

DIDASKALIA 

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*Didaskalia is an electronic journal dedicated to the study of all aspects of ancient Greek and Roman performance.*

# DIDASKALIA

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**DIDASKALIA**  
**VOLUME 9 (2012)**  
**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

9.01	<b>Risk-taking and Transgression: Aristophanes' <i>Lysistrata</i> Today</b> Michael Ewans and Robert Phiddian	1
9.02	<b>Review: <i>Lysistrata</i> Jones</b> John Given	10
9.03	<b>Review: <i>Alexis, A Greek Tragedy</i></b> Aktina Stathaki	14
9.04	<b>Review: <i>The Complete Works of Sophocles (Rebridged): These Seven Sicknesses</i></b> George Kovacs	17
9.05	<b>Review: <i>The Women from Trachis</i> at the University of Michigan</b> Amy Pistone	24
9.06	<b>Review: <i>Imagining and Imaging the Chorus: A Study of the Physicality, Movement, and Composition of the Chorus in A.R.T.'s Ajax</i></b> Viviane Sophie Klein	27
9.07	<b>Review: <i>The Oresteia</i> at Carleton College</b> Eric Dugdale	31
9.08	<b>Review: <i>Euripides' Bacchae</i> at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse</b> Ralph Covino and John Serrati	38
9.09	<b>Review: 48th Season of Classical Plays at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse: <i>Aeschylus's Prometheus, Euripides' Bacchae, and Aristophanes' The Birds</i></b> Caterina Barone	44
9.10	<b>Up Close and Personal: Encountering Ancient Drama through Performance</b> Eric Dugdale	48
9.11	<b>Review: <i>Sophocles' Elektra</i> at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival</b> Ruth Scodel	59
9.12	<b>Review: <i>Sophocles' Elektra</i> at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival</b> Dana E. Aspinall	61
9.13	<b>"First catch your satyrs" — A Practical Approach to <i>The Satyr-Play(-Like?)</i></b> Anthony Stevens	64
9.14	<b>Review: <i>Euripides' Iphigenia at Aulis</i> (Estonian: <i>Iphigenia Aulises</i>) in Tallinn, Estonia</b> Laura Viidebaum	84
9.15	<b>Interview: Douglass Parker</b> Laura Drake	91

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**Note**

*Didaskalia* is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 9 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at [didaskalia.net](http://didaskalia.net), which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

# Risk-taking and Transgression: Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* Today

**Michael Ewans**

*The University of Newcastle*

**Robert Phiddian**

*Flinders University*

*Lysistrata*, first performed in 411 BCE, is an Old Comedy about a fictional sex strike by the women of Greece designed to stop the Peloponnesian War. At a dark moment, when defeat appeared to be looming for Athens, the play provided a fantasy of peace. In recent decades it has been the most often revived and taught of Aristophanes' plays, with 119 performances worldwide in the years 1990–2010, according to the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama.<sup>1</sup> This piece, a collaboration between a translator and theatre researcher (Michael Ewans) and a Greekless literary scholar (Robert Phiddian), recounts a small part of that performance history, a part that sheds light on how this play translates (both literally and culturally) from fifth-century Athens to twenty-first-century Australia. The performances examined are a full-scale production designed to test and perfect Ewans's new translation of the play at the University of Newcastle (New South Wales) in 2005, and a series of dramatised readings of the play (in the context of a course on comedy and satire) performed at Flinders University in Adelaide between 1998 and 2009, initially with Alan Sommerstein's translations published by Penguin and subsequently with Ewans's translation.

*Lysistrata* remains popular not just because it is good, but also because it remains topically significant for its antiwar message and the apparently feminist premise of women taking over public affairs.<sup>2</sup> These causes of popularity are potentially a two-edged sword for understanding the play, as relevance can be bought at the price of anachronism and distortion of meaning. Our experience of differing translations in performances and dramatised readings suggests that an antiwar interpretation of the play's 'message' is very sustainable in both text and performance, while a feminist reading is less so. We also found confirmation of James Robson's comment in a recent overview of Aristophanes' work: 'It is often said that new translations of works are needed every generation, but in the case of Aristophanes the immediacy of some versions and adaptations (above all those written for the stage) can evaporate within a far shorter time than that' (Robson 2009, 217). The challenge for a prospective new translator lies in attuning his or her new version closely to the time of performance and publication, without including elements which will date the translation too rapidly.<sup>3</sup> Our observations will focus particularly on one scene, the raucous peace negotiation which *Lysistrata* orchestrates between the Athenian and Spartan ambassadors over the beautiful and naked body of Reconciliation. While the Sommerstein and Ewans translations have much in common, this piece will focus on their differences.

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## Michael Ewans's experience

Stephen Halliwell comments on English translations of Aristophanes that: 'Translators have found it [easy] to excise obscenity, and even give specious reasons for doing so. . . . There are few who shirk at nothing in this area.'<sup>4</sup> One of the main aims of my new translations of Aristophanes has been to rise to this challenge.

My translation was first performed in 2005, in a modern-dress performance which took place in a replica of the *orchestra* backed by a set representing a classical Greek temple, but with explicit sex scenes decorating the pediment, and with modern anti-war slogans (e.g. 'NO MORE BUSH WARS') sprayed as graffiti on the façade. Anne-Marie Adams as *Lysistrata*, wearing a smart business suit but with sexy red



but are inscribed upon Reconciliation's sexual organs.

**1st SPARTAN**

We're willing, if we can have  
this nice round bit.

**LYSISTRATA**

Which one?

**1st SPARTAN**

Pylos, the secret entrance.  
We've always wanted it, and now I'm going to grope it.

**1st ATHENIAN**

No way, they can't have that.

**LYSISTRATA**

Let them have it.

**1st ATHENIAN**

Where can we attack them from?

**LYSISTRATA**

Ask for another place instead.

**1st ATHENIAN**

This is terrible; give us instead of that  
the Hedgehog, and the Malian Gulf  
just behind it, and the Legs of Megara.

1170

**1st SPARTAN**

No way, not all of those, good sir.

**LYSISTRATA**

Back off; don't argue about a pair of legs.

**1st ATHENIAN**

I want to get my clothes off and farm my patch.

**1st SPARTAN**

I want to get in first with the manure.

*(Exit RECONCILIATION, discomfited and in haste, into the skēnē).<sup>7</sup>*

The Spartans bid for 'this nice round bit'—Reconciliation's bum—and propose to grope her 'secret entrance'—Pylos, a real concealed harbour entrance in Spartan-dominated territory on which the Athenians had managed to establish a bridgehead. Here Aristophanes lampoons an (alleged) Spartan preference for anal intercourse. Then the Athenians counter-bid for 'the hedgehog'—a real place, Echinus, whose name literally means 'sea-urchin' (i.e. Reconciliation's pubic hair); then for the Malian Gulf, a seaway which in real life was adjacent to Echinus (i.e. Reconciliation's vagina); and finally for 'the legs of

Megara', the name given to the fortified walls connecting the city of Megara to its port. (These walls had actually been demolished some years before the performance of *Lysistrata* in 411, but that fact did not disturb Aristophanes in hot pursuit of a sexual pun.) The negotiations conclude with the 1st Athenian Ambassador proposing to strip and 'farm [his] patch'—i.e. assault Reconciliation from the front—while his Spartan counterpart wants 'to get in first with the manure', i.e. assault her from the rear. At this point, in my stage direction (based on the decision we took in rehearsals), Reconciliation responds by exiting 'discomfited and in haste'. Brooke Medcalf played Reconciliation as becoming obviously more uncomfortable with the situation as the objectification of (and lust for) her body increased. But after Reconciliation's exit *Lysistrata* instantly reasserted her authority (1175ff.)

The reception of this scene by actresses and audiences in the Newcastle performances was markedly different from that in Robert's moved reading in Adelaide. None of my actresses, not even the player of Reconciliation, felt any discomfort with performing this scene (indeed, they thoroughly enjoyed the whole play). And on the DVD you can hear audience laughter, from both males and females, throughout this scene.

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### Robert Phiddian's experience

My personal knowledge of *Lysistrata* began in 1980 with the Sommerstein translation of 1973,<sup>8</sup> in an almost-perfect context for that version. We went through it in class over a couple of weeks; we were 16–17-year-old boys of privileged background, self-selected as cultural nerds and smartarses by our decision to choose the minority year-12 subject, Classical Civilisation; and our culturally-programmed tendency to over-confidence was amplified by hormones. We found smut in the text that even Sommerstein hadn't put there, and the fact that the Spartans spoke in stage-Scottish accents seemed perfectly natural and hilarious to us, even though we had lived our lives in Melbourne, a long way from Athens, but only geographically distant from the schools and colleges of the British mid-century classicist tradition that marked the translation we were enjoying. In our outpost of empire and privilege, we were an ideal audience for the translation.

A couple of decades later, in 1998, when I came to devise a course on Comedy and Satire at Flinders University in Adelaide, South Australia, with my colleague Murray Bramwell, I went back to *Lysistrata*. In a course joint-taught between the Drama and English departments, we set it as the example of Old Comedy. We discovered that Sommerstein's was still the available translation in the affordable Penguin series, and we arranged with a director, Eddy Knight, to put on a reading with a volunteer student cast and one rehearsal. This worked well, and we repeated the exercise each year we ran the course, with the same director and different students, swapping the 1973 edition for the revised but not transformed version of Sommerstein that became available in 2002. It was clear from the start that, while this translation worked adequately, it was less than ideal for the context. Our students (including the volunteer actors) had to bridge some cultural distance to enjoy the performance. Clearly a lot of that distance came from the cultural gap between fifth-century Athens and twenty-first-century Adelaide; some of it also, we suspected, could be ascribed to the translation.<sup>9</sup>

The opportunity to try something different came in 2009, when I met Michael Ewans at a conference and was granted permission to use his soon-to-be-published translation, which had been developed through performance and adaptation at Newcastle University in New South Wales in 2005.<sup>10</sup> In the Australian context, Flinders and Newcastle are broadly similar universities whose students tend not to have had much previous contact with Greek and Roman culture. Both universities opened in the mid-1960s in substantial Australian cities, and both have long-established practical programmes in drama as well as traditional offerings in the humanities; their demographics are broadly similar. Consequently, the movement from one translation to another provides a reasonably controlled experiment. The direction

and the level of preparation of the Flinders readings have been constant and the pool of student actors has been similar on all occasions; there have been no great variations in the size and nature of the student body.

While the movement from the earlier to the updated version of Sommerstein had yielded only marginal improvements in intelligibility for a new-millennium audience, there were some significant differences between earlier performances and the production of 2009. The first I noticed was that the current crop of actors found the Ewans translation easier to perform as a minimally rehearsed reading. This was partly a function of the script layout, as they were not working from a photocopy this time, and the font size was larger. Nevertheless, the language of the Ewans translation was clearly more approachable for these students than Sommerstein's, an advantage most obvious in the bawdy passages, which were often indirect to the point of incomprehensibility in Sommerstein, and anything but that in Ewans. The Ewans version is much more sexually explicit than Sommerstein's, a difference that reflects change in cultural expectations between 1973 and 2005. For the Australian youth of the new millennium, explicit language can still be shocking (when it is very blunt or especially well set up), but it just doesn't generate the furtive hilarity in verbal deflection that obtained a couple of decades ago. Aristophanes' wonderfully bizarre image (then as now) of 'the lion on the cheese-grater position' raised a laugh in both versions, but Lampito's mention of 'When Menelaos saw the breasts of naked Helen' (Ewans) works far more directly than 'he got but a wee glimpse of Helen's twa wee apples' (Sommerstein 2002, 146). Even though the apple metaphor is literally 'there' in the Greek, it is an off-key distraction in current Australia, where breasts are not apples and are seldom discussed in a stage-Scottish accent. Indeed, the loss of the accents to mark Spartans and others removed an impediment to comic appreciation generally. This may well play differently in Britain or the US, with their marked regional accents. Australians, however, inhabit a large continent with few regional differences in English, and the use of accents to differentiate speakers of different Greek dialects was received among my students as an artificial convention of another time and place.

The most striking change was that the gender dynamics of the play were different in the new translation, in two, not entirely consistent ways. The part of Lysistrata herself had always been a problem in the past. Even though we had routinely placed very capable actresses from the Honours Drama Centre programme in the part, they had never managed to shake off a kind of mother-superior seriousness. In the new translation, Lysistrata was a much more human and engaged character, even distinctly funny in places. For example, while the Sommerstein treatment of 'those six-inch leather jobs which used to help us out' is at least mildly euphemistic and can be played to convey disdain, there is no escaping her human appetite in Ewans's rendition: 'Worse still; since the Milesians deserted us, /I haven't even seen a compact dildo, /not one little leather friend' (108–10). In the Sommerstein version, the sense that Lysistrata herself was making a sacrifice in engaging in the sex strike did not come through, and it was too easy to assimilate her character with the stereotype of female chaste restraint that has meant 'good woman' in Christian European culture for centuries. A Lysistrata with an appetite both for sex and for humour was a refreshing angle on the play for me. It brought out something that intervening cultural experience had obscured.

Less appealing to my ideological bent was the way the play became more phallic and patriarchal in the Ewans translation. This tendency is also almost certainly true to the original Athenian context. Nevertheless, it was clear that the female actors were disempowered by the sheer bluntness of the male invective towards them, even while the action of the play suggested that they were winning the battles.

The power of the word 'bitch' (433) and the string of invective that came after it was amplified for actors and audience by the comic phalluses the males wore. These were anachronistically shocking and amusing in our productions—for Aristophanes' audience they would have been far more normal. Still, it was only



in the Ewans production that the football-sock phalluses became objects of powerful mirth, I think because of the unfettered violence of the misogynistic language—even if it was matched by women’s intense abuse of males at several points in the play, in particular in their response to the Bureaucrat at 433ff. In Sommerstein’s politer, more-euphemistic version, the male violence was somewhat deflected by the indirection of the language, and the sexual politics became, in practice, more amenable to an egalitarian feminist reading.

This difference between the two translations also corresponds with one actress’s experience as *Reconciliation*, which makes a contrast with the experience outlined above for the Newcastle production. This part is formally mute and notionally naked in the original text. Lysistrata gets the Athenian and Spartan ambassadors to negotiate a settlement of territory, with the parts of *Reconciliation*’s beautiful naked body representing parts of Greece such as (the mildest example) ‘the legs of Megara’ (Ewans). For obvious ethical reasons in a fairly informal university-course-based situation, the part was played fully and fairly plainly clothed in our moved reading, and yet the actress became visibly uncomfortable at the ambassadors’ vigorous verbal objectification of her body (she has reported since that this was how she felt, not just how she acted the part). In the past, through Sommerstein, Lysistrata had been very much the orchestrator of this scene, using the ridiculous priapism of the Ambassadors to discipline them and lead them to peace. In the new translation, she lost control of the scene as the horny and borderline-violent obsessions of the male actors took over. In lines 1162–75, discussed above, Lysistrata’s brief instructions (‘Let them have it’, ‘Ask for another place instead’, ‘Back off; don’t argue about a pair of legs’) came out quite differently in the performances of the two translations. In the Sommerstein performances, Lysistrata was magisterially in charge of the pitifully priapic ambassadors, but when the Ewans text was used these lines became an increasingly desperate attempt to keep the situation from getting out of control. The laughter of the audience underscored Lysistrata’s difficulty in containing the Ambassadors and heightened the male sexual aggression of ‘I want to get in first and farm my patch’ in Ewans, whereas in the Sommerstein Lysistrata was displaying and withholding female sex, clearly controlling the males. This difference is in large part a choice of production, but the words in the Ewans translation unleashed the bawdy power of male sexual aggression, and the females became relatively more abject as a consequence.

Here as elsewhere, the performance in the Ewans translation was more alienating to the women in it and in the audience than the previous performances of Sommerstein. It was notable that, in the question-and-answer session we routinely hold after the performance, it was the four male actors rather than the twelve females who did 90% of the talking. This may just be happenstance, but it correlates with the plausible silencing effect of a bluntly phallic and often obscene translation. Over the decades, I have been in the habit of assimilating the play to a sort of raucous Germaine Greer-like liberal feminism, and the previous productions of the Sommerstein version permitted (though they did not require) that reading. By contrast, this performance wouldn’t let me hold to that interpretation. This play was very clearly a fantasy of peace, not of female power. Obviously, given the Athenian context of a highly androcentric culture, this is likely to be the original intent. Consequently, the Ewans translation tells twenty-first-century readers and critics something real about the play that many of us don’t especially want to hear.

This seems to me the most significant point of difference between the performances of the different translations, and it is worth stressing that they had much in common. To a reader lacking Greek, each translation gives a satisfactory version of this classic play. In our Flinders moved readings, one of the constants has been the audience discomfort during the long opening scene when Lysistrata tries to persuade the women of Greece to give up sex to achieve peace. This was pretty much the same in both translations, as the audience felt unease at young women talking dirty. It’s not that the students watching hadn’t heard it all before, but they didn’t expect it in a lecture theatre or in a classic text. For the first few minutes, there has always been a palpable resistance to finding rude language funny, until the laughter-

authorizing phalluses of the male actors appear in the first chorus. This was and remains pedagogical gold, as it allows one to make the crucial point that the pre-Christian Greeks just didn't share our still-strong stereotype of asexual female identity and discourse. In the play-space afforded by comedy, students can recognize that attitudes to sex do not merely get stuffier as one goes back in history, as one tends to assume, but rather that they vary in intriguing ways. They can see that the ancient Greeks certainly held different attitudes from ours and were in some ways more liberated, even while being more clearly patriarchal. This is learning about the range of what it is to be human across time and culture.

Even in the fairly simple and occasionally stilted staged readings we have performed over the years, much of the play is enduringly hilarious. The phalluses and other objectifications of gender such as the third woman's attempt to escape the enforced chastity of the Acropolis by using a helmet to simulate pregnancy (742ff.) never tire. The scene where Myrrhine teases her priapic husband Kinesias mercilessly with pillows, blankets, ointment, and an eventual desertion before consummation (870–951) is also a hit. The play works in modern Australia, millennia after its first production, because of the powerful way it stages the conflict between the death-wish of war and the life-wish of sex. It is hard to conceive of a world to which this wonderful attack by fertility on militarism will have nothing funny and useful to say.

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## Twofold Conclusions

We have not tried to force ourselves into a single voice thus far, so we will each reach our own conclusion.

**Robert:** The main lesson of the experiment for me, as a literary interpreter, is about the nature and limits of cross-cultural translation for the message of satirical drama. *Lysistrata* can, with tolerable anachronism, be read currently as an anti-war play, and even as one specifically against a particular war, like the one in Iraq. *Mutatis mutandis*, it can even be claimed for the pacifist tradition, though it's pretty clear that Aristophanes was no systematic pacifist. On the other hand, assimilating the text, as I used to do, with any version of post-enlightenment feminism is a step too far. While it is fine to see it as a reprise of the war between the sexes (an ancient topos), anything more ideologically detailed makes something of the play that it hasn't the resources to support. The lack of euphemism in the Ewans translation, and the masculine sexual aggression it unleashes, makes this point unavoidable. It is worth noting that this classroom experience echoes the consistent view of classical scholars that the play is about hostility to war, not about oppression of women.<sup>11</sup>

**Michael:** My principal observation from our two experiments is the perhaps-not-very-startling one that the modern reception of my accurate (and therefore-confrontational) translation of Aristophanes' transgressive humour depends heavily on the context in which it is performed and received. The principal reason for the difference between the experiences at Flinders and Newcastle is that mine was not a reading in a classroom or para-classroom activity, but a full production with music, lights and costume. Actor and audience involvement is, I believe, necessarily greater in a full production than in a moved reading or workshop that is part of a course; both actors and audience are participating wholly voluntarily, and they are there primarily to entertain and be entertained, not to learn something (though of course any presentation of *Lysistrata* in Australia today will be a learning experience for both audience and actors, given the extent of modern ignorance of the nature of Greek drama). In a full production there is simply more momentum impelling the audience, as a group sitting together in the half-light to share the full experience of live performance, towards the climax than in a moved reading; after the audience has been conditioned to blunt sexual language and gesture from the first scene onwards, Aristophanes' challenging catharsis becomes for them the crowning glory of the play's already rampant 'obscenity' (a concept for which, by the way, the Greeks had no word; both the concept and the word are a Roman

invention).

There is for me, as a drama professor who is heavily involved in performance as a basis for research, an enormous difference between the energies created in a live show for which the punters pay money and those generated in a classroom experiment, part of a course and subject to subsequent formal analysis in tutorials. Robert has reported his audience's unease during Scene 1, where first Lysistrata and Kalonike begin with puns and double entendres, and then—when all the women from Athens, Boiotia, Sparta and Megara begin to gather—increasingly ribald expressions of their sexuality, and what they want to do with it (screw men), start to litter the script. During performances of the Newcastle full production there were certainly a few initial gasps as the full sexual range of the script (and therefore of Aristophanes' original) in the mouths of young women made their first impact on the audience; but the audience members (both male and female, young and old) had very soon fully adapted to it and become comfortable with, for example:

**LYSISTRATA**

And where is this young woman from?

**LAMPITO**

She came with me, and has authority to speak  
for the Boiotian women.

**MYRRHINE**

Ah, Boiotia, land  
of beautiful and fertile plains.

**KALONIKE** (*lifting up the Boiotian girl's see-through miniskirt*)

—please note,  
the grass has just been elegantly trimmed (85–9).

There was no question of waiting (as there was in Robert's workshop) for the appearance of the phallus-wearing old men to start the sexual laughter of the play. And I witnessed a very similar audience reaction when I directed a version which was partly in modern Greek and partly in English (for expatriates and tourists) in the ancient Odeion at Paphos, Cyprus, in July 2007. There too the videorecording provides clear evidence that after a short initial shock the audience accepted and enjoyed the fact that the young women 'talked dirty'—and there the actress playing Lysistrata was anything but a mother-superior figure; sexy, busty and redheaded and using her assets to great expressive effect right from the beginning of the play.

In my (admittedly biased) point of view the productions and workshops discussed in this paper unambiguously point to the need for new translations in which Aristophanes' 'transgressive humour'—frank obscenity, obscene pun and *double entendre*—can shine in all its glory in performance for the second decade of the twenty-first century.

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**notes**

<sup>1</sup> On the performance history of *Lysistrata* cf. Robson 2009, 196 ff.

<sup>2</sup> On gender issues in Aristophanes cf., e.g. Henderson 1996, 20–29 and Van Steen 2002.

<sup>3</sup> There is also the issue of versions which are adaptations rather than translations, such as the fine modernizations by Mary–Kay Gamel of *Thesmophoriazousai* (*The Julie Thesmo Show*) and *Wasps* (*The*

*Buzz*). These were highly effective in production, but in both cases only the framework and a number of the jokes were Aristophanic; *The Julie Thesmo Show* took place on the set of a contemporary television talk show, so there was quite wide resonance; by contrast *The Buzz* grafted on campus politics of Gamel's home university (UC Santa Cruz), which made it a show only for that time and place.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Halliwell, 'Aristophanes,' in O. Classe, ed. 2000, 77–78. It is true that Sommerstein is quite explicit in his Aris and Philips series of scholarly editions (where the translation is provided facing the Greek), but not in his Penguin translation discussed here. Great credit must also be given to Henderson, who may be said to have inaugurated the serious study of Aristophanic obscenity in *The Maculate Muse* (1975). His translation of *Lysistrata*, *Thesmophoriazousai* and *Eccleziiazousai* is also fairly explicit (1996). But it is a literary version, in prose and designed for students of ancient Greek culture rather than for performers and audiences.

<sup>5</sup> But Revermann (2006, 158 n. 59) has revived the contrary view that nude slave girls played the silent female extras in Old Comedy.

<sup>6</sup> 'Cunt' rather than 'pussy' for *kusthos*, because the Athenian, dominated by his unbearable erection (1120–1, 1136) would not be euphemistic if he was speaking a language (like modern English) which presents strong and milder alternatives. The medical term vagina is out of the question in this context.

<sup>7</sup> Aristophanes (trans. Ewans) 2010, 97–99.

<sup>8</sup> *Aristophanes*, trans. A. Sommerstein 1973 (revised edition 2002).

<sup>9</sup> On translation of Aristophanes cf. Walton 2006, 195ff.; Robson 2009, 188ff.; and Ewans 2010, 41ff.

<sup>10</sup> *Aristophanes* (trans. M. Ewans), 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Cf., e.g. Henderson, 1996, 17–18 and Cartledge 1990, 32–42.

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## Lysistrata Jones

Book by Douglas Carter Beane  
 Music and Lyrics by Lewis Flinn  
 Directed and choreographed by Dan Knechtges  
 Walter Kerr Theatre, New York

December 4, 2011 – January 8, 2012  
 Reviewed performance: December 28, 2011

### Review by John Given

*East Carolina University*

Exactly 50 years after E. Y. “Yip” Harburg adapted Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* into a Broadway musical, under the title *The Happiest Girl in the World*, Lysistrata returned to Broadway, this time in the form of a perky, blonde college cheerleader. The musical began life, with mostly the same cast and crew, as *Give It Up!* at the Dallas Theater Center and then, retitled *Lysistrata Jones*, had an Off-Broadway production by the Transport Group Theatre Company at the Gym at Judson Memorial Church. The small show transferred to Broadway’s Walter Kerr Theatre, where it ran for just 34 previews and 30 performances before closing on January 8, 2012, after disappointing holiday sales. With a book by Douglas Carter Beane and music and lyrics by Lewis Flinn, *Lysistrata Jones* is an imperfect but clever and entertaining adaptation. Rather than redirecting men’s passion for violence toward a passion for sex, this modern-day Lysistrata aims to end men’s apathy for everything *except* sex and to create passionate desires for things more noble.



*Josh Segarra as Mick and Patti Murin as Lysistrata*

The unlikely setting for this new Aristophanes is a basketball court. Lysistrata Jones (Patti Murin), a transfer student to Athens University, is the girlfriend of Mick (Josh Segarra), the captain of the hoopster Spartans. (Yes, the guys play for the Athens Spartans, “two completely different Greek city-states,” as the nerdy Xander (Jason Tam) informs us.) The Spartans have not won a game in 33 years, a fact which bothers Mick and his teammates not a jot nor a tittle. So long as they get their post-game parties with their girlfriends, they are content with losing. Lysistrata decides to put an end to the men’s indifference by persuading her fellow cheerleaders to “give up giving it up” to their boyfriends until they win a game.

Already knowing the outlines of the plot, I attended the show fearing that I would be disappointed by the trivialization of Aristophanes’ antiwar comedy. The production, though, proved to be more substantial than the lightweight plot. We learn early in Act I that Lysistrata has been surrounded by quitters her whole life. Her parents, as young fringe-theater types (hence their daughter’s name), quit first on their careers and then on each other. Her previous university was a sea of apathy. She now refuses to allow her new school to wallow in indifference. A means for effecting change comes to her attention when she reads the SparkNotes (“unabridged!”) of her namesake. By persuading the girlfriends to forgo sex, she hopes to teach everyone that there is more to life than sex and parties. The greatest nod to Aristophanes comes when one of the men, venting his sexual frustrations, suggests that the men could redirect their energies into violence against other men. The others find the suggestion unattractive and decide to go to a brothel instead.

The sequence indicates that we are closer to the Aristophanic framework than it first seemed. The men still possess the basest desires: an unattractive desire for violence, and a much more attractive desire for sex. The desire for violence could have been sublimated into a desire for war or for patriotism, but this option does not seem to occur to these American college men, even at a time when the country is at war. Instead, they simply reject violence and cling to sexual desire as the only worthwhile passion. Beane and Flinn thereby set up a plot that will require the men to develop new desires of a higher order. *Lysistrata Jones* thus takes a step beyond *Lysistrata*. Whereas Aristophanes' play returns to the status quo after Athens and Sparta are reconciled, with the desires for war and sex merely reordered, the musical seeks to point its characters in a new direction. Toward the end of the musical, Mick accuses Lysistrata of trying to make the men "nobler." And, within the limitations of a very particular (and admittedly not very exceptional) conception of nobility, the musical succeeds. One player exchanges simple sex for a sincere profession of love. Another embraces his inner poet, proves he can recite beautiful verse at will, and falls for the library assistant Robin (Lindsay Nicole Chambers). Two other men find love in each other. A fifth drops his façade and embraces his own name (more on him below). Love, poetry and beauty, one's true self—finally, the men discover desires beyond base sexual cravings. As they defeat Syracuse to end their basketball losing streak, so too does nobility defeat apathy.

A major flaw in the show is the development of the female characters. (The one exception is Myrrhine; see below.) Although all the women, except Lysistrata and Robin, value sex as much as the men, it remains unclear how they come to value the "nobler" pursuits. As in Aristophanes, they are reluctant participants in Lysistrata's scheme and repeatedly attempt to desert her cause. She always reels them back in, but in the end their noble development lies primarily in acceptance of the men's nobility. Too typical is the woman whose boyfriend leaves her for his teammate. She gleefully accepts their new relationship because he did not leave her for another woman, concluding that "it wasn't about *me!*" Her egoism remains to the end. Worst, though, is Lysistrata herself. She does have a triumphant moment of girl power in the end. For most of the play, however, the creative team has tapped too readily into the stereotype of the sweet but dumb blonde. She crumbles too quickly under her friends' criticism to be an effective leader, and she thereby fails to become the moral center of the play that she is set up to be. In general, although the production deals with race and sexual orientation in progressive (if generally safe) ways, it is far less forceful about gender issues, casting the women as naturally moral creatures who are intuitively able to lead the deficient men to the gardens of goodness.

The sex strike is the only essential part of the Aristophanic original that remains in *Lysistrata Jones*. Gone are the ploy to seize the Athenian treasury as well as the Commissioner character, though I could imagine the women storming the university's financial-aid office to cut off the men's athletic scholarships, with the university cashier ineffectually facing them down. Also gone are the male and female hemichoruses and the face-to-face battles that they bring to the stage. There are no older adults—no coaches or faculty members to disrupt the proceedings. Instead, the male and female students themselves enact the confrontations that Aristophanes gives to the hemichoruses.

