

Συναγωνίζεσθαι

Studies in Honour of Guido Avezzù

Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi, Francesco Lupi,
Gherardo Ugolini

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Negotiating Oblivion: Twenty-First Century Greek Performances of Ancient Greek Plays

AVRA SIDIROPOULOU

Abstract

In Greece, for most of the twentieth century and going, theatre makers have turned to tragedy as a means of paying homage to their cultural identity and also of further challenging their artistic sensibilities, bearing, as they do, the added ‘privilege’ or ‘burden’ of their native heritage. This analysis focuses on productions/adaptations of Greek plays by established directors such as Theodoros Terzopoulos and Yannis Houvardas, as well as by the younger generation practitioners Dimitris Karantzas, Angela Brouskou, Costas Philippoglou and Lena Kitsopoulou, which seem to reflect the tensions that problematise the fidelity-innovation continuum in twenty-first century mise-en-scènes.

1. Context

The complex, troubled relationship of modern Greeks to their past is nowhere near as forcefully manifest as is in the way twenty-first century productions of tragedy in Greece have addressed the question of tradition and its discontents. Even though the “mythical, dysfunctional, conflicted world” of Greek tragedy has established itself as one of the “most important cultural and aesthetic prisms through which the real, dysfunctional, conflicted world of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has refracted its own image” (Hall in Hall, Macintosh and Wrigley 2004: 2), there are added layers of complication when a theatre artist confronts his or her own heritage directly. To any Greek who has been spoon-fed the splendid world of the tragic poets since childhood, the endless misfortunes of modern Greece’s turbulent history seem to serve as a constant reminder that the thousands of years that separate them from their glorious ancestors are not to be measured simply in chronological terms.

To theatre artists, this disenchantment has often been fol-

lowed by an attitude of irony vis-à-vis tragedy, expressed in the desire to interpret the past through a contemporary lens, often communicating the dissonances and paradoxes of a globalised world. Several years deep into the postmodern era, for all its legitimised claims on deconstruction and revisionism, questions about ‘faithfulness’ and ‘sacrilege’ continue to generate controversy. New theatre genres that have been created through tireless innovation with hybrid forms, including the live-digital interface, but also with the audience’s immersion into the theatrical event. Greek theatre makers for most of the twentieth and twenty-first century and going, have used some of these forms while turning to the classical canon in an attempt to pay homage to their cultural identity – bearing the ‘added privilege’ or burden of their native heritage – and also to further challenge their artistic sensibilities. My brief analysis touches upon relatively recent productions-adaptations of tragedy by established Greek directors such as Theodoros Terzopoulos and Yannis Houvardas, as well as by a handful of younger generation practitioners, namely, Angela Brouskou, Costas Philippoglou, Dimitris Karantzas and Lena Kitsopoulou.¹

2. Adaptation and Ethics

In Frank Kermode’s seminal thesis of 1975, “the books we call classics . . . possess intrinsic qualities that endure, but possess also an openness to accommodation which keeps them alive under endlessly varying dispositions” (1983: 44). The “openness to interpretation”, the way a classic lends itself to revision, may be part of a “capacity to support multiple interpretations over time”: the classic text is “complex and indeterminate enough to allow us our necessary pluralities” (121). The practice of adaptation seems to license and foreground heretical directorial choices relying on iconoclastic imagery and scenographic metaphors, daring characterisation and unusual casting. After all, engaging with the tragic form helps

¹ For more on directors’ strategies of updating the classics see Sidiropoulou 2015; on the issue of ‘faithfulness’ see Sidiropoulou forthcoming.

us re-understand fundamentals and reconsider absolutes from a (safe) distance, even though we are still confronted with the discomfort of identifying with painful or violent emotions.

These concerns naturally precipitate an avalanche of questions with regards to the ethics of directing. A prevailing ‘adaptaphobia’ still separates text from performance, the classics from their adaptations, readers from spectators, complying artists from radical iconoclasts. Although directors internationally remain ambivalent about how to maintain a healthy distance from the essential ‘antiqueness’ of the classical work and still be connected to its timeless properties, many consider it a challenge to stage Greek drama. After all, directing tragedy has always involved investigating alternative ways of recalibrating an old but resonant thought, reflecting on the conditions that still keep a work meaningful and thus ‘(re)producible’ after several thousands of years. For Greeks, in particular, the ‘family-ness’ of these plays suggests a sense of entitlement – even if covert. At one point of their career or another, most Greek theatre-makers – almost as a duty to their profession and to their national identity – will tackle the genre, either by “accepting Greek tragedy’s linguistic, structural and contextual limitations as a sacrosanct given and thus employ more conventional modes of staging, or, reversely, by tampering with the form with ironic distance, together with a desire for appropriation, which in itself betrays a sense of entitlement over tradition and its interpretation” (Sidiropoulou 2015: 32). The “rootedness” of Greek drama, combined with its “otherness”, has turned it into “an ideal shortcut, a liberating format which helps the artist, and the political activist, to circumvent, legitimately and with playful ease, centuries of cultural baggage” (Revermann 2008: 108).

