Skenè Studies I • 2

Oedipus at Colonus and *King Lear*: Classical and Early Modern Intersections

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Opening Up Discoveries through Promised Endings: An Experimental Work in Progress on *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear*

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Abstract

As its title indicates, this essay is based on an original theatrical project, co-produced and co-directed by the authors in Verona, Italy, in Spring, 2018. More than a mere *resumé*, however, the article addresses theoretical as well as practical aspects of preparing and staging an outdoor performance of a bi-lingual script (in Italian and English) comprised of scenes from Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, with a heterogeneous, international cast of actors in various stages of experience. Applying a Performance As Research approach (PAR), the project challenges its own title by pursuing not endings and closures but rather beginnings and openings, celebrating process, liminal encounters, ruptures, and discoveries. The hybrid pastiche maintains tensions by, for example, inserting a Sophoclean Chorus into King Lear's storm scene, and applying improvisation techniques and the frequent use of live bassoon accompaniment to the faithful rendition of poetically crafted, rhetorically constructed verse and prose lines. Shared themes such as aging, blindness, father-child conflict, exile, homelessness and reconciliation are accentuated, in a site-specific, Greek-style mini-amphitheatre with a backdrop of cypress grove/ex-military bunker, where the audience itself becomes a border zone, amidst a heterotopic and heterochronic experiment. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's theory of "rhizomes", this literally eccentric, multifarious theatrical work-in-progress seeks neither to make nor keep promises of achieving a coherent historical/representational narrative. Instead, it aims to engage actors and spectators in an open and fluid process of supplication and exchange, for the "rhizome has no beginning or end, it is always in the middle, between things, inter-being, intermezzo" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A*

Thousand Plateaus). One of the project's key discoveries has been to understand the act of supplication as one that connects theatre makers and audiences with contemporary experiences of exile and migration.

Introducing the Athenian court performance of *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe*, the carpenter and part-time director Peter Quince declares to Theseus, Hippolyta and their fellow audience members that "To show our simple skill, / That is the true beginning of our end" (Shakespeare 2008: 5.1.110-1). Quince's promise aptly serves as our own opening line, for this essay on theatrical endings and beginnings which stems from an original project co-produced and co-directed by the authors in Verona, Italy, in Spring, 2018. More than providing a mere *resumé*, however, the following article will address theoretical, methodological as well as practical aspects of preparing and staging an outdoor open rehearsal/performance of a bilingual script (in Italian and English) comprised of scenes from Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, with a heterogeneous, international cast of actors in various stages of experience. Although most of the participants, including Ms. Sidiropoulou, were working together for the first time, and cast members were recruited mainly via a locally as well as internationally posted call for auditions, the project was not a completely original, unprecedented one. It was in some key respects a sequel to a similarly unorthodox work-in-progress presented a year before (in June, 2017), also directed by Eric Nicholson. Entitled *Richard II in-contra i Sette contro Tebe*, this experiment grafted Shakespeare's *Richard II* on to Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, juxtaposing and blending together selected scenes from each of these two classic play-scripts.[1] A production and acting nucleus also had been formed, since not

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1 For an account of this project, see Nicholson 2017.

only Nicholson but several other participants in the 2017 project were returning, among them Elena Pellone, who had performed King Richard and would now perform the role of Lear; David Schalkwyk, who had played Northumberland and First Gardener, and would now play Kent; and Mario Cestaro, who played John of Gaunt and a Messenger, and would now perform the Koryphaios. Consequently, there was a fair amount of direct continuity, and the potential anxiety about merely attempting the "Promised Endings" project was alleviated by the example of the previous year's efforts. Moreover, the group was able to benefit from practical knowledge and insights gained through preparing, rehearsing, and publicly presenting a previous bilingual performance by a mix of novice, first-time actors and experienced, professionally trained ones. Thus the particular kind of *contaminatio* being practised was both textual-interpretive and logistical-performative. Furthermore, by employing a Performance As Research approach (PAR), the project – as indeed this essay itself – challenges its own title by pursuing not endings and closures but rather beginnings and openings. In the process, it accentuates and celebrates process, ruptures, liminal encounters, and discoveries.