There are in the production a few tidbits to make the classicist smile. Like Aristophanes, it contains up-to-date political and cultural references,<sup>1</sup> but it has various classical allusions too. The drop curtain that greets the entering audience is a solid blue—the blue of the modern Greek flag—with the Athens University seal centered upon it. The university, we see, was founded in 411 B.C., the date of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. We also read the university's motto, "Faith Hope Charity," which may be a clue more to the play's conception of nobility than to anything Aristophanic. Besides Syracuse, the Athens Spartans play Corinth Community College and Ithaca College. A flier in the library rather oddly instructs students who want to "learn Greek fast" to "call Aneas [*sic*]." The cheerleaders' skirts have Greek



geometric patterns and are cut to resemble the typical skirt of a hoplite's linothorax. At a bacchanal dance, the characters appear in Greek-like costumes, and one of them is dressed as Pan. And so forth. Some things are distinctly un-Aristophanic, most notably the almost total lack of obscenity. And one minor detail I regretted was that Athena entered on a chariot pulled by a peacock, apparently borrowed from Hera's iconography.

Not regrettable is the musical's handling of what may be Aristophanes' most famous scene: the confrontation between Cinesias and Myrrhine. In the ancient play, Cinesias asks Lysistrata to send out his wife Myrrhine. Lysistrata, like a brothel madam, asks for her slice of the pie, but when he offers his phallus instead of money, she exits. Myrrhine enters and taunts Cinesias by performing a striptease for him. She abandons him at the last minute, though, and promises to satisfy him only after he agrees to peace. *Lysistrata Jones* also has characters named Myrrhine (LaQuet Sharnell) and Cinesias (Alex Wyse). Myrrhine (here pronounced "mer-eeen," almost "Maureen"), a black woman,<sup>2</sup> is the most intelligent of the cheerleaders and the least resistant to Lysistrata's plans. Cinesias is a white man from an affluent family who has rejected his parents' culture, turned the bill of his baseball cap to one side, and now speaks disconcertingly like a hip-hop artist from the 'hood. His "slave name," he says in Act I, is Todd. "Cinesias," it seems, is this misguided white boy's attempt to pick a black-sounding name. His whole persona is an act of condescension portrayed as an innocent attempt at popularity.

The Act II confrontation is set up when the basketball players decide to visit a brothel, the "Eros Motor Lodge," and Myrrhine decides to get revenge for Cinesias's dalliance. She dons a Tina Turner wig and a tight skirt and, safely disguised, gets Cinesias sent to her room at the brothel, where they perform the song "Don't Judge a Book." Beane and Flinn thus reprise Aristophanes' striptease scene with some interesting twists. Instead of disrobing, Myrrhine puts on clothes in order to make the tease effective. She stoops into a lower social register to kick her boyfriend unceremoniously out of his basement of offensive condescension. Thereby, instead of pointing Cinesias toward interstate reconciliation, she points him toward reconciliation with himself. During the scene, she gets him to answer to "Todd," and he—partly (old habits die hard)—drops the hip-hop persona. The most important clothing removal happens when Myrrhine takes off her wig and reveals her own true identity so that the lovers can be reunited. All Cinesias needs to do is win a basketball game, and he leaves determined to do so.

The musical features a significant new character, named Hetaira (played by Liz Mikel). She is the madam of the Eros Motor Lodge (taking a hint from Aristophanes' Cinesias-and-Myrrhine scene), but also the musical's narrator, Greek chorus, and *dea ex machina*. The director, Dan Knechtges, has done a fine job of making her multiple functions clear to the audience. Sometimes she is placed downstage right or upstage left, suitably for viewing the action. At other times, she appears on a platform above the stage, otherwise occupied only by the band. She is the only actor who appears above. Often she moves among the characters, but she addresses the audience directly as narrator or commentator. Her transition from narrator to Eros Motor Lodge madam is accomplished very smoothly in order to make the audience realize that, even in this function, she wields a power over the proceedings that is surpassed only by her height advantage over all the other actors, including the men. As the madam she can thus counsel the women on how to make their sex strike more effective and can manipulate the men onto the more passionate and noble paths the women expect. Not merely moving the plot forward, Hetaira accepts the role that Lysistrata failed to take up: the moral center of the play. She represents a sexuality that is boisterous but always tempered by the greater passions of human life. It is no coincidence, I presume, that she appears in the finale dressed as the virgin goddess Athena.

*Lysistrata Jones*, then, is an entertaining repurposing of the *Lysistrata* story. As a musical, it is moderately successful. The plot is entertaining. The music is listenable but not generally memorable. With its small

cast, small band, simple set requirements, and generally safe themes, the show should have a healthy life in college theater departments. (A cast recording, which is reportedly not yet in the works, would help the show's future immensely.) I hope the authors will allow later producers and directors to alter lines to reflect current events, just as producers and directors of Aristophanes regularly do. As an Aristophanic adaptation, seen from a classicist's perspective, it is also moderately successful. There is enough Aristophanes left to hold some cross-cultural literary interest. The metaphor of athletic passion for the greater passions of love and beauty works well and, although the noble goals never transcend the individual characters, they save the musical from trivializing the Aristophanic antiwar plot. At one point, Mick wonders at how people keep going to the theater to see plays that are almost 2,500 years old. With *Lysistrata Jones*, thousands more are fortunate to join the millennia of theatergoers.

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**notes**

<sup>1</sup> At the December 28 performance, I caught, among many other references, allusions to the death of Kim Jong-Il and to the pose recently named "Tebowing" (after the Denver Broncos quarterback Tim Tebow), both of which must have been added after Broadway performances began.

<sup>2</sup> Her race is apparently not central to her character: Ms. Sharnell's understudy is white.



## Alexis, A Greek Tragedy

Created by Motus (Italy)

Directed by Enrico Casagrande and Daniela Nicolò

Performed at Under the Radar Festival, La MaMa (Ellen Stewart Theater), New York

January 4–14, 2011

### Review by Aktina Stathaki

*Alexis, A Greek Tragedy*, a new production by the Italian group Motus presented in the 2011 Under the Radar Festival at the Ellen Stewart Theater (La MaMa), is in many ways a theatrical essay on the character of Antigone and its projection onto contemporary questions of social dissent. Its premise is simple: who is Antigone today? As the play text lays bare the group's working process, we are told that Motus were conducting workshops exploring this question when they heard of the shooting of 15 year old Alexis Grigoropoulos by the police and the subsequent widespread rioting in the center of Athens in 2008. The group set out on a trip to Greece in search of the character of Antigone in the midst of those events and



From *Alexis, A Greek Tragedy*. Photo by Pierre Borasci

collected information on the incident. This quest fed into their workshop process and the result was the creation of *Alexis*, a documentary theater piece including footage of the riots and the neighborhood of Exarchia (where the shooting happened), interviews with residents and intellectuals living in the area, personal thoughts about the group's journey, and rehearsals of scenes from the tragedy, interspersed with comments on the artistic process itself—explorations of how facts from the actual events (what the boy wore, what the mother said) can influence the performance of *Antigone*. According to its creators, Enrico Casagrande and Daniela Nicolò, *Alexis* is a call to action. But the performance, created in 2010, feels outdated and surpassed by the reality outside the theater. The massive current worldwide protest movements make *Alexis* already seem a thing of the past, slightly reminiscent of the 1970s performance experiments in getting the bourgeois audiences out of their comfortable seats (especially towards the end of *Alexis*, when audience members are invited on stage one by one to join the cast in simulated rock throwing). But outside the theater the bourgeoisie of today has become the 99% and already taken to the streets. While *Alexis* is spent talking about action, theatrical action is absent, and the complexity of the social action on the streets remains unaccounted for.

### Tragic action, social action

*Antigone* is focused on the burial of Polynices' corpse. The statesman Creon has prohibited the burial on the grounds that Polynices is an enemy of the state, but Antigone defies his decree and buries her brother in fulfillment of familial and religious duty. The dead body and the act of burial trigger a conflict between two different sets of responsibilities (to the family and to the state) that a citizen carries in a democracy. In the course of the play the two poles of the conflict (Antigone and Creon) become increasingly fixed in their viewpoints, bringing about personal and civic catastrophe. Between those two extremes there is a physically present chorus of elderly Thebans who maintain allegiance to Creon while trying to inspire some moderation in him, as well as an invisible implied 'chorus', the body of citizens, who, we are told, support Antigone in her action but are too afraid to speak up.

One would expect that a serious contemporary attempt to grapple with the figure of Antigone—given especially her popularity in explorations of civic disobedience—would dig deeply into the dynamics of her conflict with Creon, the significance of the tragic elements (i.e., tragic action, chorus), and the play’s structure (i.e., how the characters shift in the course of the play) beyond the easy and overused binary symbolism Antigone = resistance / Creon = tyranny. It is therefore surprising to see how little thought and exploration of the actual tragedy have gone into *Alexis*. Beyond the question “Who is Antigone today?” and a few text excerpts, there’s really no committed engagement with Sophocles’ tragedy itself, its ideas, questions, characters, or dramatic structure. As a result, the play limits its interpretation of the tragic character of Antigone to a generic and generalized symbol of resistance, stripped of any context. Questions of allegiance and responsibility to civic and private obligations, as well as the character traits that make the tragic heroes hold on to their beliefs beyond self-doubt, give way in *Alexis* to a romanticized/idealized depiction of dissent, seen as a virtue in and of itself, and to an a-priori demonization of the state as a mechanism of oppression. What is structural in the original tragedy (the state *becomes* increasingly repressive) is essentialized in *Alexis* (the state is repressive, by definition). In the Greek context where Motus’s production is set, both repression and dissent are much more complicated, as the latter is usually accompanied by extreme lawlessness while the former, when it is not pure state-sponsored violence, is often lacking in ideological foundation.

With the same ease with which the play appropriates Antigone as an unproblematic symbol of resistance, it uses the dead body of Alexis Grigoropoulos as a “stand-in” for the dead body of Polynices. A parallel is drawn between Creon’s proclamation that the warrior’s body is to be left unburied, a feast for the birds, and the Greek police’s reaction of shooting and then abandoning the boy’s body in Exarchia Square. Here the performance misses a very crucial point. Polynices’ dead body is heavy with meaning: he is a disinherited heir to the throne, who came back to claim his rights and is now proclaimed an enemy of the city; he is a brother, a citizen, and a leader, and the sum of these conflicting roles and responsibilities render his burial a crucial political issue. By contrast, what was tragic about the shooting of Alexis Grigoropoulos was its complete lack of meaning. The shooting was pure accident, in the existential sense of a death determined by the flip of a coin. The boy, a middle-class teenager from the suburbs of Athens who was hanging out with his friends in Exarchia Square that evening, provoked the police, and an exchange of insults ensued. The police car followed the kids, and when they responded by throwing empty cans, a policeman left the vehicle and shot Alexis dead. It is precisely the event’s complete accidentality (reminiscent of Meursault’s shooting of the Arab in Camus’s *The Stranger*), the ultimate absence of any serious reason, motivation, meaning, politics, or ideology behind this clash between citizen and authority, that caused unprecedented rioting in the city. It was as if the shooting signaled the eruption of bottled lawlessness, lack of governance, and meaninglessness experienced by Greeks for years: generalized feelings that actions don’t matter because no one is ever held accountable, even for a killing in the street. These were riots of destructive despair and anger, not protests for change. The events of 2008 were more of an anti-tragedy, closer to the world of Camus, where meaning is lost, than to the world of tragedy’s multiple negotiations of meanings that are equally valid for their defenders and worth dying for.

This is why Motus’s exploration of who Antigone is does not go far enough, despite rather shallow attempts such as “Antigone is the protesters” or “Antigone is the Exarchia Square that still resists.” In forcing its own narrow meaning and oversimplified binaries (protesters vs. state) onto reality, the performance misses the far richer and more productive complexity of the actual social conflict. A good look into reality (not only in Greece but anywhere in the world where indignation boils) will reveal the diversity of backgrounds, viewpoints, interests, and motivations behind the protests, which represent a collective that is messy, unclassifiable, and conflictual, as all collectives are in such moments of profound social change. Such a look might have engaged the group in a deeper exploration of the intricate relations between leader and led, as illuminated by the tragic dialectic among heroes and between hero and

chorus. To choose instead to impose premeditated meanings on such a crucial historical moment is an indication of social irresponsibility, as one reviewer rightly notes,<sup>1</sup> as well as a missed artistic opportunity.

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**note**

<sup>1</sup> Barker, J. M. Motus's Alexis A Greek tragedy at UTR . *Culturebot* January 6th 2012. Source: <http://culturebot.net/2012/01/12225/motuss-alexis-a-greek-tragedy-at-utr/>

## The Complete Works of Sophocles (Rebridged): *These Seven Sicknesses*

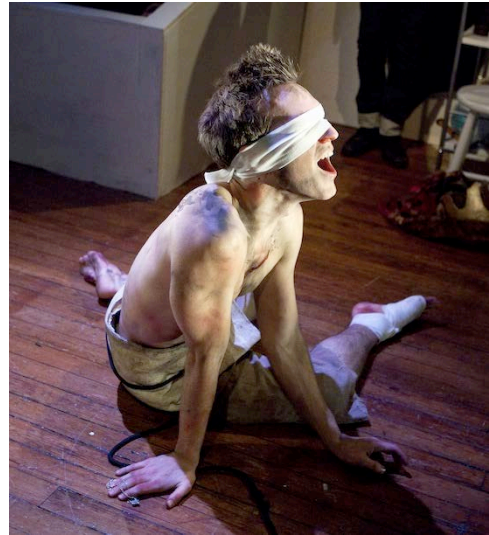
Directed by Ed Sylvanus-Iskander  
 Script by Sean Graney  
 January 29 - March 4, 2012  
 Performed by The Bats  
 The Flea Theater, New York, NY

**Review by George Kovacs**  
*University of British Columbia*

We watched the blood run from Oedipus' eyes into the already bloodied water of his mother's bathtub; we saw Hyllus, unable to light the pyre of a scabrous Herakles, slink away with his hot young bride; we cringed as Theseus, coerced by his own council, dragged Oedipus off to the hospital incinerator. And then we had eggplant curry and it was delicious. And then we went back for more.

*These Seven Sicknesses*, produced at the Flea Theater in New York, was a five-hour theatrical experience comprising renditions of all seven of Sophocles' extant tragedies. It was directed by Ed Sylvanus Iskandar and performed by the Flea's resident company, The Bats. This was the second public run of the play: the first was in Chicago, directed by scriptwriter Sean Graney, and it has already been reviewed for *Didaskalia* by **Teresa M. Danze Lemieux** (<http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/8/20/>). Lemieux's review does much of my legwork for me, and a full analysis of Graney's script can be found there. Changes were made to script and production for the New York run, and I shall comment on these as necessary.

The usual caveat of adaptation: this is not Sophocles. It is Sophocles revisited, extrapolated, and recalibrated. The seven segments stood at various degrees of adaptive separation from their Sophoclean originals. The segments were arranged into three acts: 'Honor Lost' ('Oedipus,' 'In Trachis,' 'In Colonus'); 'Honor Found' ('Philoktetes,' 'Ajax'); and 'Honor Abandoned' ('Elektra,' 'Antigone'). Each scene was tweaked to impose a continuity that does not exist in the Sophoclean corpus: the same messenger ('The Carrier') appeared in six of seven segments, the role of several characters—especially Philoktetes—recurred in novel ways (more on this below), and the decision to end with 'Antigone' after opening with 'Oedipus' lent a satisfying sense of completion to the entire cycle. It is my intent not to review the seven sections serially (this has already been done by Lemieux), but to fix upon highlights of the performance and to consider some of the interpretative issues raised by this production.



*Jeff Ronan as Oedipus, photo by Laura June Kirsch*



*Satomi Blair as Jocasta, photo by Laura June Kirsch*

Graney's script is fully self-aware, exhibiting a clear understanding of its Sophoclean heritage. In the Sophoclean originals, for instance, stage properties were few, but charged with a heightened dramatic significance, focal points for the emotional and psychological turbulence of the characters. Such was the case here. Semantic labels, in which you could hear the capitals pronounced, lent them a sacred gravity. And so never just the 'bow,' but the 'Golden Bow of Herakles.' Never Achilles' armor but the 'Unchinkable Armor.' Certain characters and places received the same treatment: 'The Blind Seer of Thebes' was never named, nor was the 'City of the Barren Hills' (Oechalia). These labels of course also served a practical purpose, limiting the foreign-sounding names for the modern, Greekless audience.

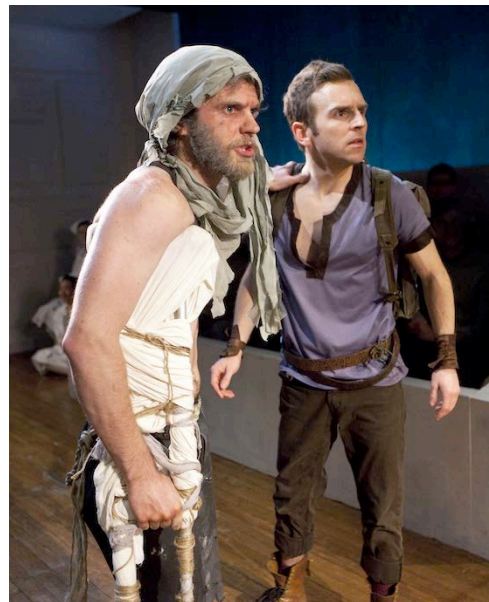
But Graney is also happy to subvert the Sophoclean heritage. Throughout the performance, the comic was as much in evidence as the tragic. Characters drop one-liners as they needle one another, comment ironically on the absurdity of their situations, and use colloquial language which frequently belies the tragic. 'I solved the riddle of the Hellbitch!' declares Oedipus in the opening sequence. 'And that was awesome!' replies Creon. High five!

Sophocles is, to my mind, the most relentless of the Athenian tragic poets: his characters are driven inexorably toward their fates and there is little room for any but the blackest of jokes, the most sardonic of musings. The use of a wide range of comic techniques in *These Seven Sicknesses*, from puns to slapstick, therefore raises some interesting questions. When I read (say) *Philoktetes* or *Ajax* with my students, there is snickering, amusement fueled by the absurdity of situation, the high rhetoric, and the blind adherence to obviously self-destructive codes of honor and morality. But this is to read the text with a modern sensibility of irony and realism, and I find myself frequently steering students back to the gravity of the situation. The life of a Sophoclean hero is rarely anything less than horrific, and we, as readers, as spectators, need to acknowledge this horror on the terms set out in this dramatic universe.

But this is not parody (though the reference in the title of my review may hint otherwise). The humor of Graney's script, even when it involves characters effacing themselves or each other, is fully complementary to the tragic moments, providing highs through which we may more fully appreciate the lows. The success of this juxtaposition, often accomplished within a line or two, is due in part to the very hard work of the Bats themselves. Where Graney shared his roles among twelve actors in the Chicago production, Iskandar marshaled 38 players. It would have been interesting (and impressive) to see the roles shared by a small company—what roles are doubled and how that might generate added



*Grant Harrison as Ajax (among the sheep), photo by Laura June Kirsch*



*Seth Moore as Philoktetes & Alex Herral as Neoptolemus, photo by Laura June Kirsch*



meaning—but the one-actor-per-role policy allowed for some deeply introspective performances, even in the smaller roles of Iskandar’s production.

Once or twice, I felt the counterpoint of comic and tragic did not work. When Elektra is presented with the offering found on Agamemnon’s tomb, Orestes’ Tickle-Me-Elmo (blindfolded to recall the incest of Oedipus and to foreshadow the coming incest of Elektra and Orestes), she is understandably devastated. But when she starts smashing Elmo’s head beneath her army boot, the hilarity of the moment eclipses too far the depth of her grief. But these clashes of tone were few and far between, and it was manifest that the Bats took their Sophocles very seriously.

The commitment of the Bats was on display from the moment I walked into the theater. Actors, in and out of costume, mingled among the crowd during preshow and intermissions, showed them to their seats, and served up the dinner and dessert—delicious minicupcakes!—during intermissions. I was struck by the openness of the actors, ready and able to discuss the show and their contributions to it. Our opinions before, during, and after the show were solicited on a variety of subjects. Cast and crew were visibly proud not only of the production, but the improvements they reported had been

made over its run, motivated in part by audience feedback. The Flea’s resident company is an informed one—everyone

was sporting a degree from Yale, Columbia, NYU, or beyond—and the value of Sophocles was not lost on them. For me it was a refreshing nexus between the oft-separated worlds of the classical philologist and the theater practitioner.

The result of the Bats’ engagement with their audience was an inclusive theatrical environment, drawing its spectators into the world of the Flea and the world of Sophocles. This was a unique echo of the theater experience of Classical Athens, itself a tight-knit community (despite its notorious politics). Members of the fifth-century audience surely knew some of the performers (even if only among the more than one thousand dithyrambic singers). Ancient performances were long (three tragedies plus a satyr play probably made for a slightly longer performance than the five hours we saw) and punctuated by intermissions, which surely enabled a great deal of socializing. It is a source of frustration for me that we know so little of the extraperformative aspects of Athenian theater: did the actors come out after the show? Were audience members free to cross the *orchestra* and mingle with



*Erik Olson as Orestes & Betsy Lippitt as Elektra, photo by Laura June Kirsch*



*Stephen Stout as Creon & Satomi Blair as Jocasta, photo by Laura June Kirsch*



*Allison Buck as Tekmessa & Grant Harrison as Ajax, photo by Laura June Kirsch*

cast and crew? Or was the space still sacred?

The Flea's orchestral space was inclusive and intimate, at once open and sacred; indeed it was part of the *mise-en-scène*. Audience members (a full house of 72) walked down the aisle of a dark, Arkham-like hospital and sat in low bleachers on either side of that aisle. This placed almost all the action in a visual crossfire, with actors moving between sections of the audience. The hospital setting, our first marker of the sicknesses theme, came and went, conceptually: at times the chorus of Nurses came forward to mop up or tend wounds, making the infirmary inescapable, while at other times the Sophoclean setting—Thebes, Trachis, Athens, Troy, or Argos—overrode it. But in the best moments the two settings of contemporary hospital and Sophoclean Greece, conflated, existed simultaneously. In the 'Trachis' segment, for instance, Dejanira retreats to her bedroom to commit suicide by drinking some industrial-strength bleach she finds under the sink, and the moment is both private and public.

The chorus consisted of six nurses and a guitar-playing orderly. Throughout the play they clean, they operate, and they sing. Music was an important feature of this production. Short odes, adaptations of modern rock from The Beatles to Springsteen to Coldplay, all reconfigured into ballads of lament, with elements of soul and gospel, punctuated the action (arranged by David Dabbon). The chorus of female voices recalled for me especially the Sirens of the Coen Brothers' *O Brother Where Art Thou?* The renditions and the vocal talent behind them were beautiful, and all the more impressive because, as I am told, most of the chorus had not sung in public before this production. These choral odes were abetted by a rich variety of tracks culled from popular bands and films. As of this writing, searching 'These Seven Sicknesses' on YouTube will yield several samples, including trailers produced for the show.

As with all tragic choruses, these Nurses were the implicit survivors of the tragedies, survivors who have witnessed past atrocities and expect many more. In the short prologue, the chorus induct a new Nurse into their ranks, telling her, 'Just work . . . don't get involved and work.' And work they do, mopping up blood, sickness, ashes, and all the other detritus left behind by the self-destructive principals, exhibiting always a concern, but striving to keep that concern detached, clinical: they know what happens to those who get involved.

The interweaving of the seven plays into one narrative strand creates new dramatic opportunities, some along the creative continuum established by Sophocles, and others that deviate from that standard. The script is snappy and, of necessity, paced very quickly, entailing a few creative casualties. Most notable was the role of Dejanira. Though played well (by Kate Michaud), Dejanira is immediately the shrill, suspicious housewife, already deeply poisoned by her failing self-esteem. We are never given any glimpse of what Herakles saw in her. Iole's role (Liz Tancredi) is correspondingly increased, and this too comes at Dejanira's expense. Brought on stage alone, Iole need not be spotted in the crowd by Dejanira (as in Sophocles), and her replies to the questions of Dejanira make it clear that she is innocent but in a very awkward situation not of her making. Dejanira's actions are thus far more vindictive than in the Sophoclean original, and I found myself unsympathetic. When the shade of Herakles (Victor Joel Ortiz), at the end of the 'Philoktetes' segment, walks off into the afterlife, we see Dejanira waiting for him, but it is difficult to see why he smiles, since he died trying to replace her. Hyllus (Miles Jacoby), too, is deprived of his Sophoclean gravitas. He proves incapable of lighting his father's pyre, but cannot get off stage to his bedroom fast enough when he gets a look at the *négligée-clad* Iole.

But the integration of the seven segments has dramatic beneficiaries too, and none greater than Creon and Philoktetes. These two characters more than any other, I thought, supplied a moral compass to the world of *These Seven Sicknesses*. It did not hurt that, in a crowd of polished performances, actors Stephen Stout and Seth Moore put in the star turns of the evening. But these two characters demonstrate the

adaptive extremes of Graney's script. Both characters find a humanity beyond the scope of their Sophoclean antecedents, but the former accomplishes this by following the trajectory set for him in antiquity, while the other rejects it and forges a new path.

Creon (Stout) appears more or less where and when he should. His evolving costume in the Theban segments, from leather jacket in 'Oedipus' to academic tweed in 'Colonus' to formal tuxedo in 'Antigone,' signals clearly his developing complexity and political prominence. Creon, who appears in the opening scene and whose suicide at the onset of a fatal heart attack caps the evening's mayhem, understands more than anyone else (except perhaps the chorus) the cost of involvement in this tragic world ('Avoid excitement,' advise the chorus, but who can in Sophocles?). When confronted by Oedipus in the opening segment, the youthful Creon presents his well-known defense: why would he want the crown, when he is already provided for? Creon is no saint, of course. In 'In Colonus' he is just as cynical and manipulative as in the original. Throughout, he is arrogant, and he is not above kicking someone who is down. 'So you don't want me to rule Thebes?' asks Oedipus, as he learns of the full extent of Creon's deception. 'No, you can't even rule your bowels, Old Man. I just want your body,' is the harsh reply. But each time we meet Creon, we sense a deepening sadness in him, an increasing awareness of the inevitable cost of his involvement in family doings, of the consequences of his actions, and a niggling sense that perhaps things could have been done differently.

By the time he arrives on stage to confront Antigone (Katherine Folk-Sullivan), Creon is resigned to the inevitability of his fate: he has resisted power, knowing its cost, but he can resist no more. He approaches Antigone, who, in her bridal gown, is preparing a makeshift coffin for Polyneices, as yet untouched. They discuss the mechanics of her project, awkwardly avoiding its purpose. The two of them sit down to share a bag lunch he has brought (some sandwiches, a soda, a few cookies), and the scene is truly heartbreaking: two individuals who are family and love each other as family should, dressed for a wedding and sharing a meal, yet who know exactly what is going to happen. Antigone will touch the corpse of Polyneices and Creon will kill her for it. The scene is all the more painful for our having met Polyneices in the 'Colonus' segment: a drunken frat boy, too irresponsible to rule and obnoxious to his family.

When Ismene arrives, Creon and Antigone are no closer to resolution than in Sophocles. But in *These Seven Sicknesses*, familial love can coexist with political tension, and the three-way scene among Ismene, Antigone, and Creon is something of a reversal from Sophocles, as Antigone and Creon, rather than treating Ismene roughly, collude to keep her from the coffin and corpse, collaborating on an almost subconscious level to save her, to exclude her from the doomed path on which they find themselves. It is all for naught, however, as Ismene commits suicide, taking the place of Eurydice in the family tragedy. Haemon shoots himself in the head and Creon, attempting to pull the dead Antigone from the coffin after a visit from the Blind Seer, induces a fatal heart attack. He shoots himself before it can take him. Creon probably deserves his fate: aware of the family's destructive patterns of interaction, he still participated. But he is no less tragic for his inability to break free of those patterns.

Philoktetes, on the other hand, takes on a much-expanded role in the world of *These Seven Sicknesses*, appearing thrice in the cycle, first as a substitute for Lichas in 'In Trachis,' where he receives the Golden Bow of Herakles, then in his own segment, and finally at the conclusion of 'Ajax,' where he joins Odysseus as advocate for the burial of Ajax. At first, Philoktetes' appearance in the Trachis segment appears to be simply a clever bit of recasting for continuity purposes, but in the Philoktetes segment, it becomes clear that Graney has far greater plans for this character. For one thing, the trauma suffered by the warrior is far beyond anything his Sophoclean ancestor experienced: when he is overcome by the sickness of his wounds, the Nurses see no other option but to amputate, with much blood and sound



effect. The severed foot, wrapped in bloodied gauze and sealed in a ziplock bag, becomes almost as important a prop as the bow itself. Philoktetes hurls it at Odysseus (it makes a very disturbing thunk when it lands) and eventually disposes of it in the hospital incinerator. Philoktetes is reduced to such a state after the feigned departure of Neoptolemus and Odysseus that he determines to commit suicide, but when he cannot finish the job his shame is palpable.

As he recovers from this lowest of moments, however, Philoktetes achieves a moral complexity beyond the original. Before a repentant Neoptolemus (who takes an arrow in the hand when he tries to shoot Odysseus), he relents and agrees to go to Troy. He forgives Odysseus his former transgressions. At first, this is done for the sake of stability at Troy and to secure his eventual return home. But then the Shade of Herakles arrives, exhorting Philoktetes to find the strength to make his forgiveness genuine. 'And when you are a shade like me, you will know you lived for honor and love, for virtues greater than revenge, or spite, or laziness. The only life worth living is one that leaves people better.' This is not the help-your-friends-harm-your-enemies philosophy normally espoused in the plays of Sophocles. Philoktetes forgives, and it is at this moment that he transcends the moral boundaries of Sophocles' drama. Philoktetes has felt the horror of his sickness and it has been amputated from him, both physically and psychologically. He sets out on a mission to free others from their own sicknesses. In the arrangement of *These Seven Sicknesses*, the judgment of arms is still pending at this point, and Philoktetes heads to Troy, knowing that only doom can await Ajax if no one is there to save him.