Yet, playing it safe no longer seems to be a strong or viable option. The idea that one can achieve historical verisimilitude is in principle misguided, and recapitulating the original ancient performance seems to be an exercise in futility – its knowledge is for the most part hypothetical. Erika Fischer-Lichte draws attention to the distance of the ancient texts, which any staging should bring to light, and insists that revivals are actually unable to access the past because it is “lost and gone forever. What remains are only fragments–play texts torn out of their original contexts –

which cannot convey their original meaning” (Fischer-Lichte 2005: 234). In fact, Fischer-Lichte’s compendious remark hits the nail on the head: “whatever we think we know about the past is a kind of reinvention—a construction, a fantasy” (in Hall, Macintosh and Wrigley 2004: 352). All the same, the term ‘contemporary’ has also been abused by otherwise well-meaning experimentalists, its alluring connotations subjected to various degrees of misunderstanding, which are sadly bound to the clichés of deconstruction. Indeed, rather than being confused with the everyday or the realistic and the vernacular, ‘contemporary’ could ideally function as a barometer of pertinence, measuring the relevance level of the original material to situations and attitudes which are both familiar and significant today. One should also take into account what adaptation theorist Linda Hutcheon views as a “postmodern paradox”: a simultaneous “enshrining” and “questioning” of the past (2003: 126). Similarly, Patrice Pavis discusses the practice of “dusting” the text, an “idealist assumption according to which, correcting classical language is all one needs to do to reach the level of fictional world and of the ideologemes reduced to an *objet fixe*, a mixture of ancient and modern times” (1986: 5). At the same time, analysing ‘historicisation’, the process of interpreting plays “from the point of view that is ours at the present time”, with situations, characters and conflicts shown in their historical relativity, Pavis elaborates on the dangers involved in the artists’ tendency “to explain the present too much, by forcing the plays to say what suited us at the time” (2013: 208).

In Greece, the conspicuous shift in the perception of tragedy as a ‘sacred’ genre can be roughly located in the early to mid-1990s, when theatre artists started to ignore the strict mandates of adaptation criticism. Since then, many directors have tried to frame tragedy’s remoteness in a style notably less declamatory and formulaic than the one that had dominated Greek theatre for the greatest part of the twentieth century. Faithful to the revisionist attitude of many of their international peers,² they keep

² One could certainly think of Tadashi Suzuki, Peter Stein, Arianne Mnouchkine, and more recently, of Katie Mitchell, Ivo van Hove, Crystof Warlikowski and Jan Fabre, to name but a few.

generating fierce controversy over the rights and wrongs of auteur practice, furthering the discussion on the ethics of directing. Significantly, these directors no longer shy away from confronting the remoteness of the classical work but try to expose the formal distance that separates us from the time of its birth and provide fresh insights for better understanding a genre that is simultaneously familiar and profoundly strange.

At the dawn of the new millennium, thanks to a variety of favourable cultural, social and economic factors, Greece experienced an even bigger theatrical boom, manifest in the proliferation of alternative theatre spaces, the intense festivalisation of the major cities and an updating of training methods brought back to the country by artists who had spent several years studying abroad. This changed landscape came along with the introduction and systematic application of a non-Realistic, non-psychological aesthetic on stage. It is no coincidence that many Greek directors who had been trained in theatre capitals such as London, Berlin or New York, applied back at home, with a degree of understandable delay, distinctive strategies of deconstruction and a notably postdramatic aesthetic, choosing to sacrifice linear story-telling in favour of sensorial dramaturgies that build on visual and aural impressions. Having become acquainted with the work methodologies of European avant-garde theatre artists, they have approached tragedy with a more critical eye, often applying openly satire and parody. Essentially, (modern) Greeks turn *to* (ancient) Greeks for inspiration and the comfort of connectedness, while also turning *against* them to solidify their own contemporary (European) identity, which to many appears quite separate from their country's celebrated but irrevocably gone past.

Year after year, the ancient theatre of Epidaurus, where most of the major productions of Greek drama are staged, becomes the locus of contention with respect to the ethics of directing, often dividing audiences into two different camps, namely, the 'traditionalists' and the 'revisionists'. Often, the plays are set in thoroughly altered environments, sometimes of special cultural significance, while the language is attuned to contemporary rhythms, subject also to the translator's degree of adherence to or deviation from what feels to be extraneous or foreign in the source text. It is

worth pointing out, however, that over the years, the Greek audiences have grown less weary of such updating strategies and more willing to accept the inevitable shift that has characterised recent interpretations of tragedy. While audiences are still known to walk out of ‘irreverent’ shows, booing the protagonists or penning vitriolic production reviews in their blogs, the increasing number in the ticket sales and a more sophisticated mindset towards less conventional or predictable readings are placing contemporary Greek spectatorship in the heart of Europe’s elite theatre goers.