Deliberate, risk-taking hybrids and paradoxes abound: the performance-script, alternating between passages of the ancient Greek tragedy (mainly in Italian translation, partly based on Sofocle 2008) and the early modern English one (mainly in its original language), juxtaposes two divergent periods, styles, acting traditions, and cultural frames of reference, without favouring one over the other. The hybrid pastiche maintains tensions by, for example, inserting a Sophoclean Chorus into *King Lear*'s storm scene, and applying improvisation techniques and the frequent use of live bassoon accompaniment to the faithful rendition of poetically crafted, rhetorically constructed verse and prose lines. Shared themes such as aging, blindness, father-child conflict, exile, homelessness and reconciliation became accentuated, in a site-specific, Greek-style mini-amphitheatre with a backdrop of cypress grove/ex-military bunker, where the audience itself becomes a border zone, amidst a heterotopic and heterochronic experiment. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's theory of "rhizomes", this literally eccentric, multifarious, and still incomplete theatrical work-

in-progress seeks neither to make nor keep promises of achieving a coherent historical/representational narrative, but rather to engage actors and spectators in an open and fluid process of supplication and exchange, for the "rhizome has no beginning or end, it is always in the middle, between things, inter-being, intermezzo" (1987: 12). In fact, one of the project's key discoveries has been to understand the act of supplication as a difficult, spatially and temporally determined form of mediation, with the potential of connecting theatre makers and audiences to contemporary experiences of exile and migration.

In keeping with its experimental and 'work in progress' characteristics, the "Promised Endings" project was neither designed nor accomplished as an exercise sustaining the relatively recent (since approximately 2005) evolution of PAR as an articulated creative/intellectual/heuristic modality and practice. In other words, there was not an *a priori* plan to apply the criteria of PAR to our work in any systematic or strictly defined way. This might have been an almost impossible mission in any case, since, as Bruce Barton has noted, "PAR remains a conspicuously elusive idea – at precisely the same time that it is passionately advocated" (2017: 2). To be sure, this is not to suggest that we wish to remain coyly elusive ourselves, or that we proceeded in presumptuously or even romantically haphazard, improvisatory style, but rather to explain that prominent aspects of our working process, revealed themselves to be consistent with severals component of the PAR approach. For example, while a play-script was deliberately stitched together from various sections – almost all in Italian translation – of *Oedipus at Colonus* and scenes in the original Shakespearean English of the second half of *King Lear*, the eventual sequence, assignment of specific lines (especially for the Chorus, and the two actors who shared the role of Oedipus), and coordination of verbal with non-verbal utterances and musical accompaniments were arrived at only through improvisation and practicing alternatives: in this respect, our often overtly playful workshop/performance did follow PAR's premium on "embodied knowledge",[2] as well as inter-

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2 See Fleishman 2012 and his assertion that the "difference of performance as a mode of research [is] its refusal of binaries (body-mind, theo-

est in "ludic knowledge".[3] While we based our project on two canonical texts of the Western tradition, we also adhered to PAR's Practice as Research commitment to crossing conventional cultural and linguistic boundaries, as well as to superseding and indeed rejecting the usual binaries and binarism that one comes across in standard interpretations of classical works. Thus a Chorus, following Greek tragic staging practice,[4] did appear early on in our performance-script, but instead of entering into a central, downstage orchestra and reciting lines from the Sophoclean text, they remained upstage, on a hillside. There they served as collective producers of various ambient sound effects, to evoke the raging storm King Lear pretends to command in English, in his "Blow winds, and crack your cheeks" speech. In this way, a path towards a third sort of script/soundscape, neither strictly ancient Greek nor early modern English, was opened. This particular opening was felt and recognised by several audience members who shared their responses during an extended post-show discussion: there was a consensus that at this point, the visible, audible, but non-recitative Chorus members were vital to the essential handling of the stagecraft, more than to the verbal and gestural articulation of a dramatic conflict. No formal anapests here, then, or even an emulation of them, but an effort to transmit a rough, tempestuous, non-linguistic kind of 'natural' music.