And it's true. Ajax is doomed. This is clear the minute Ajax enters. The divine is always held at arm's length in this world (not a single Olympian name, or even the word 'god' is heard in Graney's script), and so the Athena-Odysseus exchange of the original is omitted. But we are treated to the madness of Ajax, and it is surely the centerpiece of the entire performance; it is simply incredible theater. The madness is totally immersive, both for the warrior and for us. The 'sheep' are the warriors at Troy, a dozen of them, with sheep's heads and ears. When they kneel they are sheep, when they stand they are warriors (taunting Ajax with bleating voices as he [re]lives the moment of judgment), but always they are both. Ajax slays them repeatedly, as they stand, as they kneel, in several sequences of martial arts fighting, underscored by aggressive, colored lighting and music tracks culled from a variety of films. The repeated sequences are necessary: no matter how many times Ajax kills them, the sheep keep getting back up to bleat and taunt. When it is finally over, Ajax stands over a dozen corpses (completely filling the narrow playing space) and over Tecmessa, whom he has accidentally stabbed, fatally as it will turn out, when she tried to calm him. When he realizes the extent of his shame, Ajax commits suicide, propping his sword not in the earth but in the dead hands of Tecmessa.

And thus enter, staring across the corpse of Ajax like a pair of high school debate teams, Agamemnon and Menelaus, Odysseus and Philoktetes. By this time, the reconciliation of Odysseus and Philoktetes is complete, and the two display the strength of friendship, the unspoken bond of two men whose relationship has survived near-total ruin. Odysseus, ever the wordsmith, perhaps hits closest to home: 'Our hatred is only a dressing over the wound of our guilt. We must rip clean the dressing and expose our guilt-wound to harshness of the elements.' 'Only then can it heal,' adds Philoktetes as he stands on his remaining foot. After Agamemnon grants permission to bury Ajax, Philoktetes voluntarily hands over to him the Golden Bow of Herakles. He hoists Ajax over his shoulder and carries the corpse away—no mean feat on just one foot.

But such a positive note cannot be held long in a world grown from Sophoclean tragedy. If Philoktetes represents the moral potential of the Sophoclean hero, the opposite is true of Orestes and Elektra (whose belligerent, punk-rock grieving was more than a little discomfiting). When the shade of Agamemnon appears, critical of his children's bloodthirsty anticipation of the matricide, they are temporarily abashed.

But over the corpse of Clytemnestra, the violence of the murder and their sexual tension are conflated, and the children of Agamemnon (twins in an earlier manifestation of the script, and here cast to look very much alike) passionately act upon their incestuous urges. They are interrupted by Aegisthus, whose gory castration serves only to stoke the fires of their passion further. Aegisthus offers Orestes the Golden Bow, which he has taken from Agamemnon, as a token of ransom. Orestes smashes it over his knee, bringing to an end Philoktetes' legacy. We then admire the determined maternal instincts of Clytemnestra (played by Akyiaa Wilson) all the more. As Elektra breaks down in her grief, it is Clytemnestra who holds her to her breast, accepting her, forgiving her. Her defense of her actions—that she was retaliating for the death of Iphigenia—is convincing. Her death, when she is strangled onstage by Orestes, is the single longest moment in the entire performance and, eventually, the quietest. It was not easy to endure.

These are some of the highlights of this wonderful production, but there were many more. I might have dwelt further on the stunning Jocasta (Sitomi Blair), whose reaction to the death of Polybius is very nearly to seduce Oedipus. Or Crysothemis (Charlotte Bydwell), the Valley girl who ultimately exhibits a far more humane understanding of the world than her sister Elektra. Or the Blind Seer of Thebes (Holly Chou), appearing in each of the Theban segments, bitter and disgusted with the behavior of its royal family—partly because Oedipus violently pulls a tooth when she refuses to talk. And there is the Carrier (Tommy Crawford), so cheerful on his first appearance, delighted to relieve Oedipus' anxiety: 'The people who raised you are not your parents . . . guess I am just full of good news!' But each time he wheels on his scooter, it is with greater trepidation. In the final scene, Creon hands the Key to Thebes to the Carrier, who is about to be the night's only onstage survivor. Creon shoots himself and the Carrier tosses the Key into the coffin after him. 'Smartest thing he ever did,' quip the nurses. It is not at all clear whom they mean.

Throughout, Graney's dialogue is crisp and clean, as cutting as it is funny. Iskandar and his Bats have set a very high bar for whoever may follow, but we can only hope this script sees future performances. This is not Sophocles, but it is a great deal of what Sophocles was and what Sophocles could be. Simultaneously respectful and innovative, *These Seven Sicknesses* brings us a world of hope and misery, of beauty and violence. It is a reminder, as the plays of Sophocles must have been to their original audience, to tread carefully in this life, as so many of the paths open to us are far darker than they might seem, and as death awaits us all in the end. And minicupcakes.

[I would like to express my thanks to Ed Sylvanus Iskandar, Sean Graney, and the Bats, all of whom were ready and willing to discuss this powerful script and the challenges of producing it. I would like to thank too my companion for the evening, Liz Scharffenberger: at least some of the ideas expressed here germinated in our spirited post-production conversations.]

## *The Women from Trachis*

by Sophokles

Translated and directed by Doron Bloomfield

March 29–31, 2012

Walgreen Drama Center, Studio One at the University of Michigan

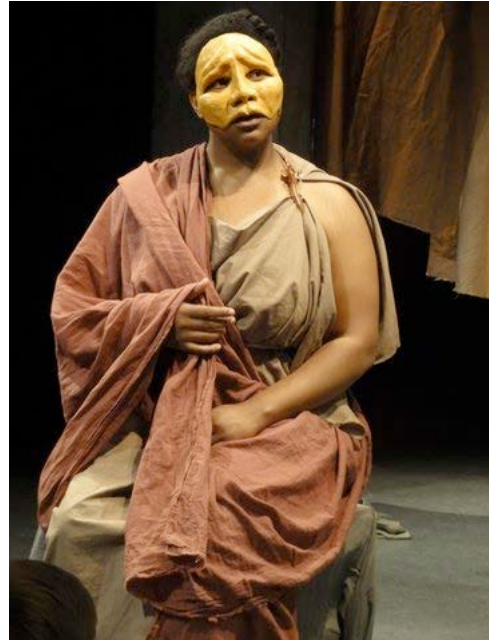
### **Review by Amy Pistone**

*University of Michigan*

The challenge of directing a Greek tragedy lies in telling an old story in a new way. Often this involves a new setting for the play or a distinctive translation. Doron Bloomfield's recent production of *Women from Trachis* offered his own unique look at Sophokles' *Trachiniae*. This performance was Bloomfield's Senior Directing Thesis at the University of Michigan, and it combined a traditional performance of the play with an unconventional approach to the work. His program notes encapsulate this approach: "The elders feel emotions they know how to control, while the young are tossed about by the force of their deepest feelings. Because youth is unbridled, and maturity brings control, focus, wisdom, strength, and ultimately death. So no one wants to grow up." Bloomfield, who served as both translator and director for the production, consistently emphasized this motif of generational conflict, drawing attention to the contrast between the young and the old.

In general, Bloomfield's translation is well done and close to the original. He leaves some of the text in Greek, which works beautifully within the play. Deianeira is often addressed as *despoina Deianeira*, and characters often interject short Greek phrases (though I suspect that the frequent use of *oimoi* may not convey a sense of lament and despair to an audience unfamiliar with the language). The most striking use of Greek was in the chorus's enthusiastic reaction to the Messenger's announcement that Herakles is returning home; a long passage of Greek, delivered in the manner of a prayer, launches the women into a thoroughly festive scene, complete with trumpets and dancing. The ritualized rejoicing is interrupted by the silent figure of Iole coming onto the stage, bound as a prisoner of war. The juxtaposition was highlighted by the music and dance, and the overall effect was striking.

The performance combined masked and unmasked actors. All those who played two roles wore a mask for at least one of them, and usually for both. These were half-masks that covered the eyes and much of the face but left the mouth exposed. Perhaps significantly, the younger generation (Hyllus and the chorus) was never masked, creating a further aesthetic distinction between the two groups. Beyond masks, the costuming was very traditional, consisting of a variety of robes and similar garments. The set was minimalist but effective. A wall of the house could be lit to be transparent, allowing the audience to see Deianeira's activities within. The theater was relatively small and the audience was seated very close to the stage. This intimacy was used to full effect by the actors, most notably Jeffrey Freelon as Hyllus, who ended the play with a speech delivered close to the audience, reproaching the gods for leaving "pain



*Melissa Golliday as Deianeira, photo by Amanda Cohen*

for us and shame for them,” and lamenting to the audience that it is “men who have to walk into the ruins, the hardest walk of all.”

At the other end of the spectrum, the interaction between Lychas (Freelon again) and the Messenger (Elizabeth Raines, who also played the Nurse) was strongly reminiscent of Shakespeare in its comic effects. Messenger speeches are a difficult element of ancient tragedy to recast for the modern theater, and the combination of Greek and Shakespearean conventions was an innovative (if not particularly smooth) attempt to bridge that gap.

There were some significant modifications to the text of the original play. After Iole’s identity has been revealed to Deianeira and her chorus women, the Chorus Leader (Teagan Rose) piercingly screams “Let him burn!” in anguish at Herakles’ betrayal, a line that hangs in the air ominously for anyone in the audience who knows how the play ends.<sup>1</sup> Later in the play, once Herakles is enmeshed in the poisoned robe and Deianeira has left the stage to kill herself, the two main chorus girls begin to argue. The secondary chorus member (Ellie Todd) seems to assign blame to Rose, as though her prophetic cry set the events in motion.

This curious issue of the guilt of the chorus, found nowhere in Sophokles, contributes to Bloomfield’s emphasis on the general motif of age. His vision is shown not merely in the aforementioned translation but also in a variety of other directorial choices. The chorus is composed of three young girls, and until the tragic events begin to unfold, they are shown playing games, reenacting the fight between Herakles and Achelous (a pantomimed wrestling match, narrated by a play-by-play commentator, with Achelous in the form of a bull), and braiding one another’s hair. Even as the events get significantly darker, the girls still bicker among themselves about the quality of Todd’s trumpet playing. They come across very clearly as young, in stark contrast to Deianeira’s more matronly aspect and the Nurse’s visible old age and infirmity. Similarly, Hyllus opens the play as an almost petulant young man. His interactions with Deianeira are those of any teenage boy with his mother. He seems vaguely annoyed or uninterested, but does agree to go in search of Herakles. Here again, his conduct highlights the contrast between the older generation (Deianeira, Herakles, and the Nurse) and the younger generation (Hyllus and the chorus). While this juxtaposition draws out an interesting theme, and Bloomfield deftly manipulates the story to place more focus on the contrast, the play itself resists the attempt.

The most obvious instance of this resistance is the character of Deianeira. Her decision to use the “love



*Jeffrey Freelon as Lychas and Nicole Gellman as Iole, photo by Amanda Cohen*



*Elizabeth Raines as the Messenger, photo by Amanda Cohen*

charm” on Heracles is motivated by her distress in the face of a younger rival (Iole). However, Deianeira does not act perceptibly old (as does the Nurse). She only seems old when compared with the overly young chorus that accompanies her. To fit into this broad motif of age, Deianeira needs to be identified with the “elders” in the play, but her words and demeanor do not suggest that she is elderly. This incongruity is surely due to the plot and text of the play, rather than the acting, which was exceptional. Deianeira was played by Melissa Golliday, who turned in particularly stunning performances as both Deianeira and Herakles. As Deianeira, she made her emotions and misfortunes the crux of the play. For modern audiences, the expectations of a woman in Ancient Greece can be somewhat distasteful, and Clytemnestra’s anger and desire for revenge can seem a more acceptable response than Deianeira’s commitment to make things work with Heracles and Iole. But Golliday’s Deianeira was convincing and sympathetic, particularly when she expressed her hatred for the sort of women who would take vengeance on their husbands, even as her own unwitting vengeance was unfolding. Both of her roles were masked, and she was extremely adept at conveying strong emotion through the mask, using her eyes poignantly.

Ultimately, the production combined traditional elements (a script that largely follows the Greek, traditional costumes, and so on) with an innovative approach to the play. Bloomfield’s attempt to find and illuminate a thread of generational conflict within the work is unique and admirable, and his directorial choices creatively advance this theme, though Deianeira’s role complicates the opposition of old and young that he wishes to establish. Bloomfield and all his actors surely deserve credit for offering a variation on this classic work of Sophokles, and while some of their choices are not entirely effective, the undertaking was inventive and thoroughly enjoyable.

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**note**

<sup>1</sup> The Greek here reads ὄλοιντο μὴ τι πάντες οἱ κακοί, τὰ δὲ / λαθραῖ’ ὅς ἀσκει μὴ πρέπονθ’ αὐτῷ κακὰ (334–5), which still conveys a hostile reaction toward Herakles, but does not directly foreshadow (and, in the minds of the chorus, cause) his fiery death.



## Imagining and Imaging the Chorus: A Study of the Physicality, Movement, and Composition of the Chorus in A.R.T.'s *Ajax*

Sophocles' *Ajax*

Translated by Charles Connaghan

Directed by Sarah Benson

February 12 - March 13, 2011

American Repertory Theater, Cambridge, MA

**Review by Viviane Sophie Klein**

*Boston University*

*An earlier version of this paper was presented as part of a 2012 symposium on "The Problem of the Chorus—Staging Classical Greek Drama" at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.*

The chorus is one of the most difficult elements of ancient Greek drama to execute effectively in a modern production. It is a highly formal device, and one that is inextricably bound up in its original cultural context. The director is faced with the challenge of translating this archaic convention into something fresh and meaningful to a modern audience. In her recent production of Sophocles' *Ajax* at the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Obie-award-winning director Sarah Benson came up with some very creative solutions to "the problem of the chorus," not only updating the ancient device for its modern setting, but also actively encouraging the audience to (re)consider the form and function of a traditional chorus.



*Photo courtesy A.R.T.*

### Physicality

The play was set in a modern military mess hall, complete with a coke machine, plastic trashcans, and folding tables and chairs in disarray. The actors wore contemporary civilian clothing and military fatigues. The chorus leader carried a laptop.

One of Benson's goals for the production was to illustrate the ever-increasing role of the media in modern warfare. Round-the-clock news cycles and up-to-the-minute video footage now enable us, as never before, to document a war as it unfolds. Soldiers can even upload their own video clips to YouTube. Benson hoped to capture some small part of this phenomenon in her production. She wanted her audience to think about how "this kind of documentation changes [the nature or at least our perceptions of] war itself."<sup>1</sup> To that end, she envisioned the chorus leader as a journalist reporting from the front lines. This concretized his function as an intermediary. As a literal and figurative reporter, he negotiated communication among the chorus, the characters, and the audience.

The chorus leader was played by a live actor, but the rest of the choral performances were prerecorded and projected on the sloping ceiling of the mess hall. The members of the chorus—men and women of diverse ages and races wearing modern, everyday clothing—each occupied one of thirty square panels. This video format enabled Benson to experiment with the chorus's liminal nature: the choristers were at once physically present and ethereal, able both to watch the story unfold from afar and to participate in it

actively. Their virtual nature made them seem part human and part otherworldly, an impression deepened by suspending the screens above the stage in a *deus ex machina* position.

The video screens further reinforced the ever-shrinking boundary between warfront and homefront. They created the illusion of a cyberspace community, a chorus of anonymous voices participating in a shared experience. They represented the digital interface that connects so many of us through our computer screens, smartphones, and tablets. In this way, the production revitalized the ancient device of the chorus by reincarnating it in a conspicuously modern medium.

### **Movement**

A traditional Greek chorus, of course, wore masks that restricted their ability to manipulate facial expression and, consequently, amplified the impact of their body language. This production inverted the traditional model. The video footage presented the chorus members from the shoulders up, directing all the attention to their faces. The limitations on their bodies heightened the effect of their smaller movements; a subtle shift, twitch, or frown became all the more dynamic and meaningful.

The videography enabled the production team to make quick edits and guide the audience's eye to a particular character or group of characters, keeping the majority of the chorus in black-and-white and calling attention to the speakers by suddenly representing them in color. The team used the same technique to add dramatic tension to particular moments in the play—for example, highlighting the real-life soldiers in the chorus during speeches that focused on military themes, and bringing forth the women in the chorus during Tecmessa's monologues.

Benson described the videography as a kind of musical score. The production team used sound and video editing to create distinct rhythms, punctuated by patterns in the chorus's dialogue. The choristers spoke individually, in rounds, over one another, or in unison as one collective body. Sometimes they simply appeared and observed the action in expressive silence. The overall effect was that of a living, breathing mosaic.

The chorus members generally appeared in one of three different configurations: individually occupying all 30 boxes, in triptych, or with one enormous face taking up all 30 screens. A fourth configuration was used only once, immediately after Ajax's famous "Time reveals all things and conceals them again" speech, in which he falsely suggests that he has turned himself around and is on the road to recovery and reintegration. In a flash, the entire stage was flooded in a sea of faces. Benson wanted to make this a palpably public moment, almost as if the hero was giving a press conference. At the end of his speech, the chorus erupted in thunderous applause and a symphony of praise and well wishes. It was the only time we saw their hands.

In this way, Benson used the chorus to distinguish between public and private moments and spaces. The chorus appeared all together, as in a *parodos*, at the beginning of the performance, became fragmented over the course of the play (except for the one scene described above), and then came together again at the end. In collaboration with video designer Greg Emetaz, Benson orchestrated an ebb and flow to the chorus's movement, using videography to recreate the choreography that was one of the defining features of an ancient chorus.

### **Composition**

The composition of the chorus was arguably the most striking and important aspect of the ART's production. Benson wanted the chorus to represent a community. She was very interested in exploring

the ways in which a community responds to crises and takes care of its own. To this end, she made the bold and controversial decision to draw the chorus from the local community, like the chorus of ancient Greek drama. Benson wanted us to recognize its members and in turn to recognize ourselves as part of the same community. The production thus invited its audience to identify with its chorus, making the issues raised seem more personal.

Furthermore, this production was designed in collaboration with Theater of War, an organization that uses ancient plays as a forum for dialogue with modern soldiers about the psychological aftermath of war. In addition to professional actors, the chorus featured active-duty military men and women, veterans, and their friends and families. Their presence created a meaningful sense of metatheatricality, especially when they departed from Sophocles' script to speak of their own experiences with and opinions about war.

All the chorus members were interviewed separately. They spent about 10 hours each working with the production team, role playing and drawing from their own experiences. Benson asked them to respond in the first person, eliciting lines such as:

"Yeah, it sucks right now. You know what, it sucks for me too."

"There are so many people that . . . you make such a difference in our lives. I can't imagine life without you."

"Look at yourself. This is not you. You can't do this. I'm sorry."

Rather than keeping the long, highly stylized, traditional choral passages, Benson asked the chorus to talk informally about themes addressed in the original odes and those that she wanted to explore in the context of this production. For example, she asked them to describe what community means to them, the times they felt betrayed, their beliefs about Fate, what it means to become obsolete. Benson remarked that the chorus responded very positively to the exercise. The military members, in particular, found it "cathartic." The majority of the chorus met for the first time opening night. They came with their families and left having forged new communities.

Benson's solution to the "problem of the chorus" was not without its flaws. While the chorus was arguably the most compelling part of this production, it was also the most controversial. Because the chorus's lines were (for the most part) unscripted, their words lacked the elegance and intensity of the original text. The greatest tragedy in the play was arguably not the death of its titular hero, but rather the loss of Sophocles' language.

Since the rest of the production attempted to follow a translation and sustain an elevated tone, the choral passages often stood out as awkward, unpolished, and "platitudinous," to borrow an expression from the *TheaterMania* critic.<sup>2</sup> The reviewer from *The Phoenix* also criticized the "non-lyrical commentary [which ranged] from chewing the fat over fate and free will to conciliatory psychobabble."<sup>3</sup>

The critic of the *Boston Theatre Review* pinpointed another problem with the choral passages.<sup>4</sup> The chorus inconsistently referred to events in the real world and in the world of the play, going back and forth between the two and hence muddying the distinction between the members' fictional and nonfictional roles. While this effect was probably intended, it quickly became confusing and detracted from the authenticity of their real experiences. For example, when a chorus member said of Ajax, "He did something very real for me and he's affected me a lot as a person," it somehow broke the spell and forced us to recognize the boundary between the action on stage and real life.



Regardless of their ultimate opinion about the chorus, audiences left the theater talking about it. Thus the production achieved a number of important goals. It invited its audience to contemplate the form and function of a chorus (even if only to criticize it); it encouraged the audience to frame the play's ancient ideas in a modern and personal context; and, perhaps most importantly, it involved the local community at all stages of the theatrical process, from performance to reception.

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**notes**

<sup>1</sup> Sarah Benson, interview by author, Cambridge, Mass., March 22, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Sandy MacDonald, "Ajax," *TheaterMania*, February 7, 2011, [http://www.theatermania.com/boston/reviews/02-2011/ajax\\_34231.html](http://www.theatermania.com/boston/reviews/02-2011/ajax_34231.html).

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn Clay, "The A.R.T.'s 21st-century Ajax," *The Phoenix*, February 22, 2011, <http://thephoenix.com/boston/arts/116052-arts-21st-century-ajax/>.

<sup>4</sup> J. Jacob Krause, "Ajax," *Boston Theatre Review*, February 21, 2011, <http://www.bostontheatrereview.com/2011/02/ajax/>.

## Aeschylus's *Oresteia*

Directed by Ruth Weiner  
 Translation and adaptation by Rob Hardy  
 May 11–13 and 18–20, 2012  
 Weitz Center for Creativity Theater  
 Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota

**Review by Eric Dugdale**  
*Gustavus Adolphus College*

Tyrone Guthrie's 1966 production of *House of Atreus*, an adaptation of the *Oresteia*, catapulted Minnesota theater into the limelight and remains a milestone in the performance history of Greek tragedy. Ruth Weiner chose Aeschylus' foundational trilogy for the inaugural season of the new Weitz Center for Creativity Theater on the Carleton College campus in Northfield, Minnesota. Far from being a tired retread of a well-worn drama, this production, premiering a new adaptation of the *Oresteia* by Rob Hardy, offered its audience a heady bouquet of new wine drawn from an old wineskin.

### The Players

Collaboration is the watchword of education in the twenty-first century. This production was an ambitious collaboration among several constituencies, and showed what can be gained when students are invited to participate in the creative process. The chorus comprised dancers from the Semaphore Repertory Company, while the character actors were largely drawn from the Carleton College Players. Others came from a class entitled *The Oresteia Project: Visualizing Greek Tragedy*, co-taught by Ruth Weiner (Theatre Department) and Clara Hardy (Classics Department). Using Simon Goldhill's *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*<sup>1</sup> as food for thought, the class studied a range of Greek tragedies; all class members were involved in the production in some capacity. Students created an accompanying exhibition about the *Oresteia*, featuring documentation of the 2000 Carleton production of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Weiner and Hardy's first collaboration. The production also participated in the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival, a partnership that provides further opportunities for selected participants, such as scholarships, internships and workshops; a KCACTF representative gave a response after the opening night's performance. With a cast of thirty-four students and a crew numbering well over a hundred, it is safe to say that the ideas explored in the *Oresteia* loomed large in the collective consciousness of Carleton College this spring.



*Rachel Porcher and Ben Stroup as members of the chorus, photo by Linnea Bullion*



*Jessica Morrison as Cassandra, photo by Linnea Bullion*



*Orestes (Josh Davids) confronts Clytemnestra (Chelsea Lau), photo by Linnea Bullion*

## The Script

Rob Hardy's adaptation has pared down the *Oresteia* to a manageable two-hour performance. It offers a stripped-down style in which every word counts and immediacy trumps Aeschylean grandeur. Classicists may miss some of their favorite Aeschylean motifs; in the Watchman's speech, for example, there is no "resting on my elbows like a dog" or "a woman's hopeful heart, which plans like a man."<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Hardy has succeeded in producing a script that is evocative and unhurried. Like that of Ted Hughes before him,<sup>3</sup> Hardy's script lingers on his favorite Aeschylean images and teases out their resonances: he expands as much as he telescopes, and he is not shy about introducing ideas and imagery of his own, as exemplified in the following extract in which the Watchman describes the sacrifice of Iphigenia:



*Orestes (Josh Davids) trapped by the Furies (members of Carleton's Semaphore Dance Company), photo by Linnea Bullion*

Ten years of watching the phases of the moon:  
the new moon as modest as a girl,  
the waxing moon pregnant with light,  
the waning moon sharpened like a blade above the house.

*(Dancer enters and begins.)*

Ten years ago I stood here and watched Iphigenia  
carry the bridal torch through these palace doors.  
She was as modest as the new moon.  
The only sorrow she knew was in the songs  
she sang in the evening, to her father's guests,  
when their brains were heavy with wine.  
She didn't understand how they looked at her,  
or what lust and cruelty was in their hearts.  
Agamemnon told her she would be a bride.  
She went from the house to meet her husband  
with flowers in her hair, like an unplowed meadow,  
like a heifer wreathed for sacrifice.  
If she trembled, and if her step was hesitant,  
it was from fear of the unknown life that awaited her.  
She had heard her mother's screams in childbirth,  
seen the bloody bedsheets, held the baby Orestes  
still slick with his mother's blood.  
She thought marriage must be a slow murder.  
But she knew that she herself came from her mother's blood.  
She knew that, somehow, this was what made life possible.  
So she went to meet her husband with a terrified joy.

*(The Chorus Leader sets her torch in a torch holder at the front of the stage.)*

But when she reached the altar, her father bound

her hands and feet, and held a knife to her throat,  
and called on Artemis to receive his sacrifice.  
And with her last breath, Iphigeneia cried out—

**Chorus C**

Clytemnestra!

*(Exit Watchman. The doors of the palace open and Clytemnestra enters.)*

**Clytemnestra**

*(raising her hands to the fire)* At last!

*(addressing the Chorus)* Troy is fallen!

In Aeschylus' version, Iphigeneia is only briefly (Ag. 228–47) the focalizer in a scene which otherwise concentrates on the tragic choice facing Agamemnon. Hardy's adaptation gives full weight to Iphigeneia's pathos, drawing attention to the relationship between mother and daughter. Indeed, Iphigenia appears onstage as a mute character dressed in full bridal attire. This snippet also illustrates a number of other characteristics of Hardy's adaptation: it maximizes the dramatic potential of stage entrances and exits; it harnesses the symbolism of stage props and stage action; it makes use of poetic devices such as antilabe, bold metaphor, and repetition ("Ten years" recurs as an antiphonal refrain eight times in the exchange between the Watchman and the Chorus). It retains many fundamental elements of Greek tragedy while offering much that is new.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in its handling of social issues. In his "Adaptor's Note" in the program, Rob Hardy alludes to the impact of a trip to Greece in March 2011 at a time when the country was experiencing social and economic turmoil, noting that "some of that contemporary unrest has found its way into this retelling of an ancient story." Hardy's adaptation presents issues in a more direct and less allusive manner than does Aeschylus. For example, the second stasimon of the *Agamemnon* begins as a fable:

Once a rich man brought  
an orphaned lion cub into his home.  
Its fur was soft and golden.  
It curled and slept  
beside the man's children.

The violent history of the Pelopids is narrated within this fable; then the chorus declares "Helen! . . . She was the lion . . ." A few lines later, Helen becomes the archetypal woman:

Woman is the lion  
a man brings into his house.  
When he lies with her,  
he makes his bed in the wilderness.  
He knows her power is older than his,  
in league with the earth and darkness,  
and with Artemis, the goddess  
who nurtures every wild thing.

The effect of Hardy's adaptation is to place issues such as gender conflict front and center in a way that

forces an audience to notice and engage with them. As an essay in the program (“Myth, Gender, and Politics in Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*”) noted, “Aeschylus has fused this progress from archaic revenge to trial by jury with a different one: the shift from powerful female to powerful male.” In my experience, students often fail to appreciate fully this aspect of Aeschylus’ trilogy on first encounter. This is unlikely to be the case for those reading or watching Hardy’s adaptation, which is full of striking imagery of gender, gender conflict, sex, and reproduction. For example, Clytemnestra describes her knowledge of the truth of Troy’s capture in terms of childbirth:

I knew this truth when it was  
the faintest glimmer of light. I understood it.  
I felt it moving inside me,  
this great truth waiting to be born.  
But you would only believe it  
when it was put into a man’s words.

By introducing the imagery of reproduction within the context of perception, the play challenges the privileging of the male as the rational sex and anticipates Apollo’s argument that it is the male who is the true progenitor.

Another main concern of Hardy’s script is the violence of war. Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* explores the costs of war too, but to a lesser extent. If Aeschylus’ Herald is triumphant at the conquest of Troy and relieved to see an end to the suffering, Hardy’s Messenger is presented as a veteran who cannot adjust to civilian life (“It feels as if I’ve been through / the end of the world, / and I don’t belong to the new world / that’s taken its place”), whose soul has been destroyed by what he has witnessed (“There’s nothing left. / Not even our humanity”), and who, like Wilfred Owen, rejects “the old lie” about the honor of war (“I don’t want the songs of poets / to tell me what we did was glorious. / I want to forget it ever happened”). One of the strengths of Hardy’s script is that it engages with today’s concerns alongside those of fifth-century Athens.