As early as the mid-1980s, Theodoros Terzopoulos and Yannis Houvardas introduced to their native Greece a distinctly formalist aesthetic, revising perceptual codes of staging the dramatic canon. Earning themselves the privileged status of *auteurs*, they have approached the works of the three tragedians with a guilt-free, unbiased approach, exploring ways of attuning the words of the text to new rhythms and channeling the plays’ specific circumstances to express their perennial vitality and remain true to today. To do justice to their work, one surely needs to forego any moralistic notions identifying adaptations with acts of transgression, and experimentation with sabotage and provocation. Together with Terzopoulos and Houvardas, who have been well-established pioneers in Greece for many years, Angela Brouskou, Costas Philippoglou, Dimitris Karantzas, and Lena Kitsopoulou have also directed the Greeks with critical success, claiming their own share of artistic reputation.³

³ There is, of course, a multitude of Greek directors who have, at one time or another of their careers, dealt with the genre. Among the most adventurous ones, Simos Kakalas of Choros theatre, has tackled Euripides’ *Orestes* in three distinctly different versions, two in 2015 – Avlaia Theatre, Thessaloniki, and Epidaurus – and one in 2016, in Choros Theatre, Athens. Kakalas revisits the myth of Euripides as a way of delving into the Greek identity and, as a young Greek, understanding where he stands vis-à-vis the ancient tradition. Indeed, “the director combines the poetic fifteen-syllable verse, the theatrical codes of the Greek ‘bouloukia’ (the wandering troupes who used to play at squares [sic] in the nineteenth century), the technique of narration, parody and shadow theatre with manga masks, post-dramatic theatre, video projections and anime” (Neofytou 2017: 279). Stylised movement and the use of Kabuki-inspired masks add a heightened dimension to the performance, ambitious to capture the necessary remoteness of the tragic form.

In addressing tragedy, the aforementioned theatre makers have in different ways and forms, as well as in different degrees of deviation from the source texts, recontextualised its temporal and spatial aspects. Some have denounced discursive language in favour of a manifestly physical-plastic discourse, others have re-conceptualised character and rethought delivery of speech, and almost all have problematised the function of the ancient Chorus. The generous application of postdramatic elements (such as the emphasis on the kinetic and the visual) and of postmodern ones (namely, the intrusion of pastiche as well as of parody) has reflected a desire to break free from a tradition of staging tragedy in a manner that Pavis calls “archaeological reconstruction” (1996: 212); an attitude anchored on the erroneous assumption that it is possible to recreate the staging conventions and conditions of an era that is no longer familiar or pertinent to us. Repudiating a predominantly bombastic style of acting – well matched to older productions’ reliance on period costumes and quasi-archaic stage design – the directors we are discussing have systematically worked towards reinventing the tragic form in distinct and original ways.

3. Artists

3.1 *Theodoros Terzopoulos*

Theodoros Terzopoulos’ emphasis on corporeality as a medium for generating universal meaning has led to an artistic idiom both vital and flexible enough to survive across national borders. In his work with Attis Theatre Company, Terzopoulos encourages global communication, inculcating the culture-specific elements of the tragic plays with a remarkably universal scope. Terzopoulos spent time at the Berliner Ensemble, working with the German playwright Heiner Müller, and later travelled extensively, researching physical expressions of acting in different corners of the globe. As a result, his work mixes Brechtian distancing with Artaud’s appeal to the senses – a poetry in space – and Asian forms of movement.

In his productions of tragedy – his multiple versions of *The Bacchae*, *The Persians* and *Prometheus Bound*, reworked over a

number of years, being among the most emblematic – Terzopoulos has focused on what he calls a ‘nucleus’ of meaning, concerned with specific themes that surface in each play.⁴ Far from creating an empathetic relationship with the audience, he wishes to bring home to the modern spectator the elemental forces of tragedy. To that effect, he has built a rigorous physical method that allows his productions to speak across different cultures and even beyond linguistic barriers, releasing energy and not emotion *per se*. Along these lines, instead of overly psychologising the tragic characters, he chooses to evoke archetypes; averse to taking the spectator through the minutiae of the plot, he delves deep into the actual myths that had inspired the Greek poets, often keeping just a few lines of the text, which are repeated in circles.

For Terzopoulos, ‘adaptation’ equals recourse to reductionist aesthetics. He has repeatedly renounced the title of ‘adapter’, eschewing in his work the process of direct updating that often characterises modern productions of tragedy. Instead of making forced adjustments to closely fit the tragic plays into an all too familiar context, he explores the grand energy that exists in them, deviating from the revisionist tactics of many of his contemporaries. Equally vehement is his refusal to sacrifice the structure and stature of tragedy, in order to create ‘plausible’ characters. For him, tragedy is a dense but open form, and therefore any new reading should shy away from a neatly arranged psychological interpretation.