After all, the experimental workshop's primary aim was to play with the paradigm of 'openness', meaning that the perfor-

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ry-practice, space-time, subject-object), its radical openness, its multiplicities, its unrepresentability, its destabilization of all pretentions to fixity and determination" (32). Our rehearsal process also utilized an eclectic range of approaches and physical-vocal exercises, theatre games, etc. derived from such sources as the Alexander Technique, Augusto Boal's, Keith Johnstone's and Kristin Linklater's writings, and the work of Peter Brook. On Brook's helpful notion and practice of "energy release", and his as well as other recent directors' applications of Antonin Artaud's ideas to theatre ensemble work, see Sidiropoulou 2011: 85-90.

3 On the uses of ludic knowledge, see Jonathan Heron's interview with Baz Kershaw, in Arlander et al. 2017: 22-3.

4 On the central storytelling, theme-setting, and "community representative" role of the Chorus in classical Greek tragedy, see Easterling 1997: 151-73; Taplin 2003; 13-16; and Rehm 1994: 51-61.

mance before a live audience was offered as an open rehearsal, just as in the preceding weeks of preparation, the practical methodology entailed truly 'in-process' collaboration, and insisted on an opening up of various possibilities of interpretation. For example, it was only at our first full-cast read-through, in early March (over two months before the public open rehearsal) that we made decisive cuts to long speeches, and assigned – though on a tentative, preliminary basis – specific lines to specific performers, in either Italian or English according to the needs of the dramatic moment as well as the relative linguistic command of the particular speaker. Similarly, not pre-determined evaluation but group improvisation and interaction exercises enabled us to find appropriate 'doubled' casting choices, sometimes of a bi-gendered kind. One of these enabled the same young female performer, Francesca Sammaritano, to play both the Resident of Colonus from the first scene of Sophocles' play, and Albany from the last scene of Shakespeare's. A Performance As Research project often will follow the three criteria of Knowledge, Methods, Impact, with an emphasis on plural forms of knowledge, in a way that runs counter to the standard sense of acquiring a definite quantity of information and/or mastering a set of identifiable and profitable skills. In keeping with this approach, our "Promised Endings" endeavour was in some ways an exercise in 'embodied knowledge', wherein utterance, composition and movement in space, musical instrumentation, trying on of various costumes and masks, experimentation with interpretive options – in short, rehearsals-cum-performance – all were needed and coordinated to enact the preliminary thesis that the two selected tragedies have connections worth exploring. As Baz Kershaw, a leading theorist and practitioner of PAR, puts it, this approach entails a "dislocation of knowledge by action", in the spirit of Gregory Bateson's paradox that "an explorer can never know what he is exploring until it has been explored" (Bateson 1972: 2; Kershaw 2009: 4-5). The related paradox of applying a criterion of 'un-knowing' to a knowledge(s)-focused work, that brought together professors, directors, students, and professional as well as non-professional theatre artists did seem appropriate and congenial to the chosen material: both plays pursue – through gestures and speech-acts of divestiture, loss, and alienation – par-

allel yet also contrasting dramatic inquiries into the phenomena of cognition, recognition, ignorance, insight, blindness, nothingness and revelation. Sustaining our essential interpretive agenda and methodology of openness all the way through the project until the affirmation of the public performance as an open rehearsal, we found this criterion to be of special value, since we were experimenting with two emblematic 'classic plays' of the western dramatic canon.

