions of the different cultures of the planet have blurred earlier distinct cultural borders and thus enlarged the framework of inquiry and practice so much that

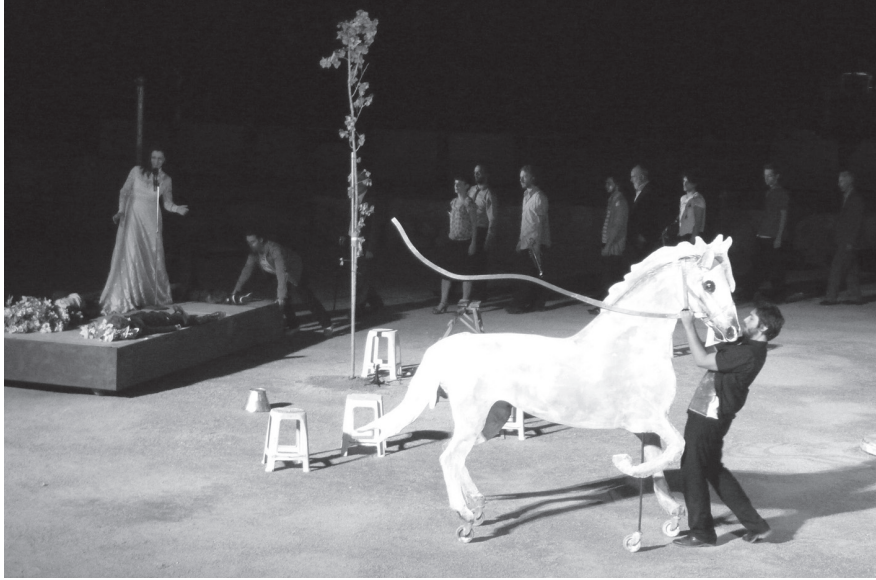
[t]he study of classical reception should therefore not be limited to analyzing the appropriation of the classical text or to identifying the responses of certain reading communities or audiences to it (or its adaptations); instead, it has to pursue a complex process which lies at the interface between adaptation and response. (208)

To use Turner’s phrasing (1982), it all looks more like an open borderland activity, an exploration of the liminal fields that may exist “betwixt-and-between” different cultures. Instead of localities and globalities, the word now is “glocalities.”

Part II

The essays collected here do not present an all inclusive or an exhaustive view of things. Their sample is mostly suggestive. It just gives a taste of what is going on now, at a time of great transformations, social, economic, ethnographic, political, and aesthetic. In their own way, they show the provisional nature of any system of cultural exchange. They highlight issues ranging from the problematics of interculturalism, inter/multidisciplinary to the difficulties of the task of translation.

Heinz-Uwe Haus’ article argues that Ancient Greek Drama/Theatre reinforces the idea that we have the power to shape and reshape our own lives and social conditions. Sylvie Jouanny, in her own contribution, writes that theatre replays the past in the present. To substantiate her point she turns the reader’s attention to the use of the story of the Trojan War, that symbolic event in Greek culture, and claims that the subject has usually been approached with some measure of realism, a mimetic treatment that has



Hercules Furens, a production of The National Theatre, directed by Michael Marmarinos, was enthusiastically received by the Festival crowd at Epidaurus in 2011. Photo: Eleni Petasi

little interest for audiences. In her mind, an oneiric, poetic, mythological approach may spark an enthusiastic response. This more symbolic aesthetic, Jouanny concludes, makes the Trojan War an archetypal conflict which inspires a theatrical search for answers but also a message of hope: what should we conclude/how can we reconcile them both? Theodoros Grammatas' sociocultural reading of the stage/audience relation claims that ancient drama constitutes a unique cultural synthesis of elements, focusing on the Athenian democracy of the fifth century BC. Its recipient, the "Citizen-Spectator" of the City-State, experienced and interpreted the stage spectacle against a background of relatively homogeneous State narratives. Today, however, this relative consensus is very much weakened. The contemporary recipient is more of a "Spectator-Consumer," rather than a traditional "spectator." S/he is a consumer with a totally different world philosophy and sociopolitical background and, certainly, a different memory bank; a bank now enriched by numerous and diverse spectacles of ancient drama throughout the world, which, altogether have created dissimilar expectations and demands. Within this context, it comes as no surprise that the role of the director gains additional importance and becomes an indispensable mediator between contemporary heterogeneous spectatorship and the revisited classical text. This last point is analyzed in more detail by Avra Sidiripoulou. In her paper she explores the ways in which contemporary directors-adapters of Greek tragedy have confronted the ancient text, tracing a propensity for an ambivalent

attitude towards the past and its infiltration into today's sensibilities. Sidiropoulou points out the need for both artists and spectators to look deeper into the classical work in order to develop a critical stance vis-à-vis the assumed textual significance, understood as the impact of the source play to its original audience. As she argues, the notions of stature, communion, and transcendence, inherent in the "classics," are often buried or rendered irrelevant in productions of strong formalist foundations and markedly visual emphasis, which end up deflating, depoliticizing, and, ultimately, devaluing the plays' dialectic as well as affective nature. Laying out the premises whereby the application of form can bring fascinating results in performances of Greek tragedy, the paper argues that the dangers embedded in the overly aestheticized mindset of avant-garde directors should also be viewed and investigated within the framework of a broader unease towards the modern relevance and adaptability of the ancient text.