Notably, for Terzopoulos, making meaningful theatre starts from the need to remember, to reclaim memory in a time of amnesia (McDonald 1991: 203), as well as to discover “the possibilities behind each word, each syllable, each letter, even” (qtd in McDonald 1991: 208) and realise them through ritual. One of the reasons why his work feels important and urgent today is that at a time when most of the so-called *alternative* theatre often fails to provide an original voice, reproducing ad infinitum hollow and ultimately pretentious forms, his art remains true to the need to explore fundamentals, to put out there what seems impossible to ex-

⁴ For example, ‘heroism’ in Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* or ‘mourning’ in Euripides’ *Bacchae*.

press (Sidiropoulou 2016: 32).⁵

The conspicuous shift of focus in Terzopoulos' treatment of tragedy over the years is worth noting; while identifying a process of maturation might perhaps suggest an attitude of condescension, evidently there is an inner movement from the existential (and thus, personal) to the political (and thus, communal) dimension. Quite recently, one of the seminal events of the European Capital of Culture – Pafos 2017 programme, his production of Euripides' *Trojan Women* brought the twenty-first-century refugee crisis in startling focus, while also retaining the timeless perspective that is so central in the director's work. Indeed, the sustained human history of conflict and displacement, as Euripides' fourth-century anti-war tragedy testifies, has been ongoing, and the need for reconciliation and peace, profoundly common across East and West. True to highlighting the "drama of division and the deeply rooted human need for reconciliation" (Attis 2017), performers from a number of divided cities, such as Nicosia, Mostar and Jerusalem, but also from Greece and Syria, became the collective voice of human suffering across temporal and geographic borders. Placed all over a circle-confined area of the stage, battered military boots – a recurrent visual motif in Terzopoulos work – signalled the absence of the killed soldiers. Central to this drama was the presence of the Turkish-Cypriot Coryphaeus, personifying the human need to connect with others, despite representing the 'other' as the enemy. Gradually, the Chorus members would each pick the photograph of a missing soldier from the ground, calling out his name, to which the word 'missing' was uttered with deadly finality in each participating language (Greek, Turkish, Arabic, Hebrew, Croatian and Bosnian). The linguistic collage synthesised a voice of protest against violence and the absurdity of war. Needless to say, in divided Cyprus, just emerging out of another cycle of failed negotiations on the reunification of the country, the word 'kayip' (Turkish for 'ἀγνοούμενος' or 'missing person') rang particularly poignant.

5 For more on Terzopoulos see Sidiropoulou in Rodosthenous (2017), *Contemporary Adaptations of Greek Tragedy. Auteurship and Directorial Visions*, London: Bloomsbury.

3.2 Yannis Houvardas

Houvardas' treatment of the classics has won him everlasting notoriety ever since his early work in Notos Theatre Company in Athens back in the 1990s. Former Artistic Director of the National Theatre of Greece, he has always held a tempestuous relationship with the canon, consistent with his strategy of extreme and thorough reconceptualisation of classical plays. Whether he stages Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Goethe or Chekhov, the premise remains the same: the work is updated, and while the source text remains mostly intact – even if interspersed with contemporary songs and ample cultural references – the action is ordinarily transposed into a setting manifestly different from that of the original.

Houvardas' recent readings of Euripides' *Orestes* (2010) and of Aeschylus' *The Oresteia* (2016) can serve as a springboard for additional questions on the "splendour" and the "misery" of interpreting the classics' (Pavis 2013: 204), respectively. While in both productions the directorial point-of-view filtered out whatever might have passed for antique detail, the two plays' relocation to today stimulated quite a different type of audience response.

In the case of *Orestes*, the idea of translating the Chorus of young, curious, but ultimately 'insignificant' women of Argos into a group of international students visiting the ancient site of Epidaurus and gradually becoming drawn into the very fabric of the tragedy, provided the director with a solid and imaginative base for addressing the ever-troubling 'Chorus problem': arriving at the theatre, the students are confronted by Euripides' dramatic characters. Engaging in a live 'conversation' with them, across time and myth, they establish a dialogue with the ancient text, eventually assuming the collective role of the Chorus. Affecting the production's scenography, the reimagining of the Chorus is accounted for in terms of 'reframing':

[Conceiving the Chorus in *Orestes*] I thought: what if among those young girls, there had also been some boys, could [this Chorus] function as representative of today's generation, which has a very superficial relationship to ancient Greek tragedy, the ancient civilization, the theatre of Epidaurus, but also, with the political issues

that the play brings forth? Which it experiences, but does not fully realise or analyse? . . . The Chorus enters the stage hyper-naturalistically. It does not stand out from the rest of the Epidaurus spectators. There is no choreography and neither is there any music. The two worlds are united through a modern code, but there is a slight difference: the protagonists are more stylised, abstract and poetic, while the Chorus is more everyday. (Houvardas 2010)

Significantly more time-conditioned, Houvardas' production of *The Oresteia* has also been less fortunate in its critical reception. Many critics reacted to the trilogy's being shrunk down to a "pocket version", castigating it as "intensely arrogant, intensely dynamic, intensely sick" (Kaltaki 2016). In evoking the atmosphere of a post-world war II Greek drawing-room, complete with sofas, small tea-tables, lamps, and popular anthems of the times, Houvardas domesticised Aeschylus' tragedy, while also failing to steer clear of extravagant, supernatural effect, such as, for example, the fog and smoke emanating from the beautifully lit box leading into the entrails of the palace. Quite unconvincingly, Clytemnestra becomes a hostess who introduces her guests into the evil house of Atreus in an apron, an image resonating with connotations of housewifey perfection.