These epistemological concerns, crucially focused on the traumas of the struggle towards knowing the self, take on special urgency for *King Lear* and its stress on disowning knowledge.[5] "Off, off, you lendings" (3.4.106),[6] cries the maddened Lear as he confronts the shivering, nearly naked Edgar/"Poor Tom", and is inspired to strip himself likewise down to nothing. Our own PAR approach sought to emulate this pattern, at the physical level using minimal means and bare, uncluttered rehearsal and performance spaces, and at the cognitive/interpretive level removing 'subtext', 'background', and 'character development' by starting with the storm scene (3.2), and then cutting to the first scene of *Oedipus at Colonus*. The Chorus of the Sophoclean play did appear, entering in approximately ancient Greek style from the rear and side *parodos* as the elders of Colonus, speaking their lines of verse in Italian translation; yet the actors who embodied these characters were not making their first appearance, since they had already 'performed', through whooshing sounds, other utterances, and the use of a metal thunder sheet, the storm from *King Lear*. As far as we knew, there never had been a prior theatrical production that had juxtaposed these scenes and doubled these roles, meaning that we only could know how our experiment would play out through the actual practice of rehearsing and staging it. Thus, rather than merely 're-producing' a single, authoritative 'classic' text of the western repertoire, in a way that would affirm, extend and perhaps slightly modify pre-existing, familiar knowledge, our hybrid

5 A well-known, illuminating interpretation of this pattern in *King Lear* is that of Cavell 2003. Also influential for our understanding and interpretation of *King Lear* have been the studies by Greenblatt 1989 and Shapiro 2015.

6 This and all ensuing citations of *King Lear* are from Shakespeare 2017

script-in-action was able to 'produce' performative phenomena, thanks to its experimental and heterogeneous method. In this context, knowing becomes a practice of 'physical engagement', to employ the terms of scientist and queer theorist Karen Barad (2007: 342).

Hence the importance of the material site, for our final rehearsals and public performance: this was the cypress grove atop a mound overlooking a grassy 'raised stage', located at the far edge of the grounds of Verona's "Educandato Agli Angeli" secondary school. While this space, with its three semi-circular tiers of large grass-topped stone benches, divided by stepped aisles, does have the contours of a traditional outdoor theatre, it is by no means a 'purpose built' performance space. Its rudimentary, nature-imbued structure and decidedly liminal position make it especially open to dramatizations of wandering, disorientation, and alienation from civilized society. In a literal as well as figurative sense, our work in progress involved "situated knowledge", of the kind delineated by Lynette Hunter: "situated knowledge becomes a situated textuality, knowledge always in the making, focused on the process" (2009: 152). The key role played by physical engagement in this process of opening up situated knowledge, for spectators as well as performers, was enacted by having the raging, shouting Lear enter from behind and through the audience, followed by the Fool. Technical stagecraft rubbed up against character interpretation: audience members had seen and heard Nicholson, standing behind/next to them, making 'storm noises' with both his deep vocal resonators and the vibrating piece of sheet metal, a few moments before they witnessed his entrance as the Fool, now wearing a yellow Shakespeare-as-Superman t-shirt, floppy multi-colored Renaissance-style beret, shiny silver synthetic 1970s 'disco'-style jacket, and battling the "wind and the rain" with a small, battered, and malfunctioning rainbow-colored umbrella.[7] His deployed res-

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7 This costuming for the Fool was one of the few fully particularized ones in our project, which favoured the use of contemporary everyday wear, or 'neutral rehearsal outfits', with simple, loose-fitting, and solid-coloured garments. The young general Polynices, however, did wear an officer's coat, and a combat helmet.

onators now moved to higher ones, as he tried to shout out, more hoarsely and ineffectually than otherwise, "Good nuncle, in, and ask thy daughter's blessing" (3.2.11-12) to the desperate King.