### The Performance

In her “Director’s Note” in the program, Ruth Weiner comments on the centrality of the chorus to ancient drama. This focus was certainly borne out in the performance, in which the chorus demonstrated the remarkable visual and emotional impact that a full-size tragic chorus can achieve. The decision to assign the speaking roles to three chorus members and the dancing to sixteen experienced dancers avoided the problem of audibility that plagues many performances of Greek tragedy in which chorus members speak while dancing. It also allowed the three *choryphoroi* to interact with the other speaking characters in more naturalistic ways. Judith Howard’s choreography exhibited remarkable variety. At times the chorus danced in set pieces evocative of ancient routines, with the sixteen choreuts (fifteen female and one male) arranged in rows and at one point breaking into schematized arm movements, reminiscent of ancient *cheironomia*, that had a distinctly martial effect.

This was certainly not, however, a production aiming at historicizing authenticity; rather, it succeeded in conveying the vitality and versatility of the ancient chorus in a modern register. The large size of the chorus was frequently put to powerful visual and auditory effect. At the arrival of Agamemnon atop a Second World War jeep, the chorus parted to form a sizeable crowd lining the parade. In the opening scene of the *Eumenides*, the tightly clustered and chaotically arranged forms of the chorus of Furies lying prostrate created a powerful tableau suggestive of a writhing snake pit. In the *Libation Bearers* the rhythmic tick-tock sound of the chorus marching *en pointe* suggested the passage of time as Orestes

approached his grieving sister. Vocalizations also often took on a musical quality. Music composed by Mary Ellen Childs further accentuated the emotional intensity of many choral scenes. As Cassandra invoked Apollo in the *Agamemnon*, the chorus swirled around her in a dizzying vortex that was heightened by trenchant string music; in the closing scene of the *Libation Bearers*, the metallic rasp of a chainsaw played as Orestes was cornered and attacked by a hooded chorus of zombie-like Furies.

At the City Dionysia of 458 BC, young male choreuts in Aeschylus' chorus performed as elders of Argos, slave women, Furies, and satyrs in successive plays. At the Carleton performance, their modern counterparts surprised the audience by the rapidity with which they transformed from Argive townspeople into feral beings in the second stasimon of the *Agamemnon*; with a deft adjustment to costume, the band that had served as a girdle was now tossed savagely between clenched teeth in a wild dance enacting the violent coming of age of the lion cub. Their white mask-like makeup and deep-sunk purple eyes by turn conveyed grief and savagery. The chorus frequently served as the emotional barometer of the play; their jubilation at Agamemnon's triumphal arrival was instantly quelled by the arrival of Clytemnestra, whose presence injected tension into the atmosphere. It was only towards the end of the *Eumenides* that the chorus's intensity flagged somewhat. It is a real challenge to know how a chorus of wild Furies should act in a trial scene without being distracting, and after a while their occasional hisses and snarls became predictable. At Orestes' acquittal, the Furies' reaction was flat (after initial howls of dismay), and the choreography of this scene was rather static in comparison to the rest of the play. The character actors played their roles with conviction and nuance. Perhaps the boldest directorial choice was to cast the only black actor in a white cast as Cassandra, thereby accentuating Cassandra's "otherness." Jessica Morrison, the actor in question, commanded the stage with her powerful yet distant performance.

Greek tragedy offers a different kind of suspense from that of most modern drama, a suspense predicated on the anticipation that accompanies a storyline familiar from myth. At the same time, Aeschylus and his fellow tragedians knew how to take their plots in unexpected directions. In the *Agamemnon*, for example, Cassandra ignores Clytemnestra's summons to enter the palace, remaining onstage until she decides knowingly to go in to her death. This production exploited both types of suspense to powerful effect. When Orestes confronts his mother, she engages him in a prolonged exchange in which she reasons with him, reminds him of Agamemnon's wrongdoings, and appeals to their familial bonds. The brief moment of doubt in Aeschylus' play, in which Orestes appeals to Pylades for direction, is expanded into a protracted scene rife with suspense, tension, and a maelstrom of conflicting emotions. Orestes and Clytemnestra engage in a macabre pas de deux in which Orestes lunges at his mother with the knife even as she seeks to draw him into her embrace. Audience expectations are at once met and confounded as Orestes drags his mother offstage and the palace doors clang shut.

The tapestry scene is another in which the performance played with audience expectation. A long red carpet is rolled out diagonally across the stage at the end of the Messenger scene, thereby building anticipation of Agamemnon's arrival and emphasizing Clytemnestra's powers of anticipation. When Agamemnon makes his triumphal entrance, Clytemnestra bids him enter the palace with the invitation:

This carpet is laid for you, Agamemnon.  
 After everything you've done,  
 after everything you've accomplished—  
 it's not right that you should enter the house  
 like an ordinary mortal—

Agamemnon demurs; such an act would not be looked upon kindly by the gods or his men. So far

everything is going according to Aeschylus' script. But then the plot takes several surprising twists:

**Agamemnon.**

*(To the Chorus)*

Take away this carpet.

A king can walk on the ground like other men.

**Clytemnestra.**

*(To the Chorus)*

Wait.

*(To Agamemnon)*

Why do we fight, Agamemnon?

I wanted this to be a new beginning.

We've spent ten years married to each other's absence.

We can't keep looking past each other  
at the people we've created to fill that absence.

We have to learn to see each other again.

I want to know you as I once knew you,  
before the war came between us.

This carpet isn't laid out for a conqueror,  
or a man who would make himself a tyrant—  
it's laid out for the bridegroom coming home to his bride.

As in Aeschylus' version, Clytemnestra plays the dutiful wife awaiting her husband's return. But in Hardy's version, Clytemnestra transforms the tapestry into the red carpet renewing their wedding vows. When Agamemnon continues to hesitate, Clytemnestra makes a bold move:

*(To the Chorus)*

Take away the carpet.

*(The Chorus moves to roll up the carpet.)*

**Agamemnon.**

*(To the Chorus)*

Stop. Leave it.

This scene did not quite work in its execution. In the lead-up to this climax, the chorus and Clytemnestra had been very careful to step over the carpet without treading on it, but Clytemnestra then walks on it alongside Agamemnon as they go up the aisle into the palace. But the scene did succeed in investing the carpet with a symbolic significance to which the audience could relate, in building anticipation, and in highlighting the war of wills that Clytemnestra wins even as she seems to defer to Agamemnon.

Through its simple and effective stage action, this production communicated much that lies at the heart of ancient dramaturgy. The variety of ways in which entrances and exits were staged (cf. Taplin 1978)<sup>4</sup> was remarkable. Among the most memorable was Orestes' re-entry after dragging his mother into the palace to kill her: shaken and spent, he tumbles out of the palace, collapses to his knees, and declares "It is done." Stage props were also used to powerful effect. For example, the boots that Agamemnon removes in order to walk on the carpet remain downstage as a haunting foreshadowing of his impending death (cf. the fascinating use of boots in scene xiii of Farber's *Molara*), recognized as such by Cassandra alone. In the opening scene of the *Libation Bearers*, Electra discovers the discarded boots and then agrees to let

Orestes try them on; they function as the recognition token as well as an accessible symbol of Orestes' coming of age as he steps into his father's shoes.

Stage machinery was also used effectively. Agamemnon's arrival in a jeep, pushed onto the stage by attendants, had all the grandeur of a triumphal procession, contrasting strikingly with the ignominy of the catering trolley on which his corpse and Cassandra's lay in their final appearance. One of my students commented that she had never really understood the *ekkylema* until she saw it come to life in this production. The relative positioning of characters in this tableau also conveyed volumes: with the chorus gathered around the *ekkylema*, Clytemnestra delivered a speech from the safety of the palace roof, seeking to persuade the restless crowd below that she is a liberator rather than a murderer.

Costuming reinforced characterization. Before Agamemnon's death, Clytemnestra had been wearing a business suit in muted grey; when she emerged on the palace roof, she had changed into an elegant evening gown in deep burgundy. In her encounter with Orestes her bare shoulders gave her a softer and more vulnerable appearance.

The set design by Joe Stanley was a tour de force. The darkly brooding presence of the palace façade with its monumental double gates at stage right contrasted with the precariously constructed raised platform at stage center, its steps comprising an assemblage of upturned wooden crates, bricks, barrels and other materials suggestive of a warehouse or military encampment. Their effect was to de-monumentalize, to convey fragility and decay. A higher balcony at stage right was used by the Pythia, Athena, and Apollo as a platform from which to deliver set pieces.

Modern audiences are not as practiced as their ancient counterparts in engaging their mind's eye to bring imagery to life. The production made frequent and effective use of projected images—for example, to instantiate the snake in Clytemnestra's dream and Clytemnestra's ghost in the *Eumenides*. Perhaps the most striking sequence was a video representation of blood spreading and cascading down a staircase. The set incorporated scrim onto which images were projected, its textured and undulating surface adding an ethereal and eerie quality to them. The political graffiti that covered the palace walls in the opening scene of the *Libation Bearers* created an edgy juxtaposition of new and old, and a timely reminder that political supremacy is always susceptible to reversal.

My colleague Yurie Hong and I brought a group of seven students to the first night of the show; most of them had just acted in their own performances of Greek drama. The elation that they exuded at seeing Greek tragedy come alive and the flurry of energetic discussion that the performance provoked are testimony that it had succeeded in offering audience members "some juicy food for thought," to quote a line from the program.

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## notes

<sup>1</sup> Goldhill, Simon. 2007. *How to stage Greek tragedy today*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>2</sup> Sommerstein, Alan H. 2008. *Aeschylus II, Oresteia: Agamemnon, Libation-bearers, Eumenides*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Hughes, Ted. 1999. *Aeschylus: The Oresteia*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

<sup>4</sup> Taplin, Oliver. 1978. *Greek Tragedy in Action*. London: Methuen. For entrances and exits in the *Oresteia*, see pp. 31–40.



## Euripides' *Bacchae* at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse

Directed by Antonio Calenda  
 Version by Giorgio Ieranò  
 May 11 to June 30, 2012  
 XLVIII Ciclo di Spettacoli Classici  
 Teatro Greco di Siracusa  
 Syracuse, Italy

### Review by Ralph Covino

*University of Tennessee at Chattanooga*

### and John Serrati

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The Greek theatre at Syracuse was designed by the architect Damokopos and constructed during the reign of the tyrant Hieron I (478–467 BC). It was dedicated to Zeus, the patron deity of the later Hieron II, and its reconstruction under that ruler is perhaps the greatest monument to the prosperity of third-century BC Syracuse.<sup>1</sup> As a venue, it was the main stage for the famous comedies of Epicharmos, who lived and wrote at Syracuse in the mid-fifth century. Aeschylus' *Persians*, the oldest surviving ancient play, premiered there in 472 BC

before going on to win the Great Dionysia at Athens. The site came to be the home of one of the most vibrant dramatic cultures in the ancient Greek world, and this legacy persists in the modern era.

Mauceri, who wrote the first history of the city in 1924, described the performance of classical drama in the theatre as being 'occasional' during his time.<sup>2</sup> Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* had been performed there in 1914, his *Libation Bearers* in 1921, and Euripides' *Bacchae* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in 1922. Performances were sporadic until 1948, at which point they became a fixture of even numbered years until 2000, when annual performances began. The 48th season of classical performances at the Theatre of Hieron in Syracuse deployed three ancient plays, Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Euripides' *Bacchae*, and Aristophanes' *Birds*.

The *Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico's* productions are no strangers to readers of *Didaskalia*. Caterina Barone reviewed the 33rd season of plays (Volume 1, Number 3:

<http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/8/15/>), the 43rd (Volume 7, Number 1:

<http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/vol7no1/barone.html>), the 45th (Volume 8, Number 2:

<http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/8/2/>), and the 47th (Volume 8, Number 15:



Figure 1 (Photo: Ralph Corvino)



Figure 2 (Photo: Ralph Corvino)



Figure 3

<http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/8/15/>), as well as the *Medea* of 1996 (Volume 4, Number 1: <http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/vol4no1/barone.html>),<sup>3</sup> while Thomas Pallen reviewed the 1994 season (Volume 2, Number 2: <http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/vol2no2/pallen.html>). Outside of this journal, Di Martino (1993) and Nicosia (2009) have offered directors' perspectives on staging ancient drama in Hieron's theatre. Given this record of attention to the festival, we were especially pleased that a historical and archaeological tour of Sicily with students brought us to Syracuse during this season's performances.

Carved out of the living rock of the Neapolis district, the site in its current form is the achievement of Hieron II (271-215 BC) and of a subsequent major reconstruction effort which took place sometime between 238 and 215 BC. This new theatre was grandiose in scale and, at 138 m. in diameter, was one of the largest in the ancient Mediterranean world, displaying Hieron's benevolence as a Hellenistic monarch. The *cavea* itself is D-shaped, a design still unusual but growing in popularity in the third century BC. Today some forty-four rows are extant, though the ancient structure also featured an extended, artificial *cavea* which was built up beyond the seats carved into the hill itself. This brought the number of rows in the ancient theatre to sixty-seven, allowing for a capacity of no less than fifteen thousand, and perhaps as many as twenty.

Modern productions, as can be seen in the images of the theatre taken on the morning of the performance (figure 1 and figure 2), are more intimate affairs. The erection of wooden benches over the ancient hewn-stone seating has substantially reduced the number of rows and hence the overall capacity. Nevertheless—and as none of the previous reviews has noted—the plays retain a true sense of occasion. Despite the heat of the Sicilian summer, we were pleased to discover that they were selling out nightly. On our arrival nearly an hour before the announced starting time, Hieron's theatre was nearly full to its current capacity.

For the vast majority of Syracusans in the third century BC, a visit to the theatre would have represented their only chance of viewing Hieron II in the flesh; one can imagine that in the hour or so leading up to the performance, the king was bombarded with personal petitions from people who otherwise had no access to him. That he regularly attended the theatre is attested by a series of inscriptions. In the middle of the rock-cut wall behind the first *diazoma* are the words 'Zeus *Olympios*' in the genitive, implying that the theatre belonged to Zeus. The seats above probably belonged



Figure 4 (Photo: Ralph Covino)



Figure 5 (Photo: Irene Ferro)



Figure 6: Maurizio Donadoni as Dionysos (Photo: Jessica Ackerman)



Figure 7 (Photo: Jessica Ackerman)

either to the priest of Zeus or, more likely, to Hieron himself. Along the same wall are inscribed the names of three members of the king's family: his wife Philistis, his son Gelon, and his daughter-in-law Nereis.<sup>4</sup> As it would have been in the ancient world, the modern audience was composed of mostly local Syracusans from all social strata, from upper-class regular 'theatre-goers' to *hoi polloi* who were taking in a night at the theatre as a form of mainstream entertainment. Our students thus experienced the Greek theatre for what it truly was: a form of social equalization, a chance for everyday people to interact with the culture of the ruling elite and, if they were lucky, with the ruling elite themselves.

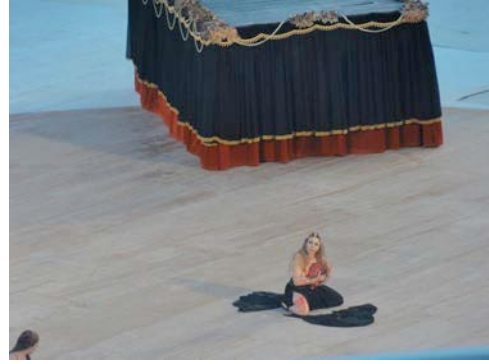


Figure 8: Daniela Giovanetti as Agave  
(Photo: Jessica Ackerman)

People had brought food and drink along with them to the theatre and there was quite a convivial atmosphere; this, of course, stands in stark contrast to the usual performance of an ancient drama in a modern university theatre—nearly always far too solemn and respectable. As a result, we believe that the students with us were able to get a much better sense of the theatre's true function as an organ of the state and, more important, of socialization and community-building. Further, a friendly laundress had, on the day of the show, told us that she had already seen the play and that it was something of a treat—not exactly what one would expect to hear about the *Bacchae* at the best of times. From what we could gather, the city was talking about the performances; the place had clearly acquired the requisite 'buzz' which, to our minds, was an excellent example for our students of the ability of performance to embed itself in a civic consciousness.

During Roman times the theatre underwent renovations at various periods. Augustus is likely to have been responsible for the earliest of these. Strabo records that he significantly restored and rebuilt large parts of Syracuse after the civil wars of the first century BC (6.2.4). There was then a major remodeling of the *scaena* in the late first or early second century AD, and another around one hundred years later. The scant and often confusing and controversial remains of the *scaena* which can be seen today are the products of these reconstructive efforts.<sup>5</sup> Also in the Imperial period, the theatre came to be outfitted to host gladiatorial shows, and in late Roman times drainage channels and a reservoir were put in place to allow the *orchestra* to be flooded for *naumachia*-style games.<sup>6</sup>

As the population of Syracuse steadily shrank during the middle ages and became concentrated on the Ortygia and in the lower Achradina district, over a kilometer and a half away, the theatre unsurprisingly fell into disuse. The upper *cavea* was cannibalized for fortification stone by the Spanish in the first half of the sixteenth century. Whatever was left of the *scaena* is likely to have fallen down in the earthquakes that hit Syracuse in 1542 and 1693; the latter was of sufficient magnitude to destroy significant parts of the city. The theatre was partially filled with rubble and earth when amateur archaeologists arrived at the site in the late eighteenth century. Excavations unearthed the theatre over the course of decades, and by the late nineteenth century it is probable that some ancient drama was taking place at the site. This may be inferred from a c. 1885 albumen print showing two men in classical dress standing in the *cavea*, one of whom is playing a double flute (figure 3).

The 1885 print as well as surviving photographs of the 1922 and 1950 performances of the *Bacchae* in the theatre provided in the *Istituto's* lavish glossy guide to this year's cycle (a must-purchase souvenir, as are the translation of Euripides' text by Giorgio Ieranò being employed this year and the seat cushions, noted in this publication by Patten in 1994) show that modern performances in the theatre initially retained a



sense of simplicity, at least in terms of costume and set, though the photographs also demonstrate how designers have long augmented the setting of Hieron's theatre so as to meet the demands of their plays. The most recent performance was no exception.

On the left of the photograph in figure 4 is the large set of risers on scaffolding which would eventually serve as the Bacchantes' mountain. Outfitted with rollers, it revolved over the course of the play and possessed the capacity to split into two to allow entry and egress for performers and props. The small circular stage visible at the top center was not utilized during this performance, playing a more prominent role in the previous evening's performance of *The Birds*. The walkway behind it, however, was employed, as Pentheus ascended the stairway into the *cavea*, passing the first *diazoma* and the aforementioned inscription bearing the name of Zeus, and then across what would have been the second *diazoma*—now the area above the seating—so as to represent his climbing the mountain. Since he did not climb the mountain directly, the risers represented a space removed from the action taking place on the wooden stage below. Visually, then, it became that transgressive, female-only 'other' space in which normal societal *nomoi* were not applicable.

The artificial mountain, however, came across as being too artificial, even if it did wonderfully offset the costumes of the Bacchantes (see figure 5). It did rather seem to break from the harmony with the natural scenery which is afforded by the theatre's setting, and the lightly-colored wood did not blend at all with the tree line immediately beyond. In the end, it was a curious choice; indeed, with its fancy rotations and transformations, the risers became a bit of a distraction.

The same could be said for the moving platform base which housed Dionysos and, at various points underneath, his Bacchantes and anyone requiring a costume change (figure 6). Rising from the platform's interior, Dionysos began the play formless and undulating. Covered by a black sheet, Maurizio Donadoni, the actor playing the god, actually stood facing away from the audience but with the theatre mask on the back of his head, giving his movements a staccato and ethereal feel. Atop the platform, he transformed himself through the addition of horns at various points, but spent most of the production in the crisp white suit seen in the photograph—an outfit which stood in marked contrast to, say, those of Pentheus, Tiresias, and Kadmos. Pentheus wore a purple cloak, white shift, and standard-issue approximation of a Greco-Roman breastplate; rough grey cloaks were the order of the day for the other two. Our students posited that Dionysos' apparel seemed other-worldly by comparison and, indeed, futuristic, bearing a similarity to the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* character Q, who also, curiously, sits atop a similarly colored moving tribunal in several prominent episodes of that serial. Like Dionysos with his maniacal laughter in this version of the *Bacchae*, Q also enjoys a bit of fun at the expense of mere mortals. Whether deliberate or not, the parallel was an interesting one to ponder in the light of recent discussions about classical receptions in science fiction;<sup>7</sup> perhaps the traffic between the ancient world and SF is not as one way as we tend to think.

The Bacchantes themselves were the undoubted stars of the show in terms of their appearance—and appear was more or less all that they did, as the chorus' lines were delivered by an individual or via the loudspeaker, save for the communal singing and chanting. Their costumes began as black cloaks covering every part of their bodies, reflective, perhaps, of current scholarly opinion about such things, but more probably in an attempt to evoke the burqa, something viewed as Eastern and exotic by Western audiences, as Dionysos and his Bacchantes themselves are supposed to have been viewed by the ancient Greeks.<sup>8</sup> As the play progresses, pieces of their outfits are gradually shed so as to reveal beige body suits; these are all which remained when their full-on orgiastic revels were achieved, as depicted in figure 7. It must be said that the dancers were superb, as was the music, which, despite being a cross between the scores of *Zorba the Greek* and *Gladiator* with a few more drums, managed to effectively accompany the

dancers' descent into frenzy. Later they wore black gowns lined with scarlet, which worked perfectly to highlight their dancing and revelry, both onstage and on the mountain, with the blood red of the interior a haunting sign of the danger to come.

The Italian translation by Giorgio Ieranò was solid and did not depart in any fantastic way from the original; the actors, for the most part, stuck to the script, though there were more than a few occasions where either through fault or design they truncated some of the longer speeches and devolved into paraphrase. None of this, of course, was noticeable to those without the translation in front of them. The slips and elisions did nothing to detract from the story or its plot. But the sound effects, such as the howling winds, were a curious addition rather than a support to the actors, always feeling forced and out of place.

In the performance which we saw, there were few things, overall, with which to quibble. It might be said that Daniela Giovanetti's portrayal of Agave's grief on her discovery that she had murdered her own son lacked believability (figure 8). The howl and heart-wrenching agony that one would expect to have echoed throughout the ancient theatre and beyond never really rang out; she moved from shock to sobbing and tears entirely too quickly, bypassing any sense of self-directed anger and culpability for her actions as she retreated with Pentheus' mangled body through the gap in the mountain.

While watching the performance, we found it easy to understand the reasoning behind the location of the great theatre, as the surrounding areas are richly steeped in tradition, history, and symbolism. Behind the audience, now as in classical times, stand reminders of the most distant past as well as of the other great influence, along with culture, that bound the ancient *poleis* together as communities: religion. The Belvedere terrace immediately to the north of the theatre featured multiple temples, grottos for mystery rites, and an L-shaped *stoa* that housed the oldest tombs in the vicinity, some going back as far as the twelfth century BC, and others belonging to some of Syracuse's previous tyrants, venerated in hero cults.<sup>9</sup> In the other direction, clearly visible, is the sea, which not only provided and continues to provide many Syracusans with their livelihood, but is also means by which their ancestors, Greek colonists from Corinth, first arrived.

Specifically, however, as we reminded our students, the ancient audience would have been staring directly at the Great Harbour, the *raison d'être* for the city's location. This not only served as Syracuse's economic lifeblood and link to the outside world, but was also the site of her greatest military victory, over the Athenian fleet in 413. The prisoners from this war, the mighty Athenian sailors, were placed in the limestone quarries which lie immediately east of the theatre—unless, of course, they could recite Euripides, in which case they were freed, for such was the power of the theatre during that era. Syracusan economic and military force were in plain sight of those watching any performance in the theatre of Hieron. The venue acted as a repository of institutional memory for the local populace, much as the theatre itself today acts as a symbol of the city's glorious past as well as its cultural present for Syracuse's modern citizens.

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#### notes

<sup>1</sup> Bernabò Brea 1967; Lehmler 2005, 132–133; Serrati 2008, 86; cf. Palacco and Anti, 1981; Palacco *et al.* 1990; Wilson 1990, 60–63. The original theatre was probably dedicated to Demeter and Kore (cf. Kowalzig 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Mauceri 1924, 60.

<sup>3</sup> Editor's Note: Barone's review of the 48th season appears in this volume, Number 9

(<http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/9/9/>).

<sup>4</sup> Lehmler 2005, 143; Serrati 2008, 85–6; on the priest of Zeus cf. D.S. 16.70.6.

<sup>5</sup> Bernabò Brea 1967, 136, 142; Coarelli and Torelli 1997, 247–253; Foertsch 1987; Palacco and Anti 1981, 20, 204; Rizzo 1923, 139, 153–157.

<sup>6</sup> Palacco and Anti 1981, 167–78; 213–4. *Contra Wilson* 1980, 2221–5, who rejects the notion that the theatre was ever used for gladiatorial combat.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Rogers and Stevens 2012.

<sup>8</sup> On women's dress, see Llewellyn-Jones 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Serrati 2008, 88–9; Voza 1984–1985, 675.

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## 48th Season of Classical Plays at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse: Aeschylus's *Prometheus*, Euripides' *Bacchae*, and Aristophanes' *The Birds*

May 11 to June 30, 2012  
 XLVIII Ciclo di Spettacoli Classici  
 Teatro Greco di Siracusa  
 Syracuse, Italy

**Reviewed by Caterina Barone**  
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The conceptual core of the XLVIII edition of classical plays at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse (May 11th – June 30th 2012) is the theme of power, both human and divine, and the closely related motif of the relationship between man and god.

The works being staged are Aeschylus's *Prometheus*, Euripides' *Bacchae*, and Aristophanes' *The Birds*, directed by Claudio Longhi, Antonio Calenda, and Roberta Torre, respectively. These are three "uncomfortable" texts, teeming with difficulties at the levels of content and dramaturgy, and at the same time dense with stirring features, further highlighted by the compact nature of the cycle.

*Prometheus* is a static tragedy: its peculiarity lies in the forced immobility of the protagonist, chained to a rock by tyrannical decree of Zeus. Staging this play is a challenge for both directors and actors, and the challenge is increased exponentially by the massive nature of the venue in Syracuse. During the latest editions, the INDA has chosen a single set design for all plays on the bill at the Greek Theatre; this year the geometric creativity of Rem Koolhaas (Studio Oma) has produced an artistic solution of spectacular efficacy, providing the Aeschylean tragedy in particular with a fundamental architectural support. The wooden stage, touching the area for the orchestra, stands as a dais rotating on a circular base and consisting of large steps. The stand is divided into two opening-and-closing halves, and reveals to the audience the mighty structure of scaffolding pipes that supports it. As the show begins, the mobile metal plate emerges from the bowels of this platform, bearing the bound Titan who incurred the wrath of Zeus by bestowing fire upon men. Thus director Claudio Longhi opens the play with a surprising idea: he bestows mobility on the figure of Prometheus by having assistants move the structure within the area of the orchestra. It is but a deceptive mobility, however, as the changes in the position of the protagonist mark only a shift in the visual perspective of spectators, and not real movement of the immobilized Titan. It is as if the audience could move around the cliff, and by standing behind the protagonist see things and people from his point of view, achieving an effect of participating identification. This effect is further amplified by the conjunction



*Massimo Popolizio as Prometheus in Aeschylus's Prometheus, Greek Theatre, Syracuse, 2012.*



*Maurizio Donadoni as Dionysus and Massimo Nicolini as Pentheus in Euripides' Bacchae, Greek Theatre, Syracuse, 2012.*

of stage and cavea, united by a ring-like catwalk going from the central aisle in the terrace (*diazoma*) to the stairway structure: a feature which allows the directors of each of the plays to create meaningful scenic solutions.

In *Prometheus*, the circular nature of the Syracusan venue evokes, as stressed by the director, the model of the anatomical theatre, which exalts a visual dimension focused on the display of the mangled body of the Titan, who is neither able nor willing to hide, but employs his own torment to denounce divine oppression. This effect extends to the whole community the value of Prometheus's heroic attitude against the tyranny of Zeus over mortals and immortals, as well as the Titan's sarcastic contempt for all those who choose to serve the mighty: a message with a strong political aspect, stressed by Guido Paduano's insightful translation, and rendered powerfully by actor Massimo Popolizio.



*The chorus of Aristophanes' The Birds, Greek Theatre, Syracuse, 2012.*

The chorus of the Oceanids supports the Titan: they are compassionate and empathic spectators of his sufferings. Their sinuous movements and the shiny clothes of green and blue scales covering their bodies evoke the eternal flow of the seas, the very origin of the nymphs, mysterious hybrid creatures who inhabit two different dimensions. Their father Oceanus is similarly clad, but profoundly different in his deference to the king of the gods and in suggesting the way of compromise to Prometheus. But the Titan remains inflexible, disdainfully rejecting Oceanus's slimy attempts at mediation.

The episode of Io further consolidates the portrayal of a merciless Zeus who despises mankind. The young maid is capriciously loved by the king of the gods and then turned into a cow by a jealous Hera. Io is an icon for the suffering of mankind at the capricious hands of the gods. The successful portrayal of her character in this production begins with transformations in her outward appearance, which were pitiful without ever becoming ridiculous: the bovine snout and hooves, the horns rending her skin. The actress (Gaia Aprea) wears very high-heeled shoes of a peculiar shape, which give her an unsteady and convulsively limping gait. Io falls and stands up again distressfully; she writhes in the spasms of her torment; she falls prey to madness and delirium. Everything in her character transmits a feeling of suffering and despair to the point of paroxysm.

Andrea Piermartire's live music contributes meaningfully to the production, giving the mythical tale a dynamic and insistent rhythm, as does the performance of the chorus, which is made up (as in the *Bacchae*) of dancers from the Martha Graham Dance Company and students of Syracuse's Accademia d'arte del Dramma antico. The geometry and figurative elegance of choreography inspired by the works of Martha Graham, under the artistic direction of Janet Eilber, exalts the visual dimension of *Prometheus* and appropriately highlights the role of the Oceanids, who as the tragedy unfolds evolve from mild consolers of the Titan's suffering into cognisant and active witnesses of his tenacious resistance, to the point of ultimately succumbing with the Titan in the final earthquake unleashed by Zeus.