Houvardas' defence of his work is put forward succinctly:

I'm always trying to keep to the essence of things. There are so many moments in the choral parts that seem impenetrable to us, because they point back to complex mythological stories in relation to other historical facts, that feature repetitions and a propensity towards lyricism. [In these moments] there is room to keep to the essence, the information, the style, and not to injure the play or Aeschylus . . . Even if I wanted to, I have never staged a production in which I am disrespectful to the theatre. I simply spoke through the play about those issues that were imperative to me. (2016)

Yet, his disclaimer notwithstanding, the relationship between source (Aeschylus' trilogy) and target (Houvardas' *Oresteia*) texts is so loose that even the production's sharp irony ultimately escapes us. We may laugh uneasily at Orestes' magnified eyeballs under his geeky spectacles or at how Cassandra is carried onto Agamemnon's shoulders like a sacrificial lamb with which he oc-

casionally fools around. We may feel amused at Electra's portrayal in her Sunday School best or at Athena's and Apollo's gaudy costumes, and at the Goth male Eumenides in long hair and moustaches; True, we tend to admire Houvardas' bold and inexhaustible ingenuity. Yet, we eventually distance ourselves from the performance, just as the director distances himself from the metaphysical and the civic import of the play in his desire (unconscious or conscious) to de-dramatise and demystify. In this sense, the contemporary/updated/thoroughly localised frame that the mise-en-scène establishes becomes a trap, which prevents a timeless flow of the text in ways that may have indeed been originally intended. If we are watching a family drama, we are still a long way from being moved by those irreconcilable forces beyond all things human, which actually set it into motion.

3.3 *Angela Brouskou*

Directing a fully-cast, unedited production of tragedy in Greece is considered both prestigious and expensive, and for the longest time, because of the high production demands, staging the Greek plays had been the privilege of an older-generation directors' elite. Angela Brouskou has been one of the very fortunate few Greek female directors to present her vision of tragedy in Epidaurus. Together with her company, Chamber Theatre, she approaches classical plays from a political angle, treating them as opportunities to test the limits of corporeality against notably stylised forms.

Brouskou's reading of Sophocles' *Electra* at the Athens Festival in 2006 was followed by her production of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* at Epidaurus in 2008, whose revisionist staging ultimately divided the spectators. At one moment in the performance, the actor playing Agamemnon appeared in a sailor's cap, adorned with garlands that he had presumably collected during his travels in some exotic land, and carrying a cigar and a whisky flask with him, while the Messenger arrived from Troy with a watermelon. Even more than those scenes, however, it was the treatment of the Chorus that caused the greatest uproar. It was depicted as a group of sycophants who sidled up to the state tyrant, a cluster of dogs, lick-

ing up to their master. Several other elements in staging and characterisation revealed Brouskou's "desire to reconsider the ways in which tragedy can be made relevant, namely, its dialectical relationship to contemporary society" (Sidiropoulou 2013: 170).

Brouskou's *Bacchae* (2014) placed the immanently ritualistic elements of the play within a modern-time setting filled with couches-thrones and reclining beds scattered on different parts of the stage. The mixed Chorus of Bacchantes (consisting of women and men) was both heightened and frenetic, especially during their frenzied dances or in the scene where they ran back and forth wildly, groping for the wine with which Dionysus sprinkled them. The god, performed by a female actor (Aglaia Papa), was dressed in a black suit and looked uncharacteristically composed, ironically complementing Pentheus' portrayal as a Nazi-type autocratic ruler, who obediently changed into drag costume in the climactic scene of the play. All in all, the eclectic costume design (for instance, the female performer impersonating Tiresias wore a cape over a mere slip and a bra) sabotaged the otherwise moving performance. The blood-shed presence of Agave unduly reinforced theemonic element, which set a comedic tone in what is meant to be the most dramatic scene of the play. In general, the director often identified the horrifying with the parodic. Such was also the case with the staged earthquake over Semele's grave, which, according to one critic, "shook like the bed in the Exorcist" (Sarigiannis 2014b).

3.4 Costas Philippoglou

Philippoglou's intelligent physical theatre work has informed his readings of the Greek plays in startling ways. A director and a performer trained in the UK next to the Complicite, Philippoglou impressed the audiences of Epidaurus with his unpretentious approach to text, which helped him integrate all elements of design and sound into a unified whole. His productions of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* in 2014 – and soon to follow his 'Beckett meets Aeschylus' version of *Prometheus Bound* in 2015 – became emblematic in their aesthetic, affective, and highly political stance.

Thrilling both audiences and critics, these productions came as somewhat of a relief after a series of pompous and flippant festival stagings of the Greeks, and generated optimism that directing Greek tragedy today in a way that is both contemporary and meaningful can still be possible.

At some point, the director had argued that what drew him to that particular tragedy was the fact that, while it seemed fundamentally static, it was actually permeated by movement that struck right into the heart of the subconscious (Philippoglou in Sella 2015). Therefore, it is no surprise that his directorial take on *Philoctetes*, admirably served by a strong cast of actors, was primarily physical.