With this usage of alternately communicative and incapable voices, and an unstable acoustic dimension, we brought further enacted hybridization to our praxis, as well as to our Sophoclean-Shakespearean text. Our usage of the term 'hybridization' stems not only from Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical model, but from the deliberate mixture – though at times more of a non-mixture, allowing for rough juxtapositions and even dissonances among constituent parts – of distinct stage discourses in our preliminary rehearsals and final 'open' rehearsal/performance. We also sought to combine, as well as alternate between, a number of different approaches to interpretation, including the cognitive-rational, multisensory, kinetic-emotional, memorized and improvisational. For the most part, we preserved the primarily poetic language of the two plays, encouraging if not requiring full memorization of the often rhetorically crafted lines: thus the articulated word, whether in Italian or English, was an integral facet of our project. At the same time, we pursued the use of non-verbal utterances, including shouts, moans, groans, growls, imitations of animal sounds, and the like, preparing the way for Lear's anguished cry/command of "Howl, howl, howl, howl" (5.3.255), with its fusion of viscerally sounded grief and the semantically apt imperative to join the king in bewailing the loss of his daughter Cordelia, whom he carries in his arms. This is a non-locution that is at the same time a locution, in J.L. Austin's terms a speech-act that is at once illocutionary and perlocutionary (Austin 1976: 10-24). Even in translation, the metrically patterned verses of *Oedipus at Colonus* – many if not most of which were originally chanted, sung, and accompanied by wind (e.g., the *aulos* double-flute) and percussion (e.g. the *tympanon* frame drum) instruments – deploy onomatopeia, assonance, and other aurally charged devices to accentuate the passions and expressions of sorrow, anger, desperation, wonder, and blessing that mark the play.[8] We aimed to perpetuate this organic

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8 On these physical and musical aspects of ancient Greek acoustic performance, see Wiles 2000: 144-64.

musical component of the plays by commissioning an original instrumental score from contemporary Greek composer Nikos Vittis, who generously provided several short but compelling and suggestive pieces, recorded for transmission by electronic speakers during the performance. Here again, practice superseded planning and preparation, as we eventually discarded the use of the recordings in favor of live performance of the compositions, by the professional concert bassoon-player Alessandra Bonetti. Cast and audience members agreed that this choice enhanced the organic and natural feel of the *mise en scène*. Thus the deep, haunting notes of the live bassoon were as crucial to the performance's method and impact as were the variety of pitches, timbres, rhythms, aspirations, and intonations produced by the actors' voices.

In keeping with Deleuze and Guattari's theory of "rhizomes", our project modulated a series of non-binary, in-process mediations and intermediary expressions. Essential among these were the live, bilingual, and regionally accented voices and voicings of our cast members, who included Italian speakers born and raised in Italy but also ones from Brazil and Argentina, and English speakers born and/or raised and trained in South Africa, Iran, Australia, the United States, and England. Motley inconsistencies of pronunciation, and occasionally disharmonic clashes of semantic units and elocution were neither a hindrance nor a liability, but rather a means for discovering unexpected inflections of the performance-script's thematic elements of exile and vagabondage, of suffering the experiences of the outcast, the homeless, and the marginalized 'other'. Extending Adriana Cavarero's theoretical work on reclaiming voice and vocality as essential, rather than incidental, to articulated speech and thought, Konstantinos Thomaidis and Ben Macpherson have proposed that because of its "in-betweenness", voice "has the power to create what Erika Fischer-Lichte terms a 'liminal space of permanent transition, passages, and transformations'" (2015: 3, quoting Fischer-Lichte). As Thomaidis also observes, this liminal and dynamic "in-betweenness" can be usefully channeled into PAR projects: in our own "Promised Endings" it could be seen as a case in point. We deliberately avoided any attempt to 'regularize' the actors' voices, accents and speech patterns, or to impose a consistent theatrical 'style' of