No less important is the role played by the choreutae in Antonio Calenda's *Bacchae*. They are clad in long black dresses that surprisingly reveal purple-red insides and cover bodies wrapped in flesh-coloured leotards. The women combine in their figures the mournful epilogue of Dionysus's epiphany with the bloody component of the *sparagmós*, the dismemberment of the sacrificial victim. Their half-naked bodies emanate an aggressive and bestial femininity: faces, hair, feet, arms, everything seems to be possessed of

a primitive and sensual force, the force intrinsic in the close encounter between Pentheus and the sacred Dionysian rites he has accused of being an occasion for women to indulge in perverse and unrestrained behaviour. The dances of the choreutae in the area of the orchestra, and their placement on the large steps of the stage, create dynamic pictorial effects of infectious emotional power. The movements of the Bacchae are accompanied by Germano Mazzocchetti's music (which harmonises archaic echoes with suggestions from the 1900s as it supports the multifarious and shifting language of the tragedy, aptly rendered in Giorgio Ieranò's translation), and they constitute a contrasting counterpoint to the contained mobility of Dionysus. The god enters the stage standing erect on a gloomy catafalque; clad in a black cloak, he speaks with his back to the audience and a white mask on the back of his head. This directorial device makes his movements look disarticulate and creates a peculiar effect of estrangement; it is a perfect image to set the tone for the actions of the elusive hybrid god with a thousand faces.

From high above on the carriage, Dionysus governs the unfolding of the events which will lead to the tragic death of Pentheus (rather uncertainly acted by Massimo Nicolini), the ruler hostile to the new cult and ultimately killed by the unwitting fury of his mother Agave (played by a fierce Daniela Giovanetti). Maurizio Donadoni embodies with his physique a stately and vigorous god, a merciless deity who conceals his violence behind a scoffing and mocking demeanour, at times resembling more an enchanting wizard, a mystifying charlatan skilled in the use of the tools of his trade: tools picked from that carriage of Thespis of sorts on which he is enthroned. From this vehicle the women will take the womanly clothes in which the ill-fated Pentheus is dressed as he is brought to the sacrifice. From the very same place the god himself will retrieve the mask and the ample garment which enfolds his divine nature in mystery. The show is hence rendered on the edge of meta-theatre: the sophisticated direction chosen for Dionysus spans various registers, from the tragic to the comic—although at times the characterisation of the god chosen by Calenda is unbalanced and shifted by the actor's interpretation towards a behaviour befitting a strolling player-illusionist, subtracting subtlety from the figure of the god and thereby reducing the ambiguous and explosive extent of his punitive action.

A triumph of fantasy and unbridled creativity marks Roberta Torre's colourful and anti-classic rendition of *The Birds*. Torre's background is that of a film director, and she has exploited to the maximum the potential of the stage sets and of the Syracusan context by placing the choreutes in every available area: from the wooden structure at the back of the orchestra—where the only scene elements are stylized mobile red trees—to the catwalk and the cavea itself. The actors are thus brought to interact with the audience. The filmy and fluffy costumes are striking: with their surreal eighteenth-century fashion, complete with multicoloured wigs, they allude to the "carnavalesque" aspects of the texts, as does the "over-the-top" tone characterising the whole show, bordering at times on what would befit a curtain raiser. The character of Hoopoe, for instance, wearing an orange leotard with frills of all kinds and dark sunglasses, moves and expresses himself in a bizarre manner. The overall effect, however, is pleasant and theatrically effective.

The alternation between recited parts and sung arias is compelling, almost creating an *opera buffa* of sorts as it follows the furious rhythm set by the director. Different styles and kinds of music follow one another and overlap, shaping a soundtrack (an original creation by Enrico Melozzi) which combines live singing with recorded birdsong and immerses the audience in an invisible aviary of sorts, with a cinematographic surround effect. At the same time, the whirling parade of suspicious and opportunistic characters in the comedy assumes grotesque and disquieting overtones as it portrays a world without a future. The utopia of *The Birds*—the escape of the protagonists Pisthetaerus and Euelpides towards an ideal city envisioned among the clouds, free from an abject, avid, and corrupt society, where men can finally achieve emancipation from the egoistical rule of the gods—never becomes a concrete reality in Aristophanes's play, despite the seemingly happy ending.

The original text is already marked by bitter disillusion, and Roberta Torre fittingly stresses this aspect: the seeming bonhomie of Pisthetaerus (effectively played by Mauro Avogadro, more at ease here than in the role of Oceanus in *Prometheus*), punctuated by clothes reminiscent of the colourful canonical costume of a clown, conceals a tyrannical and cruel disposition. Having got rid of his friend-associate Euelpides (an amiable Sergio Mancinelli, comically wearing a skirt similar to a bird's cage, complete with a perching yellow parrot), whom he sent away to build the walls of the new city ("Castellinaria degli Allocchi"<sup>1</sup> in Alessandro Grilli's brilliant translation), Pisthetaerus also rids himself of the dissidents among his bird allies, sentencing them to death and having them well cooked for his wedding banquet.

Among references to characters from movies, cartoons, and the Italian comedy TV show *Zelig*, as well as allusions to contemporary news items and various pleasantries, how much is authentically Aristophanean in this production? Perhaps not as much as strict philologists would like, but surely enough to convey the substance of the sharp and pitiless political message of the Athenian comedigrapher.

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**note**

<sup>1</sup> *Castellinaria* is reminiscent of several common Italian toponyms beginning with the prefix *castell-*. "Castelli-in-aria" is the Italian idiom corresponding to "castles in the air" in English. *Allocco*, the Italian word for the tawny owl (plural: *allocchi*), is also the idiomatic term for "dunce, easily fooled person".

# Up Close and Personal: Encountering Ancient Drama through Performance

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## Abstract

The evidence suggests that ancient actors felt a strong emotional response to the plays they performed and drew close connections between the characters they played and their own lives. And yet today's students can often find these plays inaccessible. This paper presents a case for integrating performance into the classics curriculum, highlighting the benefits this brings to students. It features two student-directed performances from the 2010 biennial Festival of Dionysus at Gustavus Adolphus College (in Minnesota, U.S.A.) and describes the conceptual and creative thinking that went into staging these adaptations of Greek tragedy and comedy.



*Video 1: House of Atreus. Allie Buchnis as Electra, Alex Legeros as Agamemnon, Sarah Graver as Clytemnestra, Bryan Pelach as Orestes.*

video: Gustavus Adolphus College  
[youtube.com/watch?v=Hs8M-vaQ0Hc](https://youtube.com/watch?v=Hs8M-vaQ0Hc)

## Introduction

Drama is a genre made for performance. And yet when classicists teach ancient drama, we often ask our students to go home and read the play, then come to class ready to discuss it. Why is this? Certainly there are often logistical difficulties that discourage a performance-based approach to teaching drama: the assigned classroom does not lend itself to movement; the class size is too large to involve everyone in acting. Then there are factors such as time and effort, as well as concerns about training: as classicists we are all well qualified to analyze texts, but many of us may feel less able to teach using performance. We may also be skeptical of our students' willingness—and ability—to act.

I shared many of these concerns when I first started teaching drama through performance in a course on Greek and Roman theatre at Gustavus Adolphus College, a liberal arts college on the banks of the Minnesota River. I had to look hard to find a suitable classroom. Then there was the problem of Midwestern reserve: how would I get shy Minnesotans to take to the idea of performing in public? After all, this is a general-education course in which most of the students have no background in classics or prior acting experience.



*Video 2: Partly Cloudy. Nick Prince as Stella (aka Strepsiades), Kait Peterson as Phyllis (aka Pheidippides), Shannon Holland as Gertrude (aka Socrates' pupil), Dan Rohlf as Professor William K. Freiert (aka Socrates).*

video: Gustavus Adolphus College  
[youtube.com/watch?v=Y07EaFyysl4](https://youtube.com/watch?v=Y07EaFyysl4)



*Figure 1: Allie Buchnis as Electra and Bryan Pelach as Orestes*

In practice, these misgivings have proved less valid than I anticipated. It is true that teaching through



performance takes more time, organizational effort, and nervous energy than a straight literature course or a lecture course in which exposure to performance comes only from watching it on film. But the rewards richly repay the additional investment of time and effort. By and large, students end up engaging with the course material on a far deeper level than if they were simply reading the plays in their rooms. The process of arriving at a shared vision for a performance, with all the incumbent directorial decisions, not only hones verbal-reasoning and consensus-building skills that will be valuable in their professional lives, but also ensures that students end up spending many hours outside class actually talking about what they are studying. Through the process of rehearsal, students develop a strong connection to the play that they perform—a connection not only on the cognitive level but also on the affective level. Assessment of student learning (through oral examinations at the end of semester as well as students' own evaluations of this course component—see Appendix) suggests that two concomitant learning outcomes are achieved: not only do students come to understand their chosen play far better through performance, but in some cases at least, they also learn to feel the play. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> the evidence suggests that performance can develop the capacity for empathy—as I believe it did in ancient Athens.



*Figure 2: Shannon Holland as Gertrude and Nick Prince as Stella*

The Theatre of Greece and Rome course is taught in the spring semester every other year. For the first two thirds of the course (while snow blankets the prairie) the course is primarily classroom based. We study a dozen or so plays, investigate Greek and Roman theatre and its stagecraft, and workshop different aspects of performance. Then, in the last month or so, we switch gears and begin rehearsing in earnest for the grand finale, the Festival of Dionysus, usually held on Honors Day when many family members come to campus. Weather permitting, it is held outdoors, as was the springtime festival of the Great Dionysia at Athens. The class splits into six or seven groups, each group of three or four students choosing a different play to perform. Performances last 12–15 minutes, so groups adapt one scene or more to create a self-standing piece. Students make all the interpretative decisions; they serve as director, producer, and actor rolled into one; they select costumes; they help publicize the event (social-networking media are used to great effect); they also critique other groups in rehearsal. As instructor I play a supporting role, providing feedback at various stages of the process.<sup>2</sup> A panel of faculty judges adjudicates at the performance and later provides written feedback. The festival has gained considerable local recognition and thus serves as an outreach event, introducing the campus and broader community to classics.

Responses to a questionnaire administered in the first week indicate that many of the students come into the class with a high degree of apprehension about the public performance. The course is designed to mitigate their anxiety. Over the semester, it incorporates the skill building and contextual understanding necessary to equip students to make informed choices as directors and actors and allow them to understand an art form that can seem very alien. We study what we can learn from ancient literary and visual sources about ancient performance contexts; we explore the afterlife of ancient drama in modern performance and study modern adaptations of these plays. We workshop a variety of aspects of ancient drama, from masked acting to choral song.<sup>3</sup> In-class performances built into the weekly class schedule allow students to develop skills and confidence in front of a supportive audience.

This paper discusses two of the seven performances at the fifth biennial Festival of Dionysus held on Saturday, May 8, 2010. Video of the performances posted on YouTube (with the actors' permission, of



course!) offers readers the opportunity to see what is being described, even if a filmed record cannot capture the immediacy and context of a live performance. The paper highlights some of the ways in which *House of Atreus* and *Partly Cloudy* engaged with important elements of Athenian tragedy and Old Comedy respectively, and suggests that performance can not only enhance our appreciation but also inform our understanding of ancient drama.<sup>4</sup>

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## House of Atreus

*House of Atreus* is a 15-minute performance (Video 1) that combines scenes from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Sophocles' *Electra*. This approach allowed its student-directors to explore new possibilities. Among the key elements of their conceptualization was a focus on structural and visual parallels between scenes: Agamemnon's return is mirrored by that of Orestes; Clytemnestra's trickery precedes and justifies Orestes' use of the same; Electra's exclusion from the house and marginal position in the opening scene (where she is hanging laundry) continues in the second scene (where she is tending her father's tomb). Meaning is conveyed through difference, too: Agamemnon approaches his ancestral house in triumphant procession down the central aisle through the throng of spectators; his disguised and exiled son makes his way home across the fields. The decision to perform scenes from Sophocles' *Electra* rather than from Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* gave its modern audience a more powerful female protagonist whose heart-wrenching grief at the false news of Orestes' death could more readily convey the emotional force of Greek tragedy.

The group set its play in the period of the American Civil War. This choice of context would be likely to resonate with audience members, since it evokes an iconic and often mythologized chapter of their shared history. Period costuming reinforced the Civil War setting. So did the mandolin, whose plaintive refrain opened and closed the performance and served as a bridge between the two scenes.<sup>5</sup> But perhaps the most arresting dramaturgical element was the settler's cabin that the group chose as the backdrop for its performance. Selecting a performance space that serves the interpretive designs of the production is one of the most crucial decisions that each group makes. The Linnaeus Arboretum, with its 125 acres of varied landscape, offers endless possibilities. The more obvious choice for a palace backdrop is the Interpretive Center, an imposing building with a columnar porch and paved courtyard; this is where many previous performances have played out. Of the more than thirty performances in the Festival of Dionysus to date, no other has used the Borgeson Cabin as its setting.

The Borgeson Cabin is a pioneer home that dates back to 1866; it was moved to its present site in 1986, and now serves as a strong visual reminder of Gustavus Adolphus College's Swedish heritage and immigrant roots. It miraculously survived the 1998 tornado that leveled most of the surrounding trees. Within our campus it stands as a *monumentum* through which the viewer can enter into dialogue with the mythical past.<sup>6</sup> On a raw and overcast spring day, it lent a powerful presence to the performance. The lineaments of its simple wooden facade, a central door framed by a pair of double-hung windows, offered a stripped-down vocabulary that readily articulated the symbolism of the house and the significance of entrances and exits.<sup>7</sup> The perimeter fence of rough-hewn logs effectively demarcated the viewing space (*theatron*) from the mythical space (*orchestra*) in which the story unfolds.

Thus the physical setting served as a narrative vehicle. Blocking added further layers of meaning. The group chose to draw primarily on the formal and symbolic register of acting characteristic of Greek tragedy rather than on modern naturalistic modes. Movement and posture were largely stylized and used to convey patterns of meaning. Agamemnon and Clytemnestra maintain their distance from each other throughout, the gulf separating the estranged spouses all the more apparent after the tender embrace between father and daughter with which the play opens. The decision to have Clytemnestra read her

longer speeches as if from her diary adds to the distancing effect.<sup>8</sup> Here, for example, is a portion of the first entry that we hear Clytemnestra reading aloud:

I feel no shame in telling you of my love for the man, shyness dies when one gets older. When a woman sits at home, parted from her husband, the loneliness is terrible. . . . These rumors ate away at me, to the point that I had to be released from the noose of suicide more than once. I once cried rivers of tears, but I can't anymore—I have no more tears . . .

Translation by Peter Meineck (adapted)<sup>9</sup>

Modern audiences often find the long set speeches of tragedy alienating, and this speech of Clytemnestra (Ag. 855-913) can seem particularly foreign. Why is it addressed to the chorus of Argive elders (855) when her long-absent husband now stands before her? The journal offers a genre whose expectations are understood by a modern audience. It is at once a literary genre that fits the formal register of tragic set speeches while also serving as a repository for personal thoughts and feelings. Reading aloud as if from a journal entry serves as an effective link between the unfolding present and the distant past that captures the retrospective interests of this speech. And yet it also retains the speech's latent ambiguities. A scene in which a character reads from her diary can be construed as a moment of extreme privacy or as a public performance. For the audience it can be a deeply intimate experience or have a distancing effect. Did Clytemnestra really experience the emotions that she describes, or is she reading from a script?

Physical objects frequently carry symbolic meaning in Greek tragedy, serving as “miniature repositories of huge associations.”<sup>10</sup> In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, such significant stage props include the purple tapestries on which Agamemnon walks as he enters the palace. Colored by the expensive dye extracted from murex sea snails, the tapestries are a precious and finely woven fabric. In trampling on them, Agamemnon commits an act with implications of extravagance and impiety as well as injury to the laborious handiwork of the women of his household. In Sophocles' *Electra*, it is the urn that the disguised Orestes brings with him that serves as an important plot element and powerful visual focalizer. The urn purportedly contains the ashes of Orestes after he dies in a chariot race; both Electra and Clytemnestra take it as proof that the news of Orestes' death is in fact true. Clasp the urn in her hands, Electra utters a poignant funeral lament for her supposedly dead brother. Thus the empty urn functions as a false recognition token. Instead of bringing about recognition of a loved one, as recognition tokens usually do in tragedy, the urn prevents Electra from recognizing the “stranger” standing before her as her long-lost brother.

The emotional power of physical tokens such as the urn is not easily accessible nowadays. Largely unacquainted with formalistic theatrical traditions, we tend to view symbolism as cerebral—even emotionally detached—while naturalistic acting is seen as the accepted medium through which to convey authentic emotion. Getting students in the theatre class to the point where they can convey the emotive power of Greek tragedy in performance requires careful preparation. For example, in order to help students appreciate the emotional significance of theatrical tokens such as the urn, I have asked them to bring to class a physical object to which they have an emotional attachment: a family photo, perhaps, or something they were given by a parent when they went off to college. This object then becomes their urn when they workshop Electra's lament.

*House of Atreus* succeeded, in my estimation, in conveying the symbolism and emotional charge of both the tapestry and the urn. For the tapestry, the group substituted a patchwork quilt, a choice that helps convey the contours of this adaptation. The humble log cabin of a Civil War soldier has replaced the palace of a Mycenaean king. Purple-dyed fineries whose desecration offends the gods have no place in

this context nor resonance with a modern audience. A patchwork quilt does, however, communicate important aspects of the Aeschylean original. The fruit of loving labor, it is a cherished heirloom passed down from mother to daughter. Its trampling is a potent symbol of the violent discord within the house of Atreus. Similarly, in the scene from *Electra*, the urn is replaced by a flag, neatly folded and solemnly delivered to the surviving relative of the fallen soldier (figure 1). This substitution activates a modern context in which symbolism and ritual have a strong emotional charge. In such circumstances, the muted grief and stately movement of Electra are all the more poignant. The flag also retains a striking element of the symbolism of the urn: as a token of Orestes' death, it is specious:<sup>11</sup> it relies on emotion and rhetoric, not proof, to make its case.

Unlike most modern drama, with its elaborate stage scenery, props, and technological enhancement, Greek drama is a theatre of the imagination. Holding the Festival of Dionysus at Gustavus Adolphus College outdoors forces the players to keep the staging simple. With no lighting, sound effects, or scene changes with which to distract the viewer, students must rely on a well-thought-out conceptual framework and a strong delivery. It was interesting to note the audience response to the final scene of the play. In this most literal sequence of the performance, Orestes picks up the woodsman's axe lying by the door before entering the cabin; when he emerges to announce their mother's killing to Electra, he leaves a bloody handprint on the white door. One of the few "special effects" of the performance, this threatens to destabilize the play at its dénouement. Although it is always hard to read laughter at moments like this, we can perhaps appreciate why Greek tragedy generally avoided presenting acts of death on stage. Discomfort at the spectacle of death can easily manifest itself as awkward laughter.

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## Partly Cloudy

As its name suggests, *Partly Cloudy* (Video 2) is a reworking of Aristophanes' *Clouds*. An ambitious mother, Stella, drags her reluctant daughter, Phyllis, on a guided tour of the college; she is looking for "one of those liberal-arts educations that everybody is talking about" for her daughter. Gertrude, their student guide, brings them into the presence of the great Professor William K. Freiert who, like Socrates, is preoccupied with conceiving great thoughts. As in Aristophanes' play, the "great scheme" backfires, in this case leading not to the burning of the Thinkery but the sudden retirement of its guru. This surprise ending heightens the topicality of the play, performed on the occasion of Will Freiert's retirement after 38 years of teaching in the classics department.

Students in this performance group cited an in-class lecture by Professor Mary-Kay Gamel (University of California, Santa Cruz) as a strong formative influence. Her ideas on different ways of conceiving "authenticity" in performance allowed the group to think more expansively about the possibilities of adapting Greek drama. In particular, her positioning of what she terms "inductive authenticity," with its strong interest in audience response, offered the group a useful way of thinking about contingency as it applies to Old Comedy. As Gamel put it in a recently published paper,<sup>12</sup> "Modern productions and adaptations which may seem radically innovative, unfaithful, subversive, even parodic or satiric, but which provoke critical and emotional responses in their audiences, more closely resemble ancient performances in their effect."

*Partly Cloudy* is laced with the topical humor that is characteristic of Old Comedy. This new type of liberal-arts education is all the rage as a result of "having a liberal in the White House—and a community activist at that." Indeed, the play, performed in the contentious lead-up to President Obama's "shellacking" in the 2010 midterm elections, employs the tension between conservative and progressive views as a contemporary analogy for the dispute between old-style education and newfangled ideas

playing out in Athens in the 420s, an ideological clash that in both contexts was cast in moral terms. However, most of the topical references in *Partly Cloudy* are more localized, centered on the campus community rather than on the nation state. This points to a fundamental difference between the Athenian *polis* and modern society. We have no direct equivalent of the *polis*, a community that is at once local and at the same time can wage war and conduct diplomacy. Thus mapping Athenian topicality frequently involves selecting between a zoom and a wide-angle lens. Politics in the narrower sense of the term usually finds its frame of reference in the national arena. But the majority of the topical references in *Partly Cloudy*—and most of its funniest jokes—are more parochial. Indeed, much of their appeal lies in the fact that they depend on insider knowledge peculiar to a specific place and time.

In *Clouds*, Aristophanes uses the language of mystery cult to describe the divide between outsider and initiate. Strepsiades and his son Pheidippides are the clueless outsiders seeking access to the Thinkery and its mystifying pursuits, while at first Socrates' pupils keep them at arm's length. When in the opening scene of *Partly Cloudy* Stella, the eager mother of the prospective student, glimpses headlines in the college newspaper that read "President Ohle unveils plan for Gustie waterslide" and "Gustavus prepares for annual Case Day festivities," the threat of these secrets getting out requires the swift intervention of a well-timed rugby tackle, leaving Gertrude dazed and the college audience in stitches.

If the anecdote recorded in Aelian (*Varia Historia* 2.13) is to be credited, the topicality of Aristophanes' *Clouds* was all the more immediate because it involved a rare double act: the character of Socrates on stage was playing to an audience in which the real Socrates was present:

When Socrates was moving around on the stage and referred to frequently (and I should not be surprised if he was also recognisable among the figures on stage, for it is clear that the makers of the masks had portrayed him with an excellent likeness) the foreigners, who did not know the person being satirised, began to murmur and ask who this man Socrates was. When he heard that—he was in fact present, not as a result of luck or chance, but because he knew that he was the subject of the play, and he sat in a prominent position in the theatre—at any rate, in order to put an end to the foreigners' ignorance, he stood up and remained standing in full view throughout the play as the actors performed it. So great was Socrates' contempt for comedy and the Athenians.

Translation by Nigel Wilson<sup>13</sup>

That Socrates was in the audience at the original performance of *Clouds* at the 423 BC City Dionysia festival is not improbable—that day he also featured in Ameipsias' *Connus*, which beat Aristophanes' play to second place in the competition of comedies. The scant information that we have about *Connus* suggests that it followed broadly the same lines as Aristophanes' play in making the new breed of thinkers (*phrontistai*) the target of its humor. Aristophanes' *Clouds* does not insist on the physical presence of Socrates in the audience. (How could anyone plan on the barefoot philosopher making a scheduled appearance?) However, it does implicitly invite the viewer to compare the character of Socrates on stage with the well-known figure that is being parodied.<sup>14</sup> Is the caricature of the head-in-the-clouds and prickly academic anything like Socrates the Athenian?

*Partly Cloudy* offers a study in the range of dramatic possibilities that such comparison opens up. There is the metatheatrical mileage to be made from having Will Friert in the audience. Her curiosity piqued by Gertrude's constant references to the great Professor Friert, Stella exclaims "I am just so curious to know what this man looks like!" "Well, actually," Gertrude replies, "He looks kinda like *that* man over there." (Figure 2)

Stella is smitten by the man she espies in the audience (“He looks so distinguished!”); but before she can finish chatting him up, she is led over to the onstage incarnation of Will Freiert. His reaction could not be more abrupt: “Go to hell! Damn it, you have just made a newly found idea miscarry!” Will Freiert the character in the play comes across by turns as cranky, arrogant, explosive, and impatient; he describes himself as “classics guru and *deus ex machina*.” The play invites the obvious question: is the real Professor Freiert like this? Wherein does the humor lie?—in a caricature that, while hyperbolic, captures the essence of Will Freiert’s personality, setting off harmonic resonances in the minds of the viewers? Or does the humor lie in a portrayal of Will Freiert that is so at odds with the gentle and self-effacing man loved by all that the onstage representation becomes preposterously hilarious? Other possibilities present themselves too. Is the parody leveled not at Will Freiert as an individual but at a group with which he is associated, namely members of an intelligentsia who turn their back on reality (the kind of education that Phyllis is hoping for is “something more practical—like business”) and who pursue learning for its own sake (“the last great relevant irrelevant major”)? Or does the performance derive its thrill from the boldness with which its creators exercise free speaking (*parrhesia*), mocking authority figures—from faculty members to the college president—at a public event in which, like the City Dionysia, outsiders (alumni, parents, and friends of the college) are present and the community is trying to put on its best face?

Responses to the performance within the audience will have varied. Outsiders coming to the Festival of Dionysus at Gustavus may have been asking themselves the question that Aelian ascribes to *xenoi* in the 423 BC audience at Athens; not knowing the person being satirized, they may have been wondering: who is this man Freiert? Can it be that Gustavus faculty are really as self-absorbed and inaccessible as all that? Members of the community will have had varying degrees of privileged knowledge and perhaps varying assessments of the degree to which art is imitating life. Classics majors and alumni will have enjoyed jokes (e.g. “I was born on the day Odysseus sailed for Troy . . . I introduced Freud to Oedipus”) not only for their pithy humor but also for their homage to Will Freiert’s interests and idiosyncrasies (e.g., his pronunciation of Odysseus). The reality in this case is that the caricature of Will Freiert at once does and does not correspond to this great Mensch.

More than two dozen centuries late for the original performance of the *Clouds*, we must resign ourselves to the fact that we will necessarily remain outsiders, unable to gain direct access to Socrates the man. Our understanding of Socrates is mediated by the interests and agendas of our ancient sources. We still occupy ourselves with the stubborn question of who Socrates was, so persistent that it has been capitalized and dubbed “the Socratic Question.” Several concomitant questions remain open. To what degree is Aristophanes’ caricature of Socrates in the *Clouds* dependent on similarity or on difference as the source of its humor? Did Socrates investigate natural philosophy (“the things beneath the earth and in the heavens”), or are we to believe Plato’s account (*Apology* 19c-d), in which Socrates explicitly denies involvement and expertise in these matters and repudiates Aristophanes’ caricature? Is the Aristophanic Socrates a stand-in for pre-Socratic philosophers and sophists in general, with little or no connection to Socrates as an individual?

These questions may also have been present in the minds of at least some of the theatre-goers in 423 BC, only a few of whom will have had direct experience of Socrates. The Aelian passage points to an inherent tension in Socrates’ position. He is it at once targeted for parody and the recipient of attention. His prominence in the play surpasses even that of Cleon in Aristophanes’ *Knights*, performed the year before. Given his interests as an apologist, it is hardly surprising that Aelian presents Socrates’ decision to stand through the remainder of the performance as an act of resistance that showed his “contempt for comedy and the Athenians.” But if Socrates was “severe in his contempt for men who dealt in insults and abuse and had nothing sensible to say,” why was he present at the performance? Aelian’s account portrays

*Clouds* as a stratagem designed by Anytus and his fellow conspirators. They felt that Socrates enjoyed support among the Athenians, and so co-opted Aristophanes to produce a play that would turn public opinion against him and allow them to prosecute him with impunity. Despite the implausibility of this conspiracy theory, it points to the fact that Socrates is likely to have enjoyed a degree of recognition among his fellow Athenians. It is interesting to note Aelian's remark: that the playwright chose to lampoon Socrates over other potential targets such as Cleon, the Spartans, the Thebans, and Pericles. Socrates' star may indeed have been shining brightly enough to attract Aristophanes' attention: he had just acquitted himself with exemplary bravery at the Battle of Delium the year before, and his association with prominent aristocrats such as Alcibiades had not yet become a liability. Socrates' reported presence in the audience (not to mention the act of rising to his feet so that others could identify him) can be parsed instead as a sign of cooperation, a willingness to subject himself to the scrutiny of his fellow-Athenians.

*Partly Cloudy* offers a provocative comparison. It introduces Prof. William K. Friert and the liberal arts education he champions as the "great idea" typically found in Aristophanic plots, only to lampoon and deconstruct it: the play ends with the character Will Friert so frustrated by the imbecility of the prospective student that he stomps off into retirement. Placed, as Aelian writes of Socrates, "in a prominent seat in the theatre," the real Will Friert is enjoying the show even as fellow audience-members are glancing at him to see how he is reacting. Certainly the circumstances here are different: it is clear to all that the players aim to roast their favorite professor rather than to lambast him. Nevertheless, the play raises interesting questions about how the parody of Socrates in *Clouds* might have been received by members of the original audience.

I hope I have made a case for the claim that including a performance component in courses on ancient drama carries real benefit, for the students, instructor, and the broader community. The process of investigating what lies at the core of a play, of identifying what Michael Walton refers to as its "spine,"<sup>15</sup> calls on students to exercise critical thinking skills; the challenge of communicating a play's Gestalt to a modern audience puts them in the role of teachers and deepens their understanding of the plays (*homines dum docent discunt*, Seneca *Epist. Mor.* 1.7.8). They gain self-confidence as they rise to the challenge of performing in public, and develop skills in verbal and nonverbal communication. The instructor too invariably gains new insights into the plays, and the public at large is introduced to the rich heritage of ancient drama.