Conjuring the idea that our world is in need of moral restructuring, Kenny McLellan's set design evoked a modern construction site, where the all-male Chorus of seven worked on moving wood and iron items to build a variety of structures, including bridges and ladders. Interestingly, the Chorus was choreographed freely in actions that seemed integral to the dramaturgy. Thus, the iconic metaphor of construction represented a vision of the world on which we are to build. Contemporary in its minimalist aesthetic, the acting area was defined geometrically, yielding a huge arena space physically contained within a long cyclical bench. In this space, the performers balanced on moveable structures loosely resembling see-saws. The outside fence parameter of the stage was often lit up in striking blue, while the change in colour was also manifest in the lighting scheme of the floor, which alternated between black and white, created by lighting designer Nikos Vlassopoulos. In the spirit of the abstracted set design, the costumes were also elegantly timeless (linen jackets, dress shirts, and so forth), their earthy hues providing a sharp contrast to the metallic colours of the set.

The three male protagonists of the play (*Philoctetes*, Odysseus and Neoptolemus) seemed at ease with the world of the play, their movement ebbing and flowing seamlessly to reflect the dramatic tensions of the text. At certain moments, the Chorus remained static – its different members spread all over the stage to create resonant tableaux vivants, which would later give way to explosive moments of physicality. What might have been stiff stylisation on other occasions

here became a fluidity of movement that embraced the rhythms of the play itself.

Speaking of the text: while Philippoglou refrains from ‘messing around’ with the play’s inner structure, he does introduce outside elements that frame it in a way that makes the experience for the audience even richer. For example, he stages the opening scene by having the protagonist read an excerpt from Seamus Heaney’s adaptation of *Philoctetes*, *The Cure at Troy* (1991):

CHORUS

Philoctetes.

Hercules.

Odysseus.

Heroes. Victims. Gods and human beings.

(1-4)

In particular, Philippoglou was praised for his clarity of vision, which was also translated into clarity in staging. What was quite obvious from the beginning was that his intention was not to “prove himself smarter than Sophocles’ text” (Sarigiannis 2014a). Instead, his sense of theatrical poetry was that of subtlety and nuance – silences became text and the imagery was more than just ordinarily beautiful: it was meaningful, dynamic and relevant. One such memorable instance is the moment in which the Chorus members share the role of Hercules on microphone, while sheets of book pages float over the stage, reflecting something stronger than mere theatre magic: a felicitous strike of the right metaphor, which comes from a careful, visionary reading.

In the end, Philippoglou’s *Philoctetes* avoided the quirks of ‘directorialism’: the production managed to get the artist’s predominant form (physical theatre) to serve his conception of the tragedy, rather than manhandle it. Never does the strenuous movement in the performance feel arbitrary or disconnected – instead, it becomes so necessary that it is hard to imagine the action without it.

3.5 Dimitris Karantzas

Breaking away from the tradition of acting and directing tragedy as an extroverted and notably loud stage business, Dimitris Karantzas' *Medea* experimented with the formal requirements of tragic speech and thought, but with an introspective eye that granted the performance a mood of reflection and visceral power. The production was staged at the little theatre of Epidaurus⁶ and received laudatory reviews. According to the programme notes, it was a "dialogue" of Euripides' tragedy with Pier Paolo Pasolini's film script of *Medea*, Jean Annouilh's eponymous play and Heiner Müller's *Medeamaaterial*. The novelty of the director's approach lay not so much in the synthesis of the different dramaturgical sources, as in his decision to have three male performers embody the different 'stations' of Medea's story.

For one thing, the conflict between the human and the sacred/divine, which is at the heart of the tragedy, is rendered surprisingly quiet, challenging the customary declamatory style of many Greek productions. The near whisper dominating the performance gives it an otherworldly, almost metaphysical tone, which aptly brings to the fore the heroine's "sacred personality" and "spirituality" (programme notes). As the director explains when comparing his reading of *Medea* with Euripides' *Bacchae*, this is "an opportunity to research the reclaiming of one's identity, what can happen when a Dionysiac figure is brought into contact with a logocentric society" (Karantzas 2017b).

Quite effectively, the narrative line has the performers go back in time and speak the text in past tense, so as to reinforce the impression of personal story extending into myth. Two ac-

6 The small theatre of Ancient Epidaurus was established in the Acropolis of the ancient city of Epidaurus at the South-Western slope, before the period of Asclepius. Dedicated to the god Dionysus, it was used mainly for the events of the Dionysian cult. From the dedicatory inscriptions, it can be concluded that the construction of the theatre was held during the fourth century, with the sponsorship of prominent rulers and upper class people. A remarkable characteristic of the theatre is the inscriptions, which constitute a real – living museum. (Information on the Municipality of Epidaurus web site: <http://www.epidavros.gr/en/sightseeing/47-to-mikro-theatro.html>).