vocal delivery, a common danger when performances of the classics are undertaken. Utterances thus occurred in surprising, previously and literally unheard-of ways, that could at times communicate the intricate, unresolved tensions between the characters of the play. For example, thanks to our young Iranian actor Arash Shafiee's heavily accented, Farsi-cadenced English, unconventional as well as unexpected nuances came to tinge the mimetic complexities of Edgar's impersonation of the Other-voiced, pseudo-demonically possessed "Poor Tom" while leading his blinded father Gloucester. When Mr. Shafiee, in his guise as a lucid "most poor man" (4.6.217) then used a pseudo-Devonshire 'rural' accent to speak lines like "Hadst thou been aught but gossamer, feathers, air, / So many fathom down precipitating, / Thou'dst shivered like an egg" (4.6.49-51), the speech rhythms and histrionic energy overshadowed any precise semantic or imagistic values: of primary interest was Gloucester's augmented confusion and disorientation, which to some extent mirrored that of the audience. Thus, having been forced to listen to Edgar's dialectally inflected lines with especially acute attention, the professional American actress (Ms. Noelle Adames) playing Gloucester spoke her response in deliberate and carefully enunciated fashion. In this case, then, the contrast between the blind, suicidal father and his dissimulating 'guardian'-son, whose tactics are of questionable ethical and psychological validity, achieved its own unique resonance and veracity beyond any possible directorial anticipation.

Similarly, unplanned discoveries of sound and sense were made through another organically evolved doubling choice, which allowed the same actor, Tiago Vesentini, to play the young prince Polynices of *Oedipus at Colonus*, and the unnamed Old Man (Gloucester's humble vassal-tenant) of *King Lear*. This was something of an improbable experiment, since these two characters are diametrically opposed in terms of age, social-political status, cultural background, and rhetorical style. The one, preparing to lead a mighty army against Thebes, attempts to use a suppliant's kneeling pose and a series of wheedling, conditional verbal appeals to persuade his father to bestow on him his blessing; as his sister Antigone, played by the non-doubling Anna Benico, forcefully confirms, Polynices' mission is doomed to ultimate failure. The

other, self-identified as eighty years old, tersely insists on staying with the blinded Gloucester, until Edgar/Poor Tom appears and he is ordered to "bring some covering" (4.1.46) for the naked "madman and beggar" (4.1.33). Although he promises to return with the best apparel he owns, he never reappears in the play: his is a true cameo part. To accentuate the contrast between the two roles, but also to link the ancient play-script with the early modern one, the young actor wore a full-face mask, grey and white in color with a jutting beard and large staring eyes, capturing the essence of the 'Senex' character-type from Hellenistic and early Roman comedy. This usage of the mask not only assisted the actor in taking on an entire persona, but also in altering his voice, posture, and gait. He also was able to convey a close connection of solidarity with his master, since Gloucester was now wearing a more individualized mask, with wildly dishevelled hair and blood-rings around the hollow 'eyes', which in fact was the same mask worn by Oedipus in the immediately preceding scenes. Since he then 'morphed' into a Chorus member, the young, novice actor with personal roots in Brazil imparted especially transnational consciousness and pathos to his renditions, which featured him in frequent movement and inferior social as well as dramatic status.

While some early consideration had been given to crafting masks in ancient Greek style for the Chorus of *Oedipus at Colonus*, as well as for the other characters of the play, the decision was eventually made to commission a special leather mask for the character of Oedipus.[9] The 'foreignness' of having a Chorus participate in *King Lear* was already sufficient, without the physical and visual markers for this collective 'character'. Instead, the prominent mask for the Greek king-turned-vagabond gained all the more importance for its uniqueness, as the only custom-made, character-specific mask in the production, and by its cross-over into the Shakespeare play. Audience observers appreciatively singled out the moment when one of the two actors playing Oedipus

9 We gratefully acknowledge our collaborator Roberto Andrioli, the professional theatre artist who made this original mask based on our design suggestions, and who also led a movement and physical acting workshop with the cast members.

slowly removed his mask and passed it on to the actress playing Gloucester: this gesture affirmed the link between the two plays, as both a sign of the historical legacy of Greek tragedy, and as an embodied metonymy of our own experiment. Again, this form of knowledge and interpretive outcome was arrived at via practice, during the rehearsal process.