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## Appendix. Student Evaluations of the Festival of Dionysus

Students were asked the following question. "How would you characterize the experience of participating in the Festival of Dionysus? Please comment especially on what (if anything) you learned from the process." Feedback was universally and overwhelmingly positive. Here are a few of the written responses:

\*The Festival was one of my favorite experiences this semester. Reading ancient drama is one thing, but trying to bring it to life for a modern audience gets you thinking about the play and its relevance from an entirely different perspective.

\*I enjoyed being hands-on with the material. I feel it added to my level of understanding of the characters and the emotions of the play.

\*It was a unique, fun experience and totally worthwhile. I am happy that I was able to participate in this because it put me outside of my comfort zone. I learned that it is a team event and the success of a play is based on the actors'/actresses' chemistry and ability to work/interact well



with each other. Also, I learned that memorizing lines isn't as challenging as I would have expected.

\*Very rewarding, it was nerve-racking and unenjoyable at the time, but it forced me to step outside the box . . . Looking back it was a lot of fun and definitely something I will remember for a long time.

\*I thought it was a valuable experience—any time you overcome fear and do something you'd rather not is valuable. I learned, to a greater extent, what it is like to be an audience member, and how to play to them and their feelings/emotions/humor.

\*The festival was a great way to bring everything we've learned into a fun and creative environment. It was a blast, and a great way to build class community.

\*The Festival of Dionysus was a remarkable experience, and I know that the course would have not been the same without it.

\*The festival was a fantastic way for students to get a hands-on experience with ancient theatre. I really felt the process was continually brought to life by student efforts each time we rehearsed.

\*I had fun and really learned a lot about the theatre process and how to stage a scene from a play—very memorable.

\*It was definitely a great experience! It was a great way to focus in on one play and really dive into all aspects of theatre.

\*Staging and performing ancient drama is a great way to really understand what we've been learning. Between setting the play and thoroughly examining the text and performing it for an audience, the Festival was just as if not more instrumental to my understanding than anything else.

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## notes

<sup>1</sup> Eric Dugdale, "Good Grief: Learning Empathy through Ancient Drama," in *Meeting the Challenge: Bringing Classical Texts to Life in the Classroom*, *Institutio* 4.1–3, eds. Licia Landi and Luigi Scarpa (Lecce: Pensa Editore, 2011), 227–36.

<sup>2</sup> In applauding the arrangement by which I entrust these responsibilities to the students, one of the referees cogently expressed the bleak alternative: "Otherwise, if the professor ends up directing, trying, at the same time, to let the students make key choices, it is like trying to write a term paper for a set of undergraduates without actually writing it for them—totally exhausting and nerve-racking."

<sup>3</sup> For details of some of the components and workshop exercises that I incorporate into the class, see Dugdale *op. cit.* 229–36.

<sup>4</sup> There are many whom I would like to thank for making the Festival of Dionysus a success: my colleagues in classics and in other departments (esp. theatre and dance), collaborators in the Interpretative Center, Physical Plant, Costume Shop, and Office of Marketing and Communication, the judges, and most importantly the wonderful students who perform in it. I would also like to thank the two anonymous referees for their helpful feedback on this article. Finally, I thank those who participated in and led the CIC / Center for Hellenic Studies' seminar on Song Culture in Athenian Drama (July 2012) for a lively exchange

of ideas on ancient drama in performance.

<sup>5</sup> In this case, the musician was not enrolled in the class. I encourage recruitment of friends as supernumeraries; they have served as mute characters, as stooges in the audience, or as choruses performing interludes (e.g., the *embolima* of New Comedy). Incorporating music into a performance often adds greatly to its emotional expressivity and impact. In the 2012 Festival, the group performing Sophocles' *Ajax* recruited a trombonist to punctuate key moments. All students who take the course must perform on stage; this requirement, as well as the date of the Festival, is written into the course description.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Jaeger, *Livy's Written Rome* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> Oliver Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 31–36.

<sup>8</sup> This was a creative response to a practical consideration arising from the Asperger's Syndrome of the actor playing Clytemnestra, Sarah Graver, which makes direct eye contact and close physical interaction difficult. That Sarah chose to take on the challenge of public performance is testimony to her gumption. In fact, Sarah is the only student in the history of the Festival who has acted in two iterations, participating again in 2012 in the winning production, *How I Met Your Uncle*, an adaptation of Plautus' *Menaechmi*. Her openness about living with Asperger's and her courage in embracing challenges are qualities that, I hope, will inspire others to take risks, whether in the form of instructors' going out on a limb by integrating performances into their class or students' going out of their comfort zone by performing in them. This article is dedicated to Sarah.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Meineck, *Oresteia* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), 33–34.

<sup>10</sup> Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action*, 77.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Ringer, *Electra and the Empty Urn: Metatheater and Role Playing in Sophocles* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 185–89.

<sup>12</sup> Mary-Kay Gamel, "Revising 'Authenticity' in Staging Ancient Mediterranean Drama," in *Theorising Performance*, ed. Edith Hall and Stephen Harrop (London: Duckworth, 2010), 153–170.

<sup>13</sup> Nigel Wilson, trans., Aelian, *Historical Miscellany* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 83–85.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, in Plato's *Apology* (17d–18d) Socrates at his trial blames Aristophanes' play for an inaccurate and slanderous representation of him; his wording draws attention to this very issue of the disjuncture between caricature and person being represented (my italics): "You saw it yourselves in a comedy of Aristophanes, where *a certain Socrates* was carried around and claimed that he walked on air and spouted lots of other nonsense concerning things *I don't know the slightest thing about*. I don't speak out of disrespect for this sort of knowledge, if there is *someone* knowledgeable about such things." Translation by David Johnson, *Socrates and Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 34.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Walton, "Where is the Spine?" in *Looking at Lysistrata*, ed. David Stuttard (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2010), 11–19.

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## Sophocles' *Elektra*

Translated by Anne Carson  
 Directed by Thomas Moschopoulos  
 Tom Patterson Theater  
 Stratford Shakespeare Festival  
 Stratford, Ontario  
 July 29 to September 29, 2012<sup>1</sup>

**Review by Ruth Scodel**  
*University of Michigan*

The Tom Patterson Theater at Stratford, Ontario, is an intimate space (496 seats) with seating around a runway-style thrust stage. This production was the third Greek play that I have seen in this space, the first two being a fine, taut, *Medea* in the Jeffers adaptation in 2000, with Seanna McKenna at her best, and a noisy, colorful, but uninspired *Birds* whose last ten minutes or so were lost in the great blackout of August 2003 (and not much regretted). This production makes superb use of the space. The immense double door often dominates in the best tragic manner, although it is flanked by piles of black plastic garbage bags, from which potsherds are scattered, apparently to symbolize the fragmentation of the family. The stage is fenced by light posts (Elektra is imprisoned). Folding chairs around the perimeter give the chorus an alternative to standing when they listen. The center of the long stage is occupied by three tables, on each of which rests a fragment of an immense *kouros*, which presumably represents Agamemnon. The tables also serve as platforms and as writing surfaces, as if the tablets of the mind have been made literal, and they provide a surface for the chorus to use for rhythmic percussion. (Narratives in particular are accompanied by rhythmic pounding; the Old Man beats with a staff during the false account of Orestes' death. Initially I found this exciting, but it became mildly irritating after a while; I gather from the program that the director has the idea that rhapsodes performed this way. The director also says that tragic choruses did not wear masks. There are other errors in the program, too.)



*Laura Condlin (left) as Chrysothemis and Yanna McIntosh as Elektra. (Photo by Cylla von Tiedemann.)*

The colloquial and fast-moving translation works on the stage. Sometimes it modernizes ethically in a way I do not like: "do not breed violence out of violence" for μη τίκτειν σ' ἄταν ἄταις invites an anachronistic interpretation, and "violate Elektra" for τοῦμὲ μὴ λυπεῖν imports modern ideas of the authentic self. The translation does not introduce Christian echoes too often, however, and it often has real power.

There are seven women in the chorus, and both they and Yanna McIntosh (Elektra) can sing. The composer, Kornilios Selamsis, gives them haunting, lyrical, music. Having so restricted a space may actually be an advantage: each movement has an effect. This production would be well worth attending only to experience a really effective chorus. To be sure, the chorus does not seem to represent any social group or present a coherent attitude, and so it comes to feel almost as if it is an Other projected by Elektra—an effect that works well, since the loneliness of this Elektra is overwhelming.

The colorblind casting is not really colorblind at all. While the chorus members are racially mixed (Sarah Afful is Ghanaian-Canadian), none is as dark as McIntosh, and the visual contrast between her and Laura

Condlin (Chrysothemis, a beautifully modulated performance) and Seanna McKenna (Clytemestra) was essential to the overall effect: Elektra does not belong to this family. The contrast is accentuated by her costume, which includes a black oversized sweater, dark-rimmed glasses, and clunky black shoes (it unfortunately reminded me of Daria, the heroine of an MTV animated series in the late 90s, but the strength of McIntosh's performance overcame this small problem). The chorus wears a sort of postmodern-classical mixture, with bits of the texts inscribed on their garments (supporting the fragmentation theme, I suppose). Clytemestra wears an elegant suit, a scarf, and high heels, Chrysothemis a light brown outfit with sunglasses and heels. Pylades looks like a street thug, and behaves like one.

Orestes at the beginning wears only knee-length underpants, and he is carried or supported by Pylades and the Old Man. He is explicitly and consistently infantilized. For the recognition and murder, he wears Bermuda-length shorts and knee socks (he puts on a butcher's apron before he enters the house to kill his mother); the outfit seems designed to evoke the uniform of the Hitler Youth. He spends a good section of the play buried in a glass coffin full of sand at the end of the runway. Towards the end, he is uncertain and robotic.

And this is where I have some trouble with this production. This Orestes is an utter weakling, a puppet of the real movers of the action, the vicious-looking Pylades and the smooth, manipulative Old Man. Similarly, Clytemestra has no depth at all. It is obvious, when she talks about Iphigenia, that this is a mere excuse—she is a world-class rich bitch. Aigisthos is a playboy. These interpretations would work very well in a production that wanted a happy ending; when Aigisthos suggests, for example, that the deed cannot be noble if they need to hide it inside, we have the impression of a man who is accustomed to being able to talk his way out of all difficulties, so that the audience does not need to take what he says seriously. Indeed, he uses his talk to prepare for a sudden attempt to escape, which Pylades stops. This performance, however, does not end happily; with this Orestes, it could not.

The weakness of Orestes allows for a distinct and moving conclusion, as Elektra is left alone outside the doors (although Carson's stage direction has Elektra follow Orestes and Pylades inside). She cannot get in; it is still not her house, and her brother will not provide her with any comfort. That she should marry this Pylades is unimaginable. The chorus concludes by repeatedly chanting that the children have reached "the finish line," but the irony lies not in any expectation that the Furies will appear, but in the likelihood that, although Elektra is now nominally free, she is still utterly isolated and trapped. "The finish line" may be a real end, but is an end of hope for the family, not an end to its sufferings. Elektra needed her brother not only for revenge, but to love her and to give her a place in a social order, and this Orestes obviously cannot do that. It is a moving conclusion and a fine modernizing twist.

Yet I cannot help but be a little troubled by this interpretation. Clytemestra is apparently based on the Helen of *Orestes*; Pylades probably shows the influence of the *Orestes*, too. Orestes seems to be an extreme version of the character from Euripides' *Elektra*. Sophocles' *Elektra* has been dropped into a play otherwise populated by Euripidean characters. Carson's translation, which puts Sophocles' play in a volume called *An Oresteia* with Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* on one side and Euripides' *Orestes* on the other—all translated in similar style—perhaps invites this. I would surely be less troubled if the director had interpreted the characters on his own. But whichever of the tragedians wrote his *Elektra* first (I think Euripides is likelier), and whatever the difficulties in inferring authorial intention, I am reasonably confident that Sophocles intended his play and his characters to be his own. It seems a cruel trick on him to corrupt it with figures from another playwright.

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: Dana E. Aspinall reviews the same production in Number 12 of this volume (<http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/9/12/>).

## Sophocles' *Elektra*

Translated by Anne Carson  
 Directed by Thomas Moschopoulos  
 Tom Patterson Theater  
 Stratford Shakespeare Festival  
 Stratford, Ontario  
 July 29 to September 29, 2012<sup>1</sup>

**Review by Dana E. Aspinall**  
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Although the jeremiads throughout Sophocles' *Elektra* consistently inspire shock and sympathy in readers, and despite the fact that Anne Carson's translation nearly always preserves the playwright's devastating rhetorical power, it is director Thoms Moschopoulos's visual and aural embellishments that audiences of the Stratford, ON, production this summer will remember most vividly.

Moschopoulos and designer Ellie Papageorgakopoulou combine ancient and modern props in their deployment of acting space, and create not only an air of foreboding but also discernible senses of deprivation and urgency: someone suffers unimaginable loss, and the environment redounds with pain and a demand for vengeance.

The rear of the stage denotes a filthy back alley: retracting steel door guards, overflowing trash bags, and graffiti-covered brick and wood. Nothing lives in this space, and the hazy dimness promises to stymie any entity that the steel and detritus cannot.

As the stage thrusts out into the theatre's center, the lighting brightens, but only to limn more harshly some marble statuary fragments of what once constituted an idealized male body.

Covered in plastic sheets, the fragments rest on three tables, as would bodies hurriedly autopsied and left for quick, emotionless disposal. Beyond the tables stretches a wire fence, which separates the audience from the stage, and, outside of that, a burial ground, with exposed, recently disturbed soil. Everywhere, then, and in every manifestation, the living and the growing succumb to cold, unregenerate death.

Even the human will, the soul, fixates itself upon the negation of life in this bleakest of Sophocles' plays, and Moschopoulos capitalizes upon this fixation. Characters emerge literally from the lifeless props, and carry into the world their ruinous compulsions. Before the play begins, for example, Pylades, the Old Man, and members of the Chorus of Women intermingle with the ushers who surround the stage; as the audience settles, these characters describe to those in their proximity the backstories involving Agamemnon's father Atreus, brother Menelaus, and sister-in-law Helen of Troy. Then, as the lights darken, these characters silently exit the stage or, as in the case of Pylades, ascend onto it and become part of the scene.



*Seana McKenna as Clytemestra. (Photo by Cylla von Tiedemann.)*



The effect is amplified once Pylades reaches the tables. Adorned in black, modern habiliments, Orestes' loyal companion strips the plastic cover away from the center table and reveals Orestes, who wears only white boxer briefs and sleeps in a fetal position among the fragments. Pylades gently awakes him, picks him up as one would a child, and carries him to the Old Man, who will urge Orestes to action.

Many critics note the severe restrictions of movement to which Elektra accommodates herself. At the beginning, she can only wait for Orestes to avenge her father Agamemnon's murder, and never rises above the grief and humiliation that her mother Clytemnestra and stepfather Aigisthos impose when they murder Agamemnon and assume his throne in Argos. "I cannot not grieve," she informs her Chorus of Women in memorable understatement, as she stands dressed in a manner ironically befitting a young, modern, and confident woman: gray sweater layered over a white blouse open at her neck, glasses, black skirt and shoes, and slightly disheveled hair. Acted, sung, and danced with aplomb by Yanna McIntosh, Elektra exudes energy and poise, and yet does nothing.

Throughout his interpretation, Moschopoulos intensifies the debilitating impact of immobility as he illustrates its ubiquitous nature: nearly every character grapples with confinement, a delimitation of his or her autonomy, and this shared experience propels each into a disregard for all life.

Most significantly, Moschopoulos foregrounds parallels between Orestes' and Elektra's predicaments. Where Elektra stagnates in suffocating inactivity—her only refuge the poetic laments she recites or sings to her Chorus—Orestes suffers a profoundly arrested emotional development, as witnessed during this first scene. His fetal sleeping position, the diaper-like white underwear, and Pylades' hoisting and transporting of his body (he performs this function at other junctures in the play as well) all signal an emotional infancy, an absence of characterological growth since that day in his childhood when Elektra rescued him from death. The idealized fragments he sleeps among on the table hint at the maturity he should possess at this point in his life, and his descent into the soil that covers his father's grave when Elektra enters signifies a stubborn clinging to the womb.

Although she understands her situation more clearly than does Orestes, Elektra's sister Chrysothemis also appears frozen in her personal development. Chrysothemis dresses fashionably, with sunglasses, a purse, and designer shoes, and thus consciously takes refuge in her wealth, one of the few advantages her mother's actions afford her. Her refusal to assist Elektra in her vengeance—despite her earlier promise to "stand up" for herself—reflects her impulse to keep all matters in stasis. As Elektra suspects, her sister's promise to help is "all words," and, like her clothing, it only covers superficially and temporarily an ugly predicament with no precedent.

Clytemnestra's entrapment, as well as her cognizance of it, informs perhaps the most visually striking moment in the production. As Chrysothemis departs and the Chorus chants "Justice is coming," the



*From top, left: Jacquelyn French, Barbara Fulton, Monique Lund, Sarah Afful, Ayryn Mackie as Chorus of Women. (Photo by Cylla von Tiedemann.)*

immense wooden doors at the back of the stage open and Clytemestra enters on a tall platform, drawn by two slaves. Dressed as a more decrepit embodiment of Chrysothemis, including a gray skirt and jacket, kerchief, sunglasses, obviously dyed blonde hair, and thick red lipstick, Clytemestra holds in one hand a glass sphere and clings to the platform rigidly—as if to prevent a fall—with the other. Although she asserts confidently that “I feel no remorse” for her adulterous relationship with Aigisthos or for her part in the murder of her husband, her unbalanced posture and gait belie this sureness. Only when informed of Orestes’ “death” by chariot crash does she express joy: “From now on, I pass my days in peace.”

Moschopoulos and choreographer Amalia Bennett underscore the ubiquity of these characters’ confinements through their manipulations of *rhapsodia*, or rhythmic recital, a technique they borrow from narrations of epic. When Elektra responds to Clytemestra’s explanation for her betrayal and murder of Agamemnon, for instance, she claps her hands to a beat; when the Old Man announces Orestes’ death to Clytemestra, he keeps the meter by pounding a stick on the ground as he speaks; and when the Chorus of Women interact with Elektra, they chant in rhythm and frequently utilize phonemes meaningful only through what they represent emotionally. Through this borrowing, Moschopoulos and Bennett create an aural experience that complements and enhances an already unusually rich visual undertaking.

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<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note: Ruth Scodel reviews the same production in Number 11 of this volume (<http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/9/11/>).

## “First catch your satyrs” — A Practical Approach to *The Satyr-Play(-Like?)*

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*At the Isthmian Games* – a reconstruction of Aeschylus’ *Isthmiastai* (also known as *Theoroi*) – was performed, in English, on May 11th, 2011, by students at the International Center for Hellenic and Mediterranean Studies (DIKEMES), Athens.<sup>1</sup> The aim of the whole process, from initial research, through improvisations and rehearsals, to final performance, was to try to discover the nature of the satyr play in and through practice. Since we know so little about fifth-century satyr plays and their relation to tragedy, it is tempting, and I think reasonable, to believe that this process of “getting inside” something at least *satyr-play-like* could generate valid insights into the genre. I use this phrase not so much to moderate any claim to success as to echo Aristotle’s assertion that tragedy developed from the “satyr-play-like” (*Poetics* 1449a 19-20), which suggests that there may be some quality that is “satyric” and even definitive of the genre, though proto-generic and presumably lacking many of the genre’s formal characteristics. Thus a “rough approximation” to satyric drama may have more historical value than would a “rough approximation” to tragedy, were we similarly in the dark about that.

In what follows I outline, first, the assumptions about satyr plays from which we started (much of this is known ground, of course); second, some significant issues in the reconstruction of *Isthmiastai*; third, the practical process of developing a suitable kind of chorus-based physical theater; fourth, what I can (fairly confidently) call our discoveries; last, an account of what, as a result of this project, I have come to think of as the celebratory *pre-dramatic* nature of the genre, at least in its earlier phase.

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### STARTING POINTS

Certain facts and assumptions about the genre as it was in the fifth century formed the foundation for the project. Throughout the fifth century at the City Dionysia, satyr plays were attached to tragedies by the rule that each competing tragedian should present three tragedies followed by one satyr play. The latter is defined by its chorus of satyrs, which inhabits a world that is much (though not exactly) like the world of tragedy. The plots of both tragedies and satyr plays are derived from myth. The costume of the characters, but not the chorus, is of the same style in both genres. The diction of the characters in a satyr play is relatively elevated, much closer to tragic than to comic diction. Moreover, on the whole the theatrical conventions of satyric drama are more similar to those of tragedy than to those of comedy. Nevertheless, there are certain differences between satyr plays and tragedies, apart from the identity of the chorus. The mythic plots of the former tend to be “lighter” and to end happily, some departures from truly tragic diction are permitted in them, and certain theatrical effects that would be inappropriate in tragedy seem to be possible. But more important as a distinguishing feature of satyric drama than such relaxations of the “rules” of tragedy is the way in which the chorus interacts with the characters and relates to the plot or action of the drama.

Euripides’ *Cyclops*, which is the only surviving complete satyr play, is probably not typical of the genre in this respect, for its chorus is relatively restrained or under-used. In fact, *Cyclops* follows more the pattern of tragedy, with an alternation of episodes largely involving the characters (including Silenos, the “father of the satyrs,” who possibly appeared in all satyr plays) and choric songs/dances, or *stasima* (which are here relatively brief). Earlier satyr plays were probably more like Sophocles’ *Ichneutai* (*Trackers*), about

half of which survives; in this play the satyrs are not just involved in the action, but effectively drive it – at least until the reappearance of Apollo towards the (lost) end of the play. During their tracking of the cattle and their dispute with the nymph Kyllene, moreover, they are always likely to sing and dance, not formally but in an expressive, energetic, even agitated way. In other words, satyr play does not strictly observe tragedy's crisp structural distinctions between the spoken and the chanted or sung, and between the simply enacted and the danced.<sup>2</sup>

Bernd Seidensticker makes a related point: "In Aeschylean and Sophoclean satyr-plays the myth into which the satyrs have been integrated often serves merely as a framework for the antics of the satyrs."<sup>3</sup> "Antics," here, goes beyond but also includes the dance, and hints at the comic aspect of the satyrs. But the formulation which seems best to capture this aspect of the genre (and which I adopt to structure the main part of this paper) is due to François Lissarrague: "The recipe is as follows: take one myth, add satyrs, observe the results."<sup>4</sup> In something like a spontaneous chemical reaction, the satyrs transform and *stretch* (rather than "distort") not so much the mythic pretext, or specific plot-line, as the *world of myth* in which tragedy has its roots and being. For Lissarrague, the key is incongruity: "The presence of satyrs within the myth subverts tragedy by shattering its cohesiveness."<sup>5</sup> But we should be a little careful in interpreting this. It is not simply that the satyrs are "out of place" in the mythic-tragic world, for it is equally the case that the play's characters, in the way they are resonant of the world of tragedy, are "out of place" in what might be called the *origin-al* world of the satyrs (by which I mean a world of origins). Yet these are not – ultimately – different worlds; they stand in a relation to each other as *commemoration* stands to *celebration*.

For me, the conception of the satyr play as celebratory was strong from the start of the process, and one of my goals was to explore the relations between the celebratory and the comic aspects of the genre. Before beginning rehearsals we had been as a group to see a Modern Greek production of Sophocles' *Ιχθυεῖς* (*Trackers*), directed by Dimos Abdeliodis at the Studio Lydra, Athens.<sup>6</sup> The exuberant, animalistic, noisy chorus in this production was rarely "funny" – beyond provoking a chuckle – and this seemed right. Their energetic and powerful presence continuously raised the satyrs above creatures to be laughed *at*, whatever the elements of their "lower" nature that showed through. Nor was there any question of laughing *with* them, since they exhibited no parodic tendencies whatsoever. In these ways the production conformed much more to Tony Harrison's idea that "In the satyr play, [the] spirit of celebration, held in the dark solution of tragedy, is precipitated into release"<sup>7</sup> than to Dana Sutton's assertion that "the humour of satyr plays consists of poking fun at tragedy, in order of course to provide comic relief."<sup>8</sup>

The idea of the genre as celebratory is consistent with the plausible suggestion that it was introduced into the City Dionysia in order to restore the close relation between theatrical performance and its god, Dionysos.<sup>9</sup> To many, that relation seemed to be breaking down, its disintegration expressed in the complaint that performances of tragedies had come to have "nothing to do with Dionysos." Satyrs (at least from the later 6th century) form the entourage of the god, his *thiasos*, and although in the plots of various satyr plays they are separated from him, his presence is felt in his absence. Above all, it is in their energetic, exuberant style of dancing (the other side of the coin of the genre's "little plots"<sup>10</sup>), that the theater is restored to its original association with Dionysos.

One other introductory point must be made here. In spite of greater awareness these days of the value of play production as a way of understanding ancient drama, there is still a widespread over-valuation of text. In saying this I am not for a moment suggesting that what the playwright wrote should be treated opportunistically or with disregard. I simply mean that the text, where we have it, is not necessarily a complete guide to what would have happened in performance. This is obvious in the case of choreography, but it has further special relevance to satyr plays. Surviving fragments include, here and

there, some inarticulate noises made by satyrs. This suggests that the satyr chorus was likely to have made such noises at other appropriate points in the performance that are *not* marked in the text. Moreover, satyrs tend to be physically restless creatures whose presence can relate to the “main action” in different ways, including distracting from it; again, this is something that need not be evident in the text.<sup>11</sup> In our production of *At the Isthmian Games*, a great deal of the action and stage business that we arrived at simply could not have been included in the script without making it far too wordy and overloaded with stage directions.

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### STEP 1: “TAKE ONE MYTH . . .”

Strictly, in starting from the fragments of *Isthmiastai*, we were not initially “taking one myth” to which satyrs could then be added. The plot of this play, though it involves mythic characters, is not based on any known satyr-free story; the satyrs’ own objectives and their breach with Dionysos are essential to it.<sup>12</sup> And naturally the satyrs are already present in the surviving scenes. Nonetheless, the process of elaborating the story-line provided various opportunities of mixing situations, characters and satyrs in order to “observe the results.”

With a single exception, the approximately ninety surviving lines of *Isthmiastai* form an almost continuous section of the play.<sup>13</sup> Though many of these lines are lacunose, the basic action of this sequence is reasonably clear. It seems that the satyrs, in an act of disloyalty to Dionysos, have decided to become athletes. At the beginning of the surviving text they are given images of themselves (probably masks) by another character, which they attach to the temple of Poseidon, patron deity of the Isthmian Games. Dionysos then enters and scolds them for their treachery. The satyrs defy him and insist that they are now athletes. Someone, possibly Dionysos himself, then offers them new metal “toys” that are somehow apt for the Games, but which for some reason frighten or repel the satyrs. What these “toys” are is uncertain.

Beyond this segment of the play, we know almost nothing of what happened in it. Certain choices had to be made at the start in order to provide a framework for improvisations. These were:

1. The character who presents the satyrs with their images at the start of the fragments should be one or other of the supposed founders of the Isthmian Games, that is, either Sisyphos or Theseus. Of these, the archetypal trickster Sisyphos seemed preferable as the more plausible adversary of Dionysos and the one with greater theatrical potential in this context.
2. Since the satyrs intend to become athletes, a scene of the satyrs in training should be included. This should reflect authentic ancient athletic practices.<sup>14</sup> Hence we needed an athletics trainer as a character.
3. The play should end with a reconciliation between Dionysos and the satyrs, including a celebratory dance. To prepare the ground for this, the satyrs would call on Poseidon, believing him their new protector. Poseidon would then appear, but would refuse to have satyrs as athletes in the Games dedicated to him.

Other decisions were made in the course of improvisations and rehearsals. Here I note only the most relevant. We opted to open the play with Dionysos, given his obvious importance in the fragments. He spoke a prologue, called on his satyrs to enter, then sent them off to dance at Isthmia. This choice required not only a scene change (though with no need to specify any location for the opening scene) – for Dionysos later catches up with his satyrs at Isthmia – but also an *onstage journey* (for the satyrs would not go off, so soon after arriving, only to return almost immediately in the new location). Not only are scene changes relatively rare in tragedy, but onstage journeys are not used as a means to effect them.



However, other (“serious”) theatrical traditions such as Japanese *nō* and Classical Sanskrit drama make extensive use of the device. Moreover, an elaborate example is found in Attic Old Comedy, in *Frogs*.<sup>15</sup> I suggested above that satyr plays could involve some relaxation of the “rules” of tragedy and, if indeed onstage journeys were ruled out in tragedy as a way of changing scene, this was a suitable occasion for greater flexibility. Our satyrs started running rhythmically on the spot, changing direction several times, increasing the energy level throughout, until they arrived, awe-struck, in front of the temple of Poseidon. (Note that something similar must occur in Sophocles’ *Ichneutai*, when, following Apollo’s exit, the satyrs begin their tracking, at some point coming upon the cave where the baby Hermes is secreted.) Now, it is precisely the high energy of the satyrs that makes such a device appropriate here. It is as though the satyrs “burst through” some of the more restrictive conventions of tragedy, allowing “bigger” theatrical effects. The same general principle probably holds true, for example, in the net-hauling scene in Aeschylus’ *Diktyoulkoi*, where the energetic participation of the satyrs allows a more “theatrical” evocation of the presence of the sea than would be possible in a wholly serious tragedy.

Alan Sommerstein translates some (damaged) lines (29-30), spoken by Dionysos, thus: “[I knew(?) . . .], when I saw your [phalli] short like a mouse’s tail, that you were polishing up your Isthmian [wrestling].” In a note, he adds: “The reference is to the practice, regular among ancient Greek athletes, of tying up the penis in a curled shape (just “like a mouse’s tail”) by a string tied round the foreskin and then round the waist. . . . For the satyrs to come on stage in this condition would make a striking contrast with their accustomed state of hyper-erection.”<sup>16</sup> But for the satyrs to come on stage like this assumes either that they had decided to become athletes before the play begins or that they go off, change costume, then reenter. We preferred to make the most of the opportunity provided by the text here. Told to do so by Sisypheos, the satyrs reluctantly, and in apparently great discomfort, tied up their phalli on stage. Moreover, this choice greatly helped in solving the problem of the reconciliation with Dionysos. After their rejection by Poseidon, the satyrs tried to mollify Dionysos, who remained cool. Then the satyrs decided to untie their phalli. The enormous relief of this set them dancing ecstatically, in such a way that Dionysos could not help joining in.