tors (Christos Loulis and Michalis Sarantis) also used excerpts from Pasolini's film script, interspersed with lines from Euripides. The exactingly choreographed movement – the actors would frequently freeze in place during the narrative – transformed them into mythical creatures from a fairytale: we learn about Medea's far away land, the arrival of Jason and the stealing of the Golden fleece, and, finally, of Medea's decision to become a murderer, in order to follow her lover to his country, in which she is to become a stranger. Nonetheless, the distance from the events is never entirely done with, especially when the third actor (Yiorgos Gallos) enters the scene to assume the character of Medea, joining the other two men in recounting her tale. More jarringly, the three male performers synthesise Medea's myth from the disparate fragments of her story, and, ironically, subtly and gradually build a collage portrait of her femininity. If anything, the tension between the male-female perspective is established more potently – through the irony of having a man impersonate the character of Medea – especially as the narrative engages Medea's own point-of-view and appears to fully condone her actions. As they struggle to put together Medea's life, a variety of captivating experiments take place. For example, the three actors performing Medea go in and out of character, as though they have stepped out of their male-hosting-a-female body, to describe and comment on the facts of the story. In more involved moments, Medea delves deep into the character's vulnerability, hurting from betrayal, in notably low tones. Commenting on the production concept, Karantzias explains that the production engages representation and an involvement with the characters. However, there are also moments when we "step outside from the tragedy to create a dialogue with Pasolini's material – how Medea can recover her relationship with the light and with the sun", which is the main argument of the performance (Karantzias 2017b).

The a-local, timeless mood is reinforced by scenography. The action is set against what looks like an art installation, covering the orchestra pit with white women's corsets, in the middle of which springs up a twig, a small tree. The timeless black suits, adequately formalistic, add, without intruding, to the mood of ritual – the three men have been variously viewed as priestly figures or as bridegrooms preparing for their wedding. The ingenuity of the

scenographic concept makes the children's sacrifice scene a memorable one: the tree is torn out of the ground, dirt and roots all visible, while Sun emerges out of the deepest recesses of the earth, a chthonic force that burns everything around it. The glaring light that permeates the entire stage foregrounds the act of killing in full irony, sanctifying Medea's act.

Needless to say, the ritualistic movement, hosted within the abstracted environment, is conducive to a reading that supersedes any psychologised interpretations of the betrayal motif. Drawing from Heiner Müller's *Medea Material*, the ending makes good use of the polysemy involved in the male-female duality: "I want to cleave mankind in two / And live in the empty centre" (Müller 1995: 53). Here, the adaptation transcends the gender politics of the production with an all-too-human statement of catharsis and reconciliation. Ultimately, while the performance context may also foster elements of chamber drama, with all its intimacy and whispering tones, the energy that pervades the minimalist action is bacchanalian. The director wishes Medea to gradually shed off her female side, in her desired union with a "different nature", sun (Karantzias 2017a). The Dionysian force "utterly devastates in absolute clarity the narrow-minded, conservative society in which Medea found herself". The sun "burns down the landscape, just so a new one can be born" (Karantzias 2017a).

3.6. Lena Kitsopoulou

Among the most radical revisionists of the younger generation of Greeks is the writer-director Lena Kitsopoulou, whose *Antigone-Lonely Planet* [Αντιγόνη-Lonely Planet] (2017) was staged in the form of a performance-lecture at the Onassis Cultural Centre in Athens, conceived as an ironic, satirical reading of Sophocles' celebrated tragedy. A group of four skiers, whose function mirrors that of an ancient Greek chorus, come together at a conference, to offer their views on the play and report their personal tragedies, directly addressing the audience. The idea that anybody – whether an expert or a layman – can speak about *Antigone* eventually leads to a fascinating brainstorming on the rights and wrongs of abiding

by the law or breaking the rules, as well as to a series of observations on the nature and efficacy of collectivity.

The ruling idea of Kitsopoulou's adaptation is that we all carry within us an Antigone, a Creon, or a tragedy equal in stature to Sophocles' drama. The very premise of an Antigone-themed conference as the main locus of action is part of the playwright's desire not only to bring the past closer to the present, but to demystify the tragedy's privileged position within Greece's production history. Kitsopoulou explains her process of writing the play:

I am not doing Sophocles' *Antigone*. I am doing my own play, inspired by *Antigone* and try to locate her, to follow her, to grasp her. In the first part of the play . . . I present a lecture about Antigone, asking my own questions through Antigone [on] what tragedy means to a modern person, what violence, dilemmas, madness, loneliness, love and faith mean. In the process, I find in [actress] Sophia Kokkali a contemporary Antigone, and follow, as much as I can, in a filmic way, her imprisonment within life . . . I am looking for the tension between living and dead, through the fragments of the play and those of my mind, as it experiences death every day. (Kitsopoulou 2017a)

The artist has always used satire and deconstructive strategies to comment on whatever she feels is ailing in contemporary Greek society. Clichés drawn from modern Greek popular culture – recurrent motifs in Kitsopoulou's work – are main structural elements. Everything – text, imagery, emotions – becomes deconstructed, until the tragic and parodic merge into one. The four speakers pontificate passionately about the simplest things, a fact which generates humour. This is clearly the case in one of the monologues of a father who suffers at his daughter's rebellion, as she opts for tennis instead of skiing, her father's sport. That said, the concept that people with little to do with either *Antigone* or the theatre can comfortably discuss what connects them to the characters, identifying in them their own afflictions, would ultimately generate controversy in the spectators.