Perhaps even more significantly, a chance, improvised variation of a planned method led to a truly unconventional and 'rhizomic' use of the Oedipus-Gloucester mask. While Ms. Adames found that the mask fit over her face acceptably, the two Oedipus actors (Roberto Adriani and Paolo De Paoli) encountered problems, as both of them felt excessive constraint and pressure on their respective faces, even when the elastic holding-strap was loosened. When, however, they altered the standard positioning, by keeping the mask's eyes at the level of the forehead and mouth at the bridge of the nose, they were able to avoid any discomfort. Moreover, the altered placement of the mask enhanced their interpretation of the character and his circumstances, in exile, exhausted, and at the end of his life's journey: not only did the mask become a kind of emblem and apotropaic head-shield (especially with its wide open, plaintive mouth and long, Gorgon-like snaky 'hair'), but with its wearers now needing to tilt their backs and heads forward in order to maintain their balance and orientation, it assisted their communication of Oedipus' elderly, weakened, and sight-challenged condition. Increased theatrical tension thus emerged, between the uncanny physical placement and movements of the unchanging stylized forehead-mask, and the convincing expression of particular thoughts, emotional reactions and outbursts through the actors' bodies and voices. The shared casting of Oedipus had already aimed to envoice and embody two sides of the character's mixed qualities, with DePaoli accentuating the agèd character's contemplative and sorrowful moods, and Adriani his extroverted and agitated energies; the specific gestures, and general physical inflections and contrasts caused by the unusually positioned mask made variations all the more evident, and startling. Multiple folds, branchings, turns, continuities and discontinuities thus could be bodied forth more unpredictably and spontaneously, thanks to the fact that a third actor, with a voice

and physique markedly different from the other two, wore this same mask to portray a similarly blind and outcast Shakespearean character.

If our hybrid performance-script established and accentuated key parallels, such as the one involving the stage *tableau* of a dispossessed child leading a blinded father toward a liminal destination (the grove of Colonus, the "cliff" at Dover), it also maintained divergences. For Oedipus, the revelation that he has reached the sacred habitation of the Eumenides confirms the prophecy of a divinely sanctioned *telos*, a meaningful end to his wretched earthly life. His terrifying curse will be his legacy for his sons, but his mysterious passage into the afterlife at Colonus – himself a *miasma*, transformed into a protector – will persist as a blessing for the realm of Theseus. In contrast, and despite his prayer to the gods that they might bless his son, the suffering Gloucester dies without a divine revelation or guarantee of redemption. While he is granted an off-stage recognition and reconciliation with Edgar, this very act triggers his ambiguous passing, "'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief" (5.3.197). Thus between the two plays themselves there are irreconcilable differences, which we did not attempt to smooth over. Gloucester did not return to give his mask to Oedipus, nor participate in the final procession toward the place of death led by the blind King himself, almost miraculously turned guide for his daughters, Theseus, and attendants. Instead, our performance cut from this scene, with the two actors playing Oedipus now leaning on each other and sharing their speeches (at times seated back-to-back on a cloth-draped stool/altar), and with the Chorus beseeching the god of eternal sleep to give Oedipus lasting repose, to Act Four, scene six of *King Lear*, followed by Act Five, scene three: the sequence, after an interval featuring a melancholy piece played on the bassoon, thus moved directly from the encounter between the suicidal/'rescued' Gloucester and the mad, flower-crowned Lear to the play's tragic climax. The chosen method, applied to the performance-script for its culminating phase, aimed to experiment more with juxtaposition than with fusion.

There also was a shift in spatial emphasis, as Lear entered, picking actual weeds and flowers from the edges of the playing area, ascending to the low semi-circular stage to engage in dialogue