Lastly, we chose to follow David Wiles’s suggestion that the new metal “toys” that (presumably) Dionysos has brought for the satyrs are hoplite helmets. “The nature of these frightening metal objects has been much debated. The logic of the plot suggests that the satyrs are about to engage in the new and physically taxing sport of racing in hoplite armour. . . . [T]he frightening metal object is in all probability a hoplite helmet, which is of course a kind of mask.”<sup>17</sup> The mask-like helmet thus ironically recalls the masks previously given to the satyrs, which first frighten but then enrapture them. This is an effective theatrical “recall.” But there was an even greater advantage for us, since we strongly foregrounded issues of gender in the play, following the textual hint of Dionysos’ complaint (in line 68 of the fragments) that he has been called “effeminate.” Our satyrs were not only tempted to become athletes because it would make them more attractive to females, but also because they saw themselves (or wanted to see themselves) as wholly “masculine.” Visually, the hoplite helmet takes this goal of ultra-masculinity to an extreme, where it horrifies rather than allures.<sup>18</sup>

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## STEP 2: “ADD SATYRS . . .”

Although satyrs are “already there” in the fragments of *Isthmiastai*, in another sense they are not yet there at all. They have to be “added” through the rehearsal process. In a certain sense this is true of any character in any drama, where the psycho-social iceberg that lies below the tip of the text can only be discovered “on one’s feet.” But it is true in a stronger sense of satyrs, for satyrs exist primarily *as bodies*.

We are following a recipe, Lissarrague’s, so the essential first step corresponds to “first catch your hare.”



The whole of this section is an elaboration of what this means. Satyrs cannot be added if you don't have any.

But what is a satyr? There are two ways of answering this question. One is to mine the available textual and archaeological evidence; seen thus, satyrs are mythological male creatures, belonging to wild nature, part human, part animal (more horse than goat-like, at least in the classical period), impulsive, anarchic, hedonistic and strongly group oriented. But the mythological creature is very elusive. The other way is to explore the theatrical process of transforming human performers into credible stage satyrs, thus "catching" them.

My claim that satyrs exist primarily as bodies concerns their theatrical nature. The body's "action centre" is the pelvis. Simply focusing your attention there, as against, say, in the head or the chest, gives you a sense of readiness to act, verging on an urge to get moving, at least if you are already standing. Focusing attention like this creates a *center* – on the one hand a center of consciousness, on the other a particular way of organizing the organism. If you walk around slowly with attention focused in your head, the rest of the body will seem light, ethereal, barely there. But if you focus attention in the pelvis you will also have a strong sense of legs, trunk and arms, and of their movement potential. The limbs will feel quite free, even "charged."

But although purposive movement of the entire body originates in the pelvis, it is not (except in small degree) movement *of* the pelvis. Normally, the "kick" of energy that originates in the pelvis is transmitted outwards. If, instead, it is held within the pelvis and expressed there, the effect is radically . . . but it is difficult to find the precise word here. Before trying to do so, it will help to see what kind of movement is involved.

"Pelvic Graffiti" is the ideal exercise with which to begin the process of turning performers into satyrs.<sup>19</sup> With a large imaginary paintbrush attached to the base of your spine, you write "SATYRS RULE OK" on a wall behind you, in the largest possible letters. Next, the paintbrush is substituted by a large wooden spoon with which you stir an imaginary pudding mix in a giant bowl on the floor (the mix should be thick, to provide a sense of resistance).

When you stand in a normal upright position, with feet quite close together, movement of the pelvis is limited. To attain the necessary size of graffiti writing or pudding stirring, the feet need to be well apart, with the knees bent. This lowers the center of gravity towards the earth – it's also an ideal position for stomping (which, for satyrs, is a way of *enjoying* the earth, nothing like a temper tantrum). Since in the way you engage your pelvis you also engage your imagination, the paintbrush can now be thought of as a *tail*, an extension of your own body. And in stirring the pudding, some movements involve a forward pelvic thrust, which brings the image of an erect phallus into play. It can be noticed at this stage that tail and phallus, both rooted in the pelvis, are "opposed" in the very way that they are connected; the forward (phallic) pelvic thrust tucks the tail under, while left-right swishing of the tail withdraws the phallus from prominence. It is important to explore this as pure pelvic potential. Donning actual satyr costume may be "liberating," like wearing a mask,<sup>20</sup> but tail and phallus really need to be "owned" – or there's a danger of looking like performers merely *dressed up* as satyrs.

It's well worth reflecting, at this early stage, that strong movements of the pelvis are not acceptable in public or social situations (some forms of post-1960s dance excepted); we might say that they are, or remain, *ou politikon*, as Plato remarked of Bacchic dancing: "not of the *polis*" (*Laws* 815c). This brings us back to a gap in the text above. If pelvic energy is expressed *in* the pelvis, I said, the effect is radically . . . ? One possible word to complete the sentence is "grotesque." It is a right word insofar as a kind of

deformation is enacted. The result is a deformity of the socially-normative, *self-regulating* body. It is a wrong word insofar as this is liberating. Still, actual physical deformity *is* liberating in a certain sense, a peculiar fact which lies behind the theatrical tradition that runs from the Fat Men padded dancers of Ancient Greece<sup>21</sup> to the *bouffons* explored by Jacques Lecoq<sup>22</sup> – in being deformed, one is an outsider; in being an outsider one is tacitly licensed to deviate in other ways, especially to mock. But satyrs are not “outsiders” at all. They are *other*. Liberating the pelvis to move *as it can* is *not only* subversive. It takes you straight beyond any need or urge to subvert into another domain of pure self-enjoyment. So the effect is as radically *graceful* as it is grotesque. To grasp this is to begin to grasp the paradox of the satyr.

Satyrs are not only pelvis-centered, they are also very vocal creatures. To play them, the voice needs to be rediscovered as a physical extension of the body, as it is for a baby, rather than as a platform for words. True, satyrs have acquired speech, but with no consequent loss of that earlier sense of the voice as a way of being in the world (as distinct from talking about it); we might say that acquiring speech has not subjected them to the (Lacanian) Symbolic. In “Voice Magic,” performers are asked to think of their voices as additional limbs with which they act physically upon the world.<sup>23</sup> An object, such as a small bottle, is placed on the ground. Squatting or on all fours (i.e., close to the ground), the group forms a circle around it, with a radius of about two metres. Each then tries by means of vocal sound alone to take hold of the object and draw it closer, or lift it up, or turn it over. This effort is both individual (for each makes his or her own sounds, with his or her own intentions) and collective (for everyone seems to draw power from everyone else). If the participants are fully engaged in this, their bodies will be full of energy, even contorted; if they are not, their bodies will be slack, mere appendages, and the real point will be lost – that the voice has to come from deep inside the body, carrying with it the specific resonance of its somatic source. Otherwise it has no “magical” power.

Performers are then asked to explore the room using their voices alone. They may walk around, orientating themselves in space, but in doing so they project different sounds along the floor, up and down walls, into remote high corners, finding sounds that “match” the materials and spaces, as though they are touching or inhabiting them with their voices. This exercise is an “opening out” of the previous one, where vocalization is focused on a single small object. It must be done second, only after the voice’s deep-rootedness in the body has been felt, for this needs to be carried over. The point of both exercises is not solely to overcome vocal inhibitions, though these can be very strong. It is also an essential preparation for the next exercise.

“Waking Up” is Jacques Lecoq’s first exercise for neutral mask.<sup>24</sup> The performer wakes for the very first time, so everything is new, to be discovered. Adapting this idea, but without using neutral masks, performers are asked to wake for the very first time, all together, and then to explore the world around them, not their own bodies (as often happens in the neutral mask exercise) nor other members of the group. In our variation, moreover, inarticulate vocalizations play a part. When this exercise was done in a very early rehearsal, its effect was striking. Vocalizations added greatly to the impression that the world really was being discovered for the first time, whereas this can sometimes seem a little forced in a silent neutral mask exercise. But why? In normal civilized life, our impulses to vocalize are highly controlled – to the point that often no impulse even surfaces. When these controls were removed, the vocal responses to the world seemed immediate, spontaneous, *precisely to be impulses*, whereas a movement or gesture often seems to have a built-in delay, however slight – to be a “chosen” response to a prior stimulus which can only be inferred by a spectator. But the vocalization is felt as it happens, not decided upon. Watching this exercise, the spectator received a very strong impression of innocence. In fact it revealed a kind of “law”: *satyrs wake for the very first time every day*.

Still, satyrs would never wake all together like this and then ignore each other, for they are intensely

group oriented. The next stage of the process, then, was to build an appropriate kind of group consciousness.

The modern sense of what a classical chorus is and how it should look and behave is perhaps best represented by the exercise usually called “Flock of Birds” or “Shoal of Fish,” in which the group moves together around a sufficiently large space, changing direction in an unplanned way, but apparently all at the same time.<sup>25</sup> Such a chorus appears “organic,” neither a drilled regiment at one extreme nor an *ad-hoc* crowd at the other.<sup>26</sup> But the collective responsibility and hence the collective identity of the chorus is illusory; one (albeit variable) individual always turns first, the others following *almost* immediately. The impression of spontaneous collective decision making can be given only if the group tacitly agrees that a) each member must try to keep as many others within his or her peripheral vision as possible (consistent with all facing the same way), and b) no member will change direction when aware that s/he is *not* within the peripheral vision of a significant part of the group. The resulting process is complex and involves not just all members’ awareness of others but also their awareness of others’ awareness of others. But it seems necessary to go an important step further in creating a satyr chorus.

The goal here is perfect irresponsibility. Whatever the group does, no individual member can be blamed for initiating it. Without speaking, a group of six or seven members looks around, finds some object(s) in the room and then does something (anything) to or with it (or them). But no individual has overall or even major responsibility for any part of the process. To achieve this, group members must maintain full awareness of each other. While, in the first phase, they look at objects, they must also keep looking at each other looking at objects. At a certain point, they all find themselves looking at the same thing. To go towards it, someone must move first. But that person will not continue unless someone else takes over, a passing on of responsibility that is reiterated until the group truly acts as one. The same applies when they start performing some action on or with the object. Each may have some idea of what to do, and will begin to do it, but will almost immediately stop if no one else not only joins in but actually takes over.<sup>27</sup>

This exercise, or game, is a little risky and has to be watched carefully. It really can make the group, along with each of its component parts, irresponsible. The result is more a *gang* than a chorus – which is not inappropriate for satyrs (the satyr gang becomes a chorus when it dances). True gangs have leaders, of course, but the essence or “true spirit” of gangs lies in the followers, those who, to themselves, seem absolved of any individual responsibility.

A variation on John Wright’s “Group Association Game” embodies the same basic principle.<sup>28</sup> It generates an extraordinary sense of group solidarity. Two groups, each of five or six members, take turns finding and articulating words. Each word must be found simultaneously by all members of the group. Someone might begin with “W –,” others take this sound up, it becomes “Wi –,” then “Win –,” and finally “Winter!” Individuals should not have specific words in mind when they start, just sounds that they want to share. The feeling should be generated of the group itself joyfully discovering the word (even discovering speech). And exactly as the word is discovered – that is, spoken collectively, confidently and for the first time – it is “thrown” to the other group, who must now find an associated word of their own, which is then thrown back as it is discovered. This process continues in a kind of competition until one group, having found the most bizarre association, appears as the “winner.”

Both games reflect a crucial way in which the satyr chorus differs from the tragic chorus. In tragedy, it is generally the case that the chorus is “turned outwards” during the episodes and “turned inwards” during the *stasima*. A chorus that is “turned outwards” functions as a *lens* helping focus the audience’s attention on the object of the chorus’s own attention, usually a character or characters in the drama (or maybe the door to a palace). For this reason the direction of the chorus’s gaze is always important; it

guides the gaze of the audience. “Turned outwards” like this, the chorus is intrinsically self-effacing. Its reactions add weight (significance) to the main action, for – quite unlike the exercise known as “Reaction Chorus”<sup>29</sup> – where we *imagine* the (unstaged) main action on the basis of a group’s reactions to it, which nonetheless hold our attention as the theatrically-“real thing” – the reactions of the true tragic chorus must capture our attention only enough to bounce it straight back to its true object, which is, as it were, magnified in the process. Yet, at the same time, the “turned outwards” chorus is always *equal* to the character(s) – equal in (another sense of) “weight.” This is the vital point behind Lecoq’s “Balancing the Stage” exercise.<sup>30</sup> That one or two individual figures can be *balanced* by a group of twelve or fifteen is precisely what establishes the tragic gravitas of the former. But this necessary equality makes its mark within the *full scope* of our field of vision, even as our *focus* is somehow concentrated by the chorus on something always beyond (and more important than) itself. In the *stasima*, on the other hand, the singing and dancing chorus is “turned inwards,” not literally (though this *may* occur) but in the sense that its primary relation is now to itself. Actual *stasima* vary greatly, of course, in the degree to which some kind of group self-awareness seems desirable to choreograph in.<sup>31</sup>

Very differently from the tragic chorus, it seems desirable that the satyr chorus rapidly alternate between turning outwards and turning inwards (in this case literally), in a way that is not mapped onto any formal divisions of the drama. This is exactly what is achieved in the games outlined above. When, in *Isthmiastai*, they are caught by Dionysos, the satyrs are likely to continually look (inwards) to each other as well as (outwards) at Dionysos, relying on each other for support as they try to find a collective “line” of excuses and defiance.

The last – and crucial – element in adding satyrs is to ensure that the *energy level* is high enough, as high as possible. There are many exercises to raise energy. But what needs to be discovered here above all is that the high energy of a group of *n* members can be far greater than *n* times the high energy of an individual. I shall return to the significance of this in the Conclusions.

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### STEP 3: “OBSERVE THE RESULTS”

According to Mark Griffith:

[L]ike the choruses of tragedy but unlike those of comedy, the satyrs rarely seem to come into any serious collision with the main characters of the play. . . . Likewise the stage-satyrs’ interactions with the other characters are predominantly collaborative. When they are not, the satyrs are either unsuccessfully amorous, or temporarily distracted by external constraints, or mildly chaotic, but never really challenging or threatening. It is as if the satyrs exist on a parallel plane of their own, intersecting with, but never seriously disrupting, the activities of the more serious and responsible human characters whose story is unfolding around them.

Like perpetual children, or rustic simpletons, or skittish colts, the satyrs caper restlessly but harmlessly around in cheerful and blessed devotion to Dionysos (and Aphrodite), returning at the end to a separate world of their own, a world that is both timeless and apolitical, a world of perpetual childhood and release from toil and worry.<sup>32</sup>

I quote this at some length because it seems both broadly true and yet misleadingly over-stated. At any rate, in the later stages of preparing *At the Isthmian Games* I was concerned that we were losing the “darker” side of the satyrs. Are satyrs little more than animated theatrical cuddly toys? If not, it is not because they are also, in Edith Hall’s phrase, “ithyphallic males behaving badly,”<sup>33</sup> i.e., would-be rapists, but for a quite different reason.

Satyrs may not come into serious conflict with other characters (though for part of *At the Isthmian Games* they are in genuine conflict with Dionysos himself), but they are always likely to *upstage* other characters. In early improvisations it became clear that other characters – or the actors playing them – had enormous difficulty controlling the satyrs. Sisyphos, for example, mistaking the newly-arrived satyrs for athletes and inviting them to begin their practice, immediately found himself embroiled in chaos as the satyrs began playing with a discus, javelin and jumping weights, as well as wrestling and running around, making him appear like a schoolteacher with absolutely no control over a class of thirteen-year-olds. Although Poseidon, on the other hand, immediately struck fear into the satyrs, their terror was so “over-expressed” that he was unable to quieten their rowdy pleas, appeals and supplications. Even our Athletics Trainer (who was played by a man of imposing physique) could only call the satyrs to order by means of a whistle, which stopped them in their tracks – temporarily – because it was to them an unfamiliar and unexplained sound.

Now, just as dramatic conflict involves a power struggle, so power relations are involved in this kind of “upstaging” – *but it is theatrical, as against dramatic, power that is at stake*. Actors playing characters had to learn not to be drawn in to the world of the satyrs (or down to their level) if they were to maintain their tragic gravitas. This phenomenon made it clear that satyric drama is not simply mixing incongruous worlds, as Lissarrague suggests (“The joke is one of incongruity”);<sup>34</sup> rather, the tragic “weight” of the characters is necessary to balance the hyper-activity of the satyrs. If the characters were to be drawn in to the world of the satyrs, the form would fall apart.

We felt that Dionysos, when onstage with the satyrs, ought not to be faced with any such problem. But it was not immediately clear how this was to be achieved. The satyrs would be no less energetic and theatrically dominant in his presence, especially in conflict with him. Their panic when Dionysos surprises them attaching their images to Poseidon’s temple was among the theatrically “biggest” moments of the play, in fact. Dionysos needed to be coolly aloof – yet not in the same way that other characters had to try to avoid being drawn in. The latter, or more accurately the actors playing them, could achieve this goal by acting *as if* the satyrs were not disruptive, even, in a sense, as if they weren’t satyrs at all, simply waiting for the relatively quiet moments in which to speak. But Dionysos relates to the satyrs as satyrs. Whereas the other characters, played in what might be called a mode of “denial,” seem as a result to inhabit their own relatively small, closed “spheres,” Dionysos’ presence must be expansive, open and accepting, implicitly embracing the satyrs and their world.

Had we enough time, we might have achieved a much more “rehearsed” solution of these problems, that is, a relatively easily repeatable mix of high-energy satyr antics and quieter moments in which characters could be foregrounded. But this seems undesirable. A fully *drilled* performance would suppress and “kill” the very thing we wanted, the impulsiveness and unpredictability of satyrs. It seemed much truer to our goal to retain an impromptu aspect to the performance, although this involved more risk. What the audience would witness was not to be simply “restored behavior.”<sup>35</sup> It should involve something of the “happening.” Without this, there would be no sense of actually *sharing a space with satyrs*, as against referring back, by means of performance, to a past, lost world in which satyrs only *were*.

Lastly, as far as this issue is concerned, I was surprised by the fact that a satyr chorus could be significantly bigger – numerically – than a tragic chorus performing in the same space. In that space, the maximum size of a tragic chorus would be eight, but our satyr chorus was eleven strong, without any sense of overloading the space. I am still not entirely sure why this is, but I guess that it reflects the way that *balancing the stage* in Lecoq’s sense is not necessary in satyr plays, or not in the same sustained way as in tragedy.<sup>36</sup> When, given the dramatic situation, such balancing becomes necessary, the larger satyr



chorus can achieve it with a tighter grouping than would normally be desirable in tragedy, bodies pressed together, for example, as when the satyrs form a defensive group after their initial mad panic on Dionysos' reappearance.

Perhaps the most important discovery is that satyrs spontaneously and naturally dance, at any opportunity, in an overflow of both energy and community. In *Isthmiastai*, moreover, this habit has a special significance, for Aeschylus sets up an opposition between dancing and athletics, with (at least in our version) the satyrs choosing the latter over the former because it is more "masculine." In this context, their natural tendency to dance implicitly undermines their commitment to athletics, but at the same time it more than compensates for their athletic incompetence.

In early improvisations, there were two particularly important moments at which the satyrs just started dancing. The first was when Sisypheos gave them their images in the form of masks. We worked this scene to pass through the reaction phases of sheer terror, fearful curiosity, pure curiosity, playful pleasure, and lastly narcissistic indulgence. As this sequence moved into the last phase, the satyrs naturally started to dance – it's how they express themselves *as a group* (for their narcissism quickly became collective). The second instance occurred once the satyrs had succeeded in attaching their images to the temple and were singing (over and over) line 22 from the fragments. This scene presented a small problem, since it is followed by the entry of Dionysos, who in lines 32 to 34 implies that the satyrs have given up dancing in order to become Isthmian athletes. Initially, we solved this by having the satyrs suddenly realize that they should not be dancing, then switch to something resembling athletic training before Dionysos entered. But it soon happened that the satyrs forgot that they shouldn't be dancing! This left Dionysos to make his entrance anyway, speaking lines 32–4 ironically – which worked just as well.

The build-up to this dance was also revealing. The situation provided a good opportunity to bring out two sides of satyrs which are at least partly opposed; firstly their incompetence and bafflement, secondly their grace and coordination. How were they to attach their images high on the temple (as in line 19 of the fragments they suggest doing)? They first tried jumping – unsuccessfully. Next they tried climbing (which meant climbing on the audience) – also unsuccessfully. Then they cracked the problem by having one climb onto the shoulders of another, while the rest formed a chain-gang supply line. This business was combined with chanting (over and over) lines 18 to 22. Now, this was an image of the satyrs *working*, something they are not usually happy to do (insofar as work implies deferred – while play implies immediate – gratification), but it was also an image of work transformed, transcended. The rhythmic coordination of chain gang and chant was *already dance* – and it naturally fed into the more celebratory dance that followed.

It also soon became evident that there were very many opportunities for comedy. In fact, it was tempting to build in comic action and effects throughout the play. Naturally this raised the question of how appropriate it would be to do so. The idea that the fifth-century satyr play provided "comic relief" seems to me inadequate and misleading. As I suggested above, it underestimates the celebratory (hence the Dionysian) aspect of the genre. But this does not mean that comedy should be avoided. Comedy that reflects the anarchic, disruptive nature of the satyrs is surely apt. Even so, it seems likely that a certain amount of laughing *at* the satyrs would also have occurred in the original genre, in particular at their incompetence in a range of activities. Even in the mid- (perhaps the early) fifth century, the attitude of the sophisticated city-dwelling audience to the crude rustic satyrs would probably have involved a sense of superiority (though mixed with other attitudes). Through this, the satyrs probably developed as comic anti-types. This, in turn, would have been an extension of the social inversions in the masquerades, which pre-date the theatrical genre, where citizens dressed up as and imitated satyrs and behaved in what would otherwise have been unacceptable ways.<sup>37</sup> But, developed in theatrical form, such role playing



would have come to seem *contained* by the “safe superiority” of the audience, with laughter the expression of exactly this “neutralization.”<sup>38</sup>

We had an ideal plot thread with which to explore this issue, the satyrs’ involvement with athletics. We assumed that satyrs would not make good athletes, not because they lacked the physical capacity but because they could not submit to the discipline required. In our “training” scene we took the satyrs through the events of the ancient pentathlon – discus, running, javelin, long jump (with jumping weights) and wrestling – which generated very many possible gags; too many, in fact. The satyrs proved “incompetent” at all events, so that laughter could enjoy its sense of superiority, but the scene was also pure parody and as such it called into question the ideal behind athletics, thus pulling the rug from under that sense of superiority. This, in turn, reflected (and provoked reflection on) the conflict at the heart of the (at least of *our*) play, between the Dionysian and something else that scorns the Dionysian as soft and “feminine,” that valorizes rigorous, (mechanically) repetitive training, with all its accompanying asceticism,<sup>39</sup> and sets itself up as the “true” masculine ideal.<sup>40</sup>

The precise production problem in this scene was how far to follow where comic potential led. It was necessary to keep the comedy “tight and pointed” in order to sustain the parody; otherwise, it led towards clowning. As John Wright says, “In clown, your job is to make us laugh; in parody, your job is to make us think and laugh – at the same time. Meaning is never far away in parody, but it falls apart as soon as we lose sight of what you’re really saying.”<sup>41</sup>

Does the principle adopted here run counter to what seems so essential to the genre, the way satyrs tend to take over – to take over the plot and to take over the playing space? No, because it was not the satyrs themselves (that is, the performers transformed into satyrs) who were generating all the comic possibilities that had then to be discarded. These possibilities were suggested to an observer. Left to the satyrs themselves, the scene simply – and quickly – dissolved into chaos. Satyrs are *not* clowns. Clowns are always individual, even (or especially?) in the traditional trio. We needed, of course, to involve only small numbers of satyrs in each athletic event, to maintain clarity. The others became an enthusiastic audience – and this audience had a tendency to usurp the scene. Hence, as soon as the three pairs of participant satyrs had turned the last event, wrestling, into a bizarre form of dance, all the others had to join in – and the scene reached its inevitable, chaotically exuberant end.

Some of the possible gags that were rejected would have involved a tacit acknowledgement of the presence of the audience. The issue of whether or not to acknowledge the audience (something which can be achieved in a variety of ways) arose often, in fact, and it is worth asking why. When Athenian citizens masqueraded as satyrs, no doubt they behaved in a provocative way to their “audience” of fellow citizens. It seems strange that all trace of this should drop out of the satyr play. Yet it is widely assumed that while Old Comedy drew attention to its theatrical nature, necessarily including those who constituted the shared activity *as* theater by means of their gaze, tragedy and satyr play opted to privilege the fiction, the “*otherwhere*.” I referred earlier to a kind of “neutralization” of the satyrs that occurred through this exclusion of the audience, but I suspect that there is another side to this coin. For our production, the audience was in very close proximity to the action. In this circumstance, “ignoring” the audience *increased* the sense of danger. Indeed, there was a real risk of someone’s being accidentally trodden on or hit. When some satyrs actually climbed upon members of the audience in order try to attach their images to the temple, the impression of “ignoring” the audience (as against “involving” it) – treating it as though it wasn’t there – was taken as far as possible, so that it turned into its opposite. Moreover, this was a “natural” extension of the satyrs’ tendency to “upstage” others, which really means to take over and dominate – even to burst – the playing space. As far as we know, there was no such proximity in the fifth-century theater, and even if there were, the far-greater size of the audience would

have greatly reduced the effect of what I might call “over-ignoring” the front row. But the effect we achieved was fully consistent with what I now think is the essence of the satyr play, which I will define as *breaking the container*, an idea I shall develop in the Conclusions. But it does not “break the illusion.” This concept, in fact, is far from adequate for understanding tragedy, but it is even more inappropriate for the satyr play, as I shall also argue in the Conclusions.

The last of our results worth noting here is that we had no need for Silenos. Hence we did not include him. (Notably, he is not part of Lissarrague’s recipe either.) If, from the beginning of the process, we had not had it in mind that Silenos was a conventional character in the fifth-century satyr play, a belief that made us look for ways to include him, we would not even have noticed that we did not need him.

It is not certain that Silenos was a character in all fifth-century satyr plays. His prominence in *Cyclops* (which was probably produced in 408) and his very different treatment in *Ichneutai* (which is probably much earlier) and *Diktyoulkoi* (which is likely to be earlier still), in both of which he interacts much more closely with the chorus, suggest some kind of evolution of the genre over the classical period. In *Cyclops*, Silenos seems to have become an autonomous comic-grotesque character, the prototype of Shakespeare’s Falstaff, even of Barnadine. Euripides’ foregrounding of Silenos and relative sidelining of the satyr chorus are two sides of a coin; both reflect the degree to which this play no longer embodies the qualities that had once been the reason for the inclusion of satyr plays in the City Dionysia.

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## CONCLUSIONS

Richard Seaford describes the satyr as an ambiguous creature, “cruder than a man and yet somehow wiser, combining mischief with wisdom and animality with divinity.”<sup>42</sup> He goes on to note “a similar ambiguity of satyrs in festival and ritual. On the one hand they are men and boys, dressed up for frolics at the festival; and on the other hand they are, within the *thiasos*, the attendants of the god and the initiated custodians of a solemn and secret tradition.”<sup>43</sup> His words imply that those who dress up as satyrs, in masquerade, *are* satyrs, if only in their cruder, more-mischievous manifestation. This resonates strongly for me, for through the production process I developed the conviction that, while satyrs are mythological creatures belonging to wild nature, they are also *what you turn into when you imitate them*. A character in a drama is always “elsewhere” – that is, the audience consents to treat the actor *as* that character, in the (authentic) character’s absence. There is always a gap, a kind of space, between the signifier, the actor, and the signified, the character. This holds for even the most convincing performance. But it seems to me that it does not hold for satyrs. Satyrs are not “characters.” Nor are they contained within a drama. For satyrs *are their presence*. The presence of satyrs lies in – or *is* – their energy, which is necessarily the energy of the performers. The energy of satyrs is what “breaks the frame” within which they appear.

I referred earlier to the high energy level needed in a satyr play. In this respect the genre is comparable with Commedia dell’Arte, which is also a high-energy form of theater. Lecoq remarks that the intensity of Commedia makes it *non-linear*.<sup>44</sup> The linearity of plot, with one event simply leading to another, is not only frequently suspended to accommodate the *lazzi*, but even as the plot is unfolding it is warped and in a sense “up-ended” by the way in which the characters “die of everything: of desire, of hunger, of love, of jealousy.”<sup>45</sup> The horizontal plot-axis is knocked into a crazy, jagged graph by the vertical highs and lows of an *extreme way of being*. Now, something very similar to this is true of satyr plays too, with the added dimension that the energy, or intensity, of a group of **n** can be much more than **n** times the energy, or intensity, of one, as I remarked before. Commedia characters do not *quite* break the container. Satyrs do.

From this point of view, the “container” that the satyrs break is the plot. By extension, it is the mythic-

tragic world that is the concomitant of plot in this context. In this way, the satyr play returns the theater to its *here-and-now*. Old Comedy does this too, but in such a radically different way that it amounts to a wholly different thing. Old Comedy does it *intellectually*, through its semiotically multi-layered self-subversion. Satyr plays do it *physically*, through the body – above all through the body’s return to self-celebration, that is, through a “wild” form of dance – a dance *event* that transcends the plot in which it is motivated; a dance event, moreover, that is like an eruption of nature into the domain of culture.