Bearing associations of 'Greekness', the conference room is decorated with photographs of famous Greek actresses who had performed *Antigone* in the past. Besides the four skiers (in full sports gear), the audience is constantly startled by an on-

slaught of surreal images, such as a scuba diver who parades on stage and is murdered off-stage, and, more surprisingly, a bear that comments on the difficulties of being a skier. Pitted against such grotesque moments of hilarity are snippets from Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* and lines from the author's imagined dialogue with Rainer Werner Fassbinder. We are also bombarded by references to popular clichés and stereotypes of modern Greek life and society (including allusions to the tycoon Aristotelis Onassis, whose Cultural Foundation was actually hosting the production) as well as with the fears and anxieties of the writer (namely, mottos such as "cigarettes can lead to bad teeth and teratogenesis"; "security guards can be violently abusive"). Kitsopoulou endorses the aesthetics of kitsch as a lens that refracts the ailments of the Greek middle class.

The arsenal of directorial quirks is inexhaustible: things are constantly improvised, variety sketches produce coarse laughter, brief film footage and popular Greek songs alternate with exaggerated images of splatter and gags. Yet, while Kitsopoulou's humour often makes perfect sense, sometimes the audience's perceptual faculties are tested to the limit, as her never-ceasing sense of the bizarre parodies the solemn premise of Sophocles' tragedy. Her pastiche strategies are grounded on the conviction that tragedy and comedy can interchange, that "good humour conceals pain", that "tragedy has comedy in it" (Kitsopoulou 2017b). If anything, this is a ritual of deconstruction and demystification: of tradition, of antiqueness of any illusory identification with the grandeur of one's classical 'Greekness':

I don't think of ancient Greek drama as something otherworldly or difficult, or as something intimidating. I think it includes me... it's in the tiniest snapshot of daily life, and in the most extreme weather phenomenon. It's condensed poetry, and all I can do is to adjust my small self in it. I know I have a place in there, I know it speaks about me. (Kitsopoulou 2017c)

In the second part of the show, the director changes gear: we watch a shocking video sequence of Antigone crawling across the marble floors of the building, 'shedding' behind some of her vital organs, before she is finally boxed into a glass coffin. The ico-

nography is extreme: blood is everywhere, while Antigone is being brutally victimised by security guards and then interacts sexually with the body of her dead brother. In the most dramatic and visually stunning scene, after the character is buried alive inside her transparent tomb, the audience is asked to leave the theatre space, before the performance ends, to quietly register the final shocking moments of the play. The performance ends without a definitive end. As the spectators leave the space, one is left with the impression that the tragedy will go on forever.

One may well claim that Kitsopoulou's theatrical universe is ruled by chaos, as if she is trying to plunge into the abyss of human pain. Be that as it may, while the director she has been celebrated as the 'enfant terrible' of Greek theatre, it is worth considering that her plays and performances – praised as pieces of revolt against bourgeois complacency – are ultimately sponsored by the very capitalist structures of established cultural institutions, depending for the survival upon the system they are meant to be criticising.

On a Hopeful Note

The dangers of deconstruction and revisionism have repeatedly fed the discussion on adaptation and the limits of directorial freedom, also based on the assumption that unless developed intuitively, an originally fresh idea can slide into mannerist pattern. However, many straightforward renderings that claim affinity to the ancient conventions of performance fail to either move the spectators or invite critical understanding or both; in such orthodox productions, the original text often falls into deep slumber and eventually fades into oblivion, as if collapsing under the weight of the centuries that it has carried on its shoulders. Indeed, much of modern theatre's inability to arouse strong reactions in today's disillusioned audiences can be attributed precisely to the fallacy of recreating – or slavishly aping – the imagined conditions of an era that are no longer applicable or interesting to us (Sidiropoulou 2015: 45).

Even though the issues involved in directing the classics re-

main open, acknowledging the levels of both indebtedness and divergence from the original (ancient) source in any act of directorial rewriting could perhaps foster a more mature and honest attitude to adaptation. Calling a performance an ‘adaptation’, ‘new reading inspired by’ or ‘version after’ from the start could be an effective way of paying tribute to the original author and also making clear from the outset that a degree of divergence from the source text will be in operation. This way, the audience can find it easier to endorse any radically different outlooks on the familiar myths. Theoretically at least, both directors and spectators have had time to resolve within themselves such troublesome notions as respect or sacrilege towards the source text.

The love-hate relationship of the modern Greeks to their long tradition is perhaps fuel to the dynamic, ever-fluid potential of adaptation, sustaining the question of why and how the classics can be still meaningful today. Through their innovative work, the directors who have – although briefly – been featured in this article add further ammunition to the argument that we can no longer retell the stories of our predecessors without first considering the factors that can render them relevant today. In acknowledging the fact that the past is quite separate from their present, these artists ultimately go through a ritual of mourning. In different ways, their work seems to capture the sense of loss that gradually comes after the burial of a loved one: it is mixed with a hopeful – if wistful – acceptance that in remembering the dead we are in fact keeping them alive amongst us.

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