In his own paper, Freddy Decreus claims that the history of the West has been constructed on a nearly total absence of a philosophy of the body. In the last few decades, however, a new interdisciplinary combination of philosophy, psychoanalysis and neuroscientific studies has witnessed the resurrection of this body. Theodoros Terzopoulos, according to Decreus, was one of the first practitioners both to introduce this energetic climate on stage and to apply it to the staging of classical texts. With productions like *Ajax*, *Prometheus Bound* and *The Bacchae*, Terzopoulos introduced a bio-energetic methodology that radically questioned the perennial presuppositions of the "phallogocentric" West and its "metaphysics of presence".

Menelaos Givalos' contribution also argues that our era's heterogeneous worldviews and sociocultural contexts severely affect both the production procedure and the spectators' reading of ancient drama. He wonders whether ancient Greek tragedy can be successfully transferred and comprehended today. The least we could do, he claims, is to critically look into the distinction between the transfer and the rendering of ancient tragedy and, also, into the relationship between synchronicity and diachronicity, which, finally, defines the modern perspective. Based on these distinctions, Givalos maintains, the criticism of the post-modern worldview would lead us to the examination of the possibility of an organic relationship between ancient tragedy and the modern conception of the world. Yannis Papadopoulos, in his essay, writes that the social function of theatre art in the classic Hellenic era differs radically from that of contemporary post-dramatic poetics in the sense that, whereas ancient dramas and games educated the members of the *polis* to act publicly, as citizens, postmodern culture encourages its members to live as individuals, reviving their "pre-conscious ferocity."

Katerina Karametrou, in her own paper, claims that tragedy is Man's heroic vision, signifying the triumph of intellect against the defeat of the human body. Tragedy extols the morally autonomous individual who envies, endeavors, and reaches the divine and lays a mirror before human nature. Tragedy,

the art of *nostos*, emanates from the alluring union between customs and rituals and it denotes the abrogation of the interval between the divine and the human. The ideological and political content of (ancient) drama is a spring of inspiration and moral speculation for the educator–theatre–pedagogue and the student at a time of crisis. That is what gives it, according to the writer, an everlasting value; for societies are always in a state of crisis, economic, intellectual, or moral.

Vayos Liapis' paper is the only one in this volume that uses a contemporary Greek dramatic text – Kambanellis' trilogy *The Supper* (*O Δείπνος*) – in order to analyze its intertextual relations to ancient Greek tragedies. Kambanellis' trilogy, Liapis maintains, is shot through with metatheatrical devices (role-play, make-believe action, references to dramatic convention) and with sustained references (explicit, oblique, or cleverly distorted) to ancient Greek tragic versions of the Atreid myth. The trilogy's elaborate and sophisticated fusion of lived reality and dramatic fiction is enhanced by its construction of space as a heterotopia, a locus that is at once physically real and phantasmatic.

Finally, Michael Walton's paper touches upon a thorny issue: that of translating ancient texts, a process that inevitably brings to the surface theoretical ideas about text and textuality, authorship and hybridity, text and audience. Most translators of Greek drama would agree that different principles apply to the translation of comedy and tragedy, Walton writes. But what of those lighter moments to be found in Aeschylus and Sophocles, the writer wonders, and the outright comic aspects of much of Euripides? Tragic irony is usually easy to spot, but is the same true of Euripides for whom palpable parody of Aeschylus may suggest that a similar tone should be found elsewhere in his plays to represent his perceived iconoclasm? Is the danger in making decisions about comic irony that they will determine the translator's interpretation and dictate it to readers, directors and performers, Walton asks.

What the numerous re-readings and re-stagings of ancient drama show is that each generation of scholars and practitioners convey a different image as well as a different stance towards the past. What they all seem to agree on is that ancient drama is a precious jewel of world cultural heritage, an ancient art-form which still has the potential to offer a significant living presence in the theatres of the third millennium, according to Eagleton (qtd in Hall 346). What is at stake for each generation is to test the Classics' "magical ability to suffer" almost any kind of appropriation without at the same time losing their inner strength, as Israeli director Zinder claims (2010), a statement that brings to mind Brecht, who once remarked (1948) that the strength of a literary tradition rests on its plagiarism (qtd in Innes 248). And the increased interest contemporaries show in the Classics testifies to that.

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