with Gloucester, and then returning to confront audience members, pointing at them and looking in their eyes on lines such as "Thou, rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand" (4.6.156). With the Fool absent, Lear performs the comical and satirical as well as tragically poignant elements of this scene, and Elena Pellone conveyed this truly madcap, seriously funny yet deeply moving tonal variety to the full. This section stood apart from the Oedipus scenes all the more, since its actors were not the ones who doubled parts across the two plays (like Eric Nicholson, who with tonal contrast and politically thematic implications played Theseus as well as the Fool). By the time of Lear's ranting threat to "kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill" (4.6.183), our audience was focused on and involved with the play in its own discrete world of dramatic representation, an effect which increased with the arrival of Cordelia's attendants, prompting the King's progressive switch to the ironically playful and wittily punning "I will die bravely, like a smug bridegroom. What? / I will be jovial" (4.6.194-5). The heterotopic emphasis of our experiment aimed to coordinate the audience as a kind of border zone, at times critically detached in a Brecthian way from the excerpted, bilingual scenes that they were observing, at others vitally engaged with particular dramatic moments and interactions. Audience members thus could feel themselves emotionally transported, as Lear cajoled all present, "Come, an you get it, / You shall get it by running, sa sa sa sa" (4.6.198-9), but returned a few moments later – no intervening scene from either *King Lear* or *Oedipus at Colonus* – carrying the limp "corpse" of Cordelia in his arms, shouting the sounds/words "Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones" (5.3.255).

In almost any circumstances – including merely reading the script of the play alone, in silence – this is an exceptionally powerful dramatic moment. At the same time, it runs the risk of narrow over-sentimentalisation, if a production serves up the standard, anticipated 'Pietà' icon of agèd grieving father holding his sacrificed daughter. Since our objective was to widen the frame of reference of both plays, the casting of a much younger woman as Lear, dressed in a simple, 'timeless' and 'unisex' muslin robe, did aspire to connect the scene with similar potential tragedies in the off-stage real world, both past and present. We also reinforced the

links to the *Oedipus at Colonus* cypress grove setting by turning one of the thick, twisting hemp ropes tied to the tree trunks, and grasped by the Chorus for descent into the main playing area, into the noose used to hang Cordelia. Josefina Pelosi, who doubled as Ismene, solemnly inserted her neck into the hanging 'noose', and remained there as the dead Cordelia until she was freed by Lear. This and the other remaining ropes, dangled across the slope of the hillock like the apparatus of a ship, helped to frame the concluding sequence of the performance, from Lear's own "look there, look there" (5.3.310) passing, through a reprise on the bassoon of a solemn 'death march' motif, to the Messenger/Theseus' speech – delivered in both Italian and English – recounting Oedipus' wondrous death to Antigone, Ismene, the Chorus, and the audience. Katharsis was made available as a possibility, but not striven for as an artistic/spiritual goal. Then, having climbed to the top of the hillock, the Messenger/Theseus spoke Edgar's final quatrain, offering a brief 'epilogue' that might tie the two play-scripts together:

> The weight of this sad time we must obey,
> Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
> The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
> Shall never see so much, nor live so long.
> (5.3.322-5)

Yet if this utterance had the impact of an epilogue, its shift from imperative injunction to prophetic declaration also opened up, and continues to open up, radical uncertainties about the future, resuming the unanswered questions of Kent "Is this the promised end?" and Edgar "Or image of that horror?" (5.3.262-3).

At a symbolic level, the dangling ropes of our *mise en scène* evoke various crucial aspects of our work in progress. Loosely but securely tied to evergreen trees traditionally associated in the Mediterranean world with death and the afterlife, they provide support as well as connection, for fruitful studying and re-animating of scripts from ancient and early modern times. These ropes neither bind nor suffocate, since they can be stretched out and left open, as they become untied from one specific mooring, to be reused at other times and places, and for a variety of other purposes. To invoke Beckett, they can move on to fail better, like our own

and other experimental theatrical projects. In the mode of PAR, these multiple purposes and failures will begin, 'end', and begin again by pursuing traceable paths in aleatory ways. Finally, creative ropes, threads, and strings of all kinds – including musical ones – may enable theatre-makers and theatregoers, in today's world of movement and migration, to seek and receive help, knowledge, protection, guidance, and transformation. For when they wander away from home, as suppliants, the blinded Oedipus and Gloucester start to see feelingly, through their blood-stained masks.

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