Tradition has it that the satyr play was invented by Pratinas towards the end of the sixth century (but not invented *from nothing*, of course), and that it was included in the City Dionysia soon after in response to the complaint that tragedy, as it was developing, had “nothing to do with Dionysos.” Rather than seeing this as the (albeit reiterated) complaint that the plot of such-and-such a tragedy was about, say, Heracles rather than Dionysos, it is more appropriate to see in it a criticism of the *new form of theatrical drama itself*. Not only does drama require new plots, it shifts the emphasis to these plots. Ritual, in contrast, repeats something. As Seaford notes, the satyr play was also subject to this demand for newness of plot,<sup>46</sup> but its plots were “little,” a feature Aristotle ascribes to the “satyric” form from which tragedy developed; “little” may be taken to mean not only slight but also relatively insignificant. What matters in the satyr play, then, is not so much the newly invented plot but the repeated ritual, the displacement of the drama by the dance.

If the satyr play was a conservative reaction to the very emergence of theater (as something generating drama), shifting the weight of the event back towards ritual, then it is possible that it also retained an improvisatory element, at least in the early stages. This would certainly feed into the way the satyrs seem to “break the container,” for it would have the consequence that they are not fully “contained” by the rehearsal process either. Pratinas invented the satyr play as a *scripted* genre, but this does not rule out all possible improvisation.

Guy Hedreen says of silens (an alternative Attic name for satyrs) that “the fifth-century poetry, like the sixth-century vase painting, suggests that choral song and dance, an activity characterized by precision and discipline, was part of the everyday lives of beings that epitomize instinctual behavior.”<sup>47</sup> In itself, the idea of choral song and dance as characterized by precision and discipline is unproblematic, but it is contained in an argument in which Hedreen frequently uses the word “regimented” to describe the dancing of the silens-satyrs; describing the image on a neck-amphora in Malibu, for example, he says, “[t]he dance steps and movements of the [two] silens are highly regimented: each is high-stepping with his left leg, bending the right leg, looking back over the right shoulder, carrying the nymph on the left shoulder.”<sup>48</sup> Now, this “regimentation” may be simply a visual convention used to convey the *idea* of dance, but Hedreen tends to assume it holds for performance practices too. Richard Seaford, in the same volume, takes this argument a step further: “rehearsal, and control by a central individual, are facilitated by the transformation of the procession into a stationary hymn and make possible the kind of regimentation that Hedreen stresses in some sixth-century vase-painting of satyrs” – though this is not a point being made specifically about satyr plays.<sup>49</sup> The problem here – if it is not simply the ill-chosen word “regimentation” – is that too much of a binary opposition is assumed between the improvised and the rehearsed. The improvised can be something simply “made up as you go along,” or a re-mixing of previously worked-out routines, as in *Commedia*, or a subtle interaction and complicity between highly trained artists, as in jazz. The rehearsed can be self-displayingly rehearsed, like a group of college cheerleaders, or it may hide its own highly rehearsed nature, as in any convincing stage fight. Rehearsal does not necessarily lead to regimentation; nor does improvisation necessarily imply the opposite of regimentation, whatever that is.

However, the assumption that “precision and discipline” were *overt* (that is, self-displaying, at least up to

a point) in choral performance *in tragedy* seems to me a reasonable one. I would go on to assume, however, that this is a good reason for their relaxation in satyr play.

*For the satyr play is the "release" of the chorus.*

It helps if we assume here that the same group of individuals performed as the choruses in all three tragedies and the following satyr play. P. E. Easterling stresses the audience's awareness of this as part-constitutive of the satyr play's significance for them,<sup>50</sup> but it is also important to see it from the chorus's own point of view. The day-long performance constituted a kind of journey for that chorus, a journey towards and culminating in the satyr play. The physical and mental demands of this were very great, but even so, the wilder and hence even more physically demanding satyric dancing of the last play can be seen not only as a kind of "arrival" but also as a "reward" (though this may be a slightly demeaning way of putting it). It expresses the chorus's *return to centrality*. To understand this idea fully we need to see that tragedy rests on a kind of paradox; the tragic chorus is *theatrically* central, but *dramatically* marginal. Broadly, the theatrical aspect of a performance of a play covers anything that draws the attention of the audience to the performance event or to any of the constitutive elements of that event. Its dramatic aspect inheres in the fiction, both in the plot and in the represented "world of the play." Within the theatrical structure of tragedy, it is as though the action is presented *for* the chorus to witness, an intention marked by the repeated "suspensions" of dramatic development in the *stasima*, in which the reactions of the chorus are transposed to a different, supra-dramatic level of song and dance. During the *stasima*, in fact, although the chorus remains within its dramatic or fictional identity, it also reasserts its constant single-play-transcending role, a role, moreover, that largely defined the institution of performance for Athenians, for whom performance meant, quite simply, *choroi*. Within the dramatized fiction of the tragedy, however, the choric role is restricted to witnessing and reacting to *someone else's story*. Over the course of the fifth century, in fact, no doubt as a kind of consequence of this restriction, the chorus tends to become less and less involved in the action.

But in the satyr play (at least in the Aeschylean and Sophoclean kind) the chorus takes what we might call "center stage," and this status surely functions as a kind of recognition of their role *throughout* the tetralogy. It is also a kind of *return*. As drama develops historically, certain features of the forms and practices from which it originates become attenuated, even lost. But the satyr chorus brings with it an origin-al world, a world of origins, and thereby the theater briefly recovers its own source, which is *prior to the dominance of drama*.

To this account, another key fact must be added. Plays were performed in Athens in honor of the god Dionysos. The chorus was thus engaged in a celebration of the god. But satyrs too are celebrants of Dionysos. Thus, after three grueling tragedies in which the discipline of the chorus was in large part exerted to keep it in its "proper place" with respect to the *drama*, a place of (mere) witnessing, the members of the chorus were required to enact, and in that sense become, *what, as a dance troupe, they already were*: celebrants of Dionysos.<sup>51</sup> In this change lies a kind of *liberation* from their de-centering and restricting roles in the tragedies. In this light it is entirely apt that the plots of numerous satyr plays (including *Cyclops*) themselves enact such a liberation, with the satyrs being freed in the end from their bondage to someone other than their god.

In the plot of *At the Isthmian Games*, the satyrs have not been enslaved by another; they have chosen to renounce their allegiance to Dionysos. But the play turns upon the key visual image of tied-up phalli. At the end of our version, as a necessary precondition of their danced reconciliation with Dionysos, the satyrs' phalli have to be set free.

Tragedy enacts a loss. Or rather, in a certain sense it *re-enacts* that loss, and thus commemorates it, for the mythic location of tragedy is both a past and an elsewhere. This is not to suggest that the audience thought of Hippolytos or Agamemnon or Ajax as once having lived and died in the way depicted, for that very same audience would have expected the depictions to be varied, as it were “re-fictionalized,” with each festival of new plays. Rather, any tragedy is “distanced” from the world of the theater and audience. This feature is often inadequately described, especially as tragedy is distinguished from Old Comedy, as its “maintenance of illusion.” Many factors, which cannot be analyzed here, contribute to it. Among them is the “*disguise*,” the entrapping or limiting fictional identity, of the chorus.

We are on the verge of a crucial paradox. If tragedy projects itself elsewhere and back in time, satyr plays also do so and to an even greater extent! The world of the satyrs is pre-civilized or pre-political. The mythic context is typically very early, dealing with origins, the first musical instruments, the first wine-making, the births of gods. But the celebratory quality of a satyr play also invokes the *here-and-now* to an extent impossible in tragedy, where the commemorative function entirely privileges the *there-and-then*. Crucial to this effect is the sense, shared by chorus members and audience alike, that this chorus of satyr-celebrants belongs both to mythic pre-history, to the wild, and (*pace* Plato) to the civic present, to the city.

In the case of satyrs, to *play* is to *be*. This holds for “real” satyrs: their very being lies in their playfulness. It holds for those who “dress up” as satyrs: to play a satyr is to become one. Therefore, in the satyr play, *there is no illusion to break*.

But in the satyr play, the chorus breaks the container of “drama” – and thus liberates the dance. It is the satyrs’ natural tendency to dance, along with their natural aptitude for it, that becomes the larger container (without which, satyrs would be menacing, truculent, uncouth).

To dance is to celebrate the gift of dance.

Thus, while satyrs may “lose out” in some plots (their plans or their desires are frustrated), they always “win” on another level. It is hard to imagine them leaving the orchestra in a defeated way (like, say, the chorus in *Agamemnon*) – for better than any “last word” or even any “last laugh,” *they have the last dance*.<sup>52</sup>

It may be that *At the Isthmian Games*, as we staged it, differed in many significant ways from the (early- to mid-) fifth-century satyr play. But insofar as there may have been something *like* the original genre in it, in other words, insofar as we may have created something *satyr-play-like*, it is possible that insight was gained into the even earlier type of performance from which Aristotle says tragedy originated. It is also possible that the actual satyr play was invented and instituted to recover certain qualities of this earlier form. Still, it is hard to see how one might become certain of any of this. But in trying to “play our way back” to what came to seem a *pre-dramatic* form, a modern performance of this kind can at least be seen as *post-dramatic*, and this understanding begins to open up the question of its potential relevance for modern audiences.<sup>53</sup> But that is another topic.

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## notes

<sup>1</sup> The “Attic Tragedy in Translation” course, which is part of the College Year in Athens Program at DIKEMES, always includes a “workshop production” of a version of an ancient play, often of an experimental nature. In teaching this course, I have worked on and directed theatrical reconstructions of fragmentary plays on three occasions prior to this one. Those productions foregrounded the fragmentary nature of the original material and played with the “openness” of reconstruction. In this way, they confronted and explored the lost. This production, though based on fragments, had a different



motivation; it was precisely the “fullness” of the satyr play (as something presupposing, though going far beyond, the continuity of text) that we were trying to recover.

<sup>2</sup> “The choral songs of *Cyc[lops]*, although five in number as in tragedy, resemble the songs of Old Comedy in their shortness, metrical simplicity, and tendency to accompany action. And the last two songs are astrophic. In the satyric fragments the choral songs appear to be more frequent than in *Cyc.*, and in the *Ichneutai* [by Sophocles] we find both *astroph* and strophic pairs divided by spoken lines. In these respects the fragments resemble Old Comedy more closely than does *Cyc.* But the regularity and simplicity of rhythm characteristic of *Cyc.* is found only at A[eschylus] *Dikt[youlko]* 806–20; the other surviving songs tend to express agitated action or reaction, notably with dochmiacs, runs of short syllables, and rapid alternation of metres.” R. A. S. Seaford, Introduction to *Cyclops of Euripides* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 46.

<sup>3</sup> Bernd Seidensticker, “Dithyramb, Comedy, and Satyr–Play,” in *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. Justina Gregory (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 44.

<sup>4</sup> François Lissarrague, “Why Satyrs Are Good to Represent,” in *Nothing To Do With Dionysus? Athenian Drama in its Social Context*, eds. John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 236.

<sup>5</sup> Lissarrague, “Why Satyrs . . .,” 236.

<sup>6</sup> This production had its first performance on October 16th, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Tony Harrison, *Plays 5* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Dana Sutton, “The Satyr Play,” in *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, Volume 1, Part 2: *Greek Drama*, eds. P. E. Easterling and B. M. W. Knox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 95.

<sup>9</sup> Seaford, *Cyclops*, 11.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle ascribes this characteristic to the “satyr–play–like” from which, he says, tragedy developed (*Poetics* 1449a 19), but the surviving evidence suggests that the plots of actual satyr plays were relatively simple or slight.

<sup>11</sup> George W. M. Harrison makes an extraordinary claim about Euripides’ *Cyclops*. Shortly after the *parodos*, “[t]he satyrs, bored by Odysseus’ travelogue and Silenos’ gestured tour (106–30), must wander off–stage since the plot requires that they not be present when Silenos discovers that Odysseus has wine (139) and bargains Polyphemos’ possessions for wine for himself.” (George W. M. Harrison, “Positioning of satyr drama and characterization in the *Cyclops*,” in *Satyr Drama: Tragedy at Play*, ed. George W. M. Harrison (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2005), 238.) Presumably, then, they must also “wander” back onstage ready for line 175. It is certainly notable that the satyr chorus has no lines between 81 and 174, and this reflects the strong “separation out” of Silenos from the chorus in this play, but there are many better ways to solve the problem in production than arbitrarily removing the satyrs. Nevertheless, whatever way is chosen, it will go beyond what is strictly “in” the text, an ironic result in relation to Harrison’s suggestion, which seems rooted in the idea that “if it’s not in the text, it’s not there.”

<sup>12</sup> The majority of satyr plays that we know anything about take their basic plots from existing myths (such as Odysseus’ defeat of Polyphemos) in which satyrs play no part. Some reason for the satyrs’ presence in the play (such as their capture and enslavement by Polyphemos) is then needed. In *Isthmiastai*, however, there seems to be no such prior story.

<sup>13</sup> We used the Loeb Classical Library text of the play: *Aeschylus III: Fragments*, ed. and trans. Alan H. Sommerstein (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), 82–99.

<sup>14</sup> Advice on this was provided by Nigel Kennell.



<sup>15</sup> Dionysos and Xanthias leave the *skene*, which represents the house of Heracles, and journey into Hades – Dionysos going by Charon’s boat while Xanthias has to walk round the lake – ultimately arriving at the same *skene*, which now represents Pluto’s palace. The process lasts some 260 lines (from ca. 180 to 440), though these include choral passages.

<sup>16</sup> Sommerstein, *Aeschylus* III, 89.

<sup>17</sup> David Wiles, *Mask and Performance in Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 207. Wiles also cites as evidence Dionysos’ reference to a satyr hiding behind a shield, “so we may infer that the satyrs have been learning to carry a hoplite shield.” But if this is the case, why is the helmet such an unwelcome surprise? The scene is much more effective if the threat of the *oplitodromia* is the final straw for satyrs who have already been finding athletic training very arduous. We therefore interpreted Dionysos’ reference to a shield metaphorically, having a satyr hiding behind another even as he spoke “defiantly.”

<sup>18</sup> What alternatives are there to the hoplite helmet? Javelins might be frightening, but in our version the satyrs had already been using them. Taplin’s suggestion of shackles may be consistent with the sparse textual evidence, but it would give a completely different, harsher mood to the play, presenting Dionysos as a slaver. And it is far less “neat” as a solution. See Oliver Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus: The Dramatic Use of Exits and Entrances in Greek Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 421–2.

<sup>19</sup> The exercise is described, not quite as here, in Dymphna Callery, *Through the Body: A Practical Guide to Physical Theatre* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2001), 30.

<sup>20</sup> Wiles, *Mask and Performance*, 210.

<sup>21</sup> There was probably some similarity between the dances performed by the padded dancers and those performed by satyrs, and “[i]t is as if the satyrs, once developed, took over the territory of the padded dancers.” J. Richard Green, “Let’s Hear It For The Fat Man,” in *The Origins of Theater in Ancient Greece and Beyond: From Ritual to Drama*, eds. Eric Csapo and Margaret C. Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 105.

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Lecoq, *The Moving Body*, trans. David Bradby (London: Methuen, 2002), 124–34.

<sup>23</sup> My memory may well be at fault, but as far as I am aware, this and the next exercises are my own – but both are highly influenced by Grotowski’s work on voice.

<sup>24</sup> Lecoq, *Moving Body*, 40.

<sup>25</sup> I do not know the origin of this exercise. It is described or referred to in numerous texts.

<sup>26</sup> “A chorus is not geometric but organic. In just the same way as a collective body, it has its centre of gravity, its extensions, its respiration. It is a kind of living cell . . .” Lecoq, *Moving Body*, 139.

<sup>27</sup> This “Group With No Leader Game” is taken from John Wright, *Why is That so Funny? A Practical Exploration of Physical Comedy* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2006), 48–9. Wright comments that this game “gives you the safest feeling of being out of control that you’re ever likely to experience.”

<sup>28</sup> Wright, *Why is That so Funny?*, 316.

<sup>29</sup> See Lecoq, *Moving Body*, 138–9.

<sup>30</sup> Lecoq, *Moving Body*, 141–4. The playing area is imagined to be a plate or disc which is balanced on its center point. A person standing in the center will maintain that balance, but if s/he moves away the disc is imagined to tilt. Someone else must then enter and find a position that returns the disc to “horizontal” balance. In the “1 = 1” version, the second person will then cease to balance the disc, going wherever s/he likes, requiring a third to enter and find the position that maintains overall balance. But in the “1 = n”

version, a group of *n* individuals is balanced by one. Note that if the *n* move around, “shoal-of-fish” like, as they wish, so that the one has the responsibility of balancing the disc, the effect is often of a person who seems anxious, frightened or threatened. But if roles are reversed, so that the *n* must balance the one, a *chorus* appears in its relation to a protagonist.

<sup>31</sup> It is sometimes claimed that, in the *stasima*, the original tragic chorus commonly maintained a rigid “block” formation (5 x 5 x 5), all facing out towards the audience. But the structure of many stasima makes this seem unlikely. Perhaps the best choral song with which to experiment with the way some kinds of “turning inwards” seem written into the text is not strictly a *stasimon* but the *parodos* in *Agamemnon*, all 218 lines of it. A chorus may occasionally “turn inwards” during an episode too, as in *Agamemnon* 1346–71 – though this marks a kind of “fragmentation” of the chorus.

<sup>32</sup> Mark Griffith, “Satyrs, citizens, and self-presentation,” in *Satyr Drama: Tragedy at Play*, ed. George W. M. Harrison (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2005), 171–2.

<sup>33</sup> Edith Hall, “Ithyphallic Males Behaving Badly, or, Satyr Drama as Gendered Tragic Ending,” in *Parchments of Gender: Deciphering the Body in Antiquity*, ed. Maria Wyke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 13–37. Also as Edith Hall, “Horny Satyrs and Tragic Tetralogies,” in *The Theatrical Cast of Athens: Interactions between Ancient Greek Drama and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 142–169.

<sup>34</sup> Lissarrague, “Why Satyrs . . .,” 236.

<sup>35</sup> “Restored behavior is the key process of every kind of performing, in everyday life, in healing, in ritual, in play, and in the arts. Restored behavior is ‘out there,’ separate from ‘me.’ To put it in personal terms, restored behavior is ‘me behaving as if I were someone else,’ or ‘as I am told to do,’ or ‘as I have learned.’” Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 34. In performance, in other words, enacting is always (in some sense) re-enacting. I am not at all sure that this is true.

<sup>36</sup> See note 28. In tragedy too, of course, certain events will pull the scene “off-balance”; but balance tends to exert a strong and almost immediate counter-pull, as something always to be returned to, like the “tonic” or “home key.” This is essential to the formality of tragedy.

<sup>37</sup> “[M]any pictures of satyrs suggest that men and boys dressed up as satyrs for [the second day of the Anthesteria]. Beliefs about the mischievous and frolicsome nature of the satyrs derive no doubt from the actual behaviour of the satyrs on this and similar occasions.” Seaford, *Cyclops*, 7.

<sup>38</sup> With a hint, perhaps, of “neutering”?

<sup>39</sup> The satyrs were naturally appalled when told they had to give up wine and sex.

<sup>40</sup> There are evident parallels here with the opposition between Dionysos and Pentheus in *Bacchae* and with that between Dionysos and Lykourgos in Aeschylus’ lost tragedy *Edonians*.

<sup>41</sup> Wright, *Why is that so Funny?*, 253.

<sup>42</sup> Seaford, *Cyclops*, 7.

<sup>43</sup> Seaford, *Cyclops*, 9.

<sup>44</sup> Lecoq, *Moving Body*, 119.

<sup>45</sup> Lecoq, *Moving Body*, 121.

<sup>46</sup> Seaford, *Cyclops*, 16.

<sup>47</sup> Guy Hedreen, “Myths of Ritual in Athenian Vase-Paintings of Silens,” in *The Origins of Theater in Ancient Greece and Beyond: From Ritual to Drama*, eds. Eric Csapo and Margaret C. Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 181–2.

<sup>48</sup> Hedreen, "Myths of Ritual," 170.

<sup>49</sup> Richard Seaford, "From Ritual to Drama," in *The Origins of Theater in Ancient Greece and Beyond: From Ritual to Drama*, eds. Eric Csapo and Margaret C. Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 386.

<sup>50</sup> P. E. Easterling, "A Show for Dionysos," in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. P. E. Easterling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 39.

<sup>51</sup> "[T]he citizen actually was a servant of Dionysos when he danced in a satyr chorus." Wiles, *Mask and Performance*, 208.

<sup>52</sup> Of course, we know almost nothing about the way satyr plays ended. It seems likely to me, however, that many if not all would have ended with a celebratory dance. This is even possible in the case of *Cyclops*, notwithstanding the two perfunctory "exit lines" given to the chorus; but to sustain this idea we have to imagine a dance that is not accompanied by any scripted song. After all, the satyrs are on their way to reunion with Dionysos. An alternative "processional" exit would seem very flat.

<sup>53</sup> The concepts deployed here are due to Hans-Thies Lehmann. See Hans-Thies Lehman, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London; Routledge, 2006).

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## Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* (Estonian: *Iphigenia Aulises*)

Translated by Anne Lill  
 Directed by Lorna Marshall  
 Performed by NO99  
 March – September 2012  
 (reviewed performance: March 20, 2012)  
 Tallinn, Estonia

**Review by Laura Viidebaum**  
*Cambridge University*

On 17 March 2012, a popular and progressive theatre group in Estonia, NO99, under the supervision of the British director Lorna Marshall, premiered their production of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* (IA) in Estonia. While this is not the first time Greek tragedy was performed in Estonia, it was still a landmark production of Ancient Greek drama in Estonian theatre.

Theatre is a very popular cultural medium in Estonia, which is one of the smallest countries in the EU: there are currently more than 20 professional theatrical groups that are (at least partly) supported by the state. The country practises a form of institutionalised theatre, which recently, in the light of widespread economic problems, has been viewed more and more as a successful model for other countries. Estonia's subsidised theatre companies operate with stable groups (fixed actors) and produce plays in their own theatre buildings (in contrast to a project-based theatre system), often developing thus a clear niche in the field. Because of this policy, most of the popular troupes have acquired and maintained throughout their existence ardent supporters in the contemporary strands in drama they have adopted (e.g., realism in the National Drama Theatre, experimental theatre in the Von Krahl Theatre, etc.).



*Figure 1: Klytaimnestra (Mirtel Pohla, in black) and Iphigenia (Eva Klements, in white) (photo: Siim Reispass)*

NO99 also has a stable theatre house and its own clear niche: socio-political theatre. In 2012 the company reduced their numbers and operates now with seven actors. Since its official establishment in 2004, NO99's repertoire has been very wide, covering original productions, film adaptations, improvisational projects, and close readings of various classics. For instance, in 2005 NO99 adapted Yukio Mishima's work (NO99 *Sometimes It Feels As If Life Is Ending and That There Hasn't Been Any Love At All*),<sup>1</sup> followed by, among others plays, an adaptation of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (NO98), McDonagh's *Pillowman* (NO97), Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard* (NO95), Cimino's *Deer Hunter* (NO90), Toompere's *The Death of a Communist* (NO87), and the political and provocative performances (written and produced by NO99's director Tiit Ojasoo and art director Ene-Liis Semper) *Oil* (NO93), *GEP* (NO88), and *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (NO83). More recently, NO99 has brought to the stage Michael Frayn's *Noises Off* (NO73), an adaptation of Stephen King's *Misery* (NO68), and Lauri Lagle's *The Great Tuck In* (NO65), which was inspired by Ferrer's movie *La Grande Bouffe*. This highly selective short list gives a glimpse of the company's distinctive trademark—every production bears a number that counts down from 99 (NO is

an abbreviation of 'number'), which underscores the limited duration of the theatre project. According to some sources, this idea was originally inspired by an essay of Hasso Krull, an Estonian poet and novelist who suggested that time should be counted down from the end of the universe (i.e., from the death of the sun).<sup>2</sup>

Because of their ambitious projects that often make use of high-quality props and high-tech solutions (e.g., they always launch a trailer to introduce the play, including a trailer for Euripides' *IA*: <http://vimeo.com/41829177>), NO99 usually has a rather expensive budget for their plays. In the case of *Iphigenia*, however, the bare stage and simple costumes probably kept costs quite low. The venue for the production of Euripides' *IA* itself is rather intimate (even in Estonian terms), accommodating only a small audience (164 people at maximum). With roughly a dozen performances, this play was viewed by roughly 2000 people in Estonia.

NO66 (Euripides' *IA*) is the first ancient tragedy performed by this theatre company. In fact, starting from the Estonian Independence in 1991 there have been perhaps half a dozen performances based directly on an ancient play, but Euripides seems not to have been produced in this period before NO66 (there was, however, a production of the *Bacchae* in 1989). A previous performance of a Greek tragedy (Sophokles' *Antigone*) was mounted in 2010, also produced by a foreign director, Homayun Ghanizadeh (Iran). The scarcity of ancient plays on the Estonian stage suggests a lack of interest in such material perhaps best explained by Professor Anne Lill, an expert in Ancient Greek theatre and translator at the University of Tartu. In a 2009 interview she argues that 'the situation in Estonia does not apparently encourage this art form [Greek tragedy]. The cultural background is different [here] and the layers of cultural knowledge scarce. Greek tragedy is a demanding genre and requires profound knowledge and familiarity from those engaged with it. The audience there [in other European countries] is more interested [in this art form], because their education has created a fertile basis for appreciating ancient Greek tragedy.'<sup>3</sup>

Lill hints here at a dilemma confronting Estonian theatre producers: the lack of a wider and more pervasive tradition in Ancient Greek performance genres, and hence of audience familiarity with them, may make Estonian theatre directors hesitate to introduce an ancient play. Even though the general school system requires most pupils to read at least Sophokles' *Oidipus Tyrannos* during their A-level studies, contemporary cultural life in Estonia is neither built upon nor encourages a familiarity with classics. In other words, a wider interest in Ancient Greek theatre is just not part of artistic and literary



Figure 2: Menelaos (Rasmus Kaljujärv, left) and Agamemnon (Tambet Tuisk, right) (photo: Siim Reispass)



Figure 3: Chorus (Marika Vaarik) (photo: Siim Reispass)



culture in Estonia, where the study of classics is almost unknown to most people, even those holding a university degree. But the evident resonance of NO99's *IA* with the audience demonstrated very clearly the vast, and terribly unused, potential of Greek tragedy on the Estonian stage.

Since there was no previous Estonian translation of Euripides' *IA*, a translation was commissioned from Prof. Anne Lill specifically for this performance. The literal translation follows the Greek rhythms closely, in both the choral and the spoken parts of the play. The variation of short and long vowels in Estonian allows a versification that approximates the effect of Ancient Greek meters, which are essentially based on the interplay between the lengths of syllables. The Estonian translation uses iambic trimeters and trochaic tetrameters in the dialogue sections and various Aeolic metres in the choral parts, without distorting the natural flow of the language.<sup>4</sup>

Since the Estonian audience, who is generally unaware of the conventions among Estonian classicists for rendering Greek meters into Estonian, might have expected verses in poetic rhyme, it seemed possible that they would feel estranged by listening to Greek rhythmic patterns in Estonian. This fear, however, was unjustified. Even though the translation followed the original in both wording and content, the performed text was still a recognisable adaptation, substituting archaisms and metrical but difficult passages with more commonly used words and expressions. In other words, the actors attempted to find a good balance between poetic language and clear content, even if it came at the expense of the meter. Hence, though the metrical translation was not always followed with great care in performance, the overall impression of a poetic text was still maintained.

It was also useful that the complete translation of the play was printed in the playbill, along with good photos of the performance and an introduction not only to the play but also to the more general background of the characters and the mythological theme.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it was an unexpectedly rich playbill and entirely worth its cost of only a couple of euros.

The advertised fidelity to the original text was, I dare say, unique among (professional) performances of the ancient Greek drama in Estonia. Indeed, one of the most vivid earlier productions of ancient Greek tragedy (Mati Unt's *Brother Antigone*, *Mother Oidipus*, premiered in 2003, published as a text in 2006) was a witty mixture of different plays by Aischylos, Sophokles, and Euripides, inventive not only in the mixture itself but also in its use of language (e.g., neologisms consisting of word pairings of Estonian with Greek). Marshall's engagement with Euripides and the original text was of a different kind: instead of deconstructing and explicitly



Figure 4: *Klytaimnestra (Pohla) and Agamemnon (Tuisk)* (photo: Siim Reisspass)



Figure 5: *Iphigenia (Eva Klements)* (photo: Siim Reisspass)

reinterpreting the underlying text, this production explored the tensions between an apparently stable ancient text and the fluidity of performance and reception. To some extent, in such a shape it seemed even more provocative on an Estonian stage than a modern adaptation or reading (deconstruction) of the play would have appeared, since the Estonian theatregoers who are (mostly) inexperienced in ancient plays were here presented with a performance that had done nothing (or very little) to modernise the original text and bridge the gap between ancient and modern. The focus on the enactment of the text challenged the actors and audience to go beyond the trappings of the theatre and to explore the emotions and conflicts behind words. Here, the simplicity of the *mise-en-scène* forced both the actors and audience to use their imagination to fill in the gaps and to create meaning.



Figure 6: Agamemnon (Tuisk, left) and Iphigenia (Klements, right) (photo: Siim Reispass)

For the Estonian audience, the central issues of Euripides' *IA* are at the same time very familiar and very distant. On the one hand, the distance between the Greek text and the modern Estonian audience is perhaps awkwardly wide in respect to issues of religion (Estonians are usually held to have a notoriously cold attitude to religion), and it was there that the audience was invited to look behind the delivered words and seek equivalents for this experience elsewhere in their everyday life. On the other hand, as the Estonian reviewer Madis Kolk pointed out, Euripides' tragedies in general and *Iphigenia in Aulis* in particular have great potential to be understood and loved by Estonian theatregoers, because their particularly 'Euripidean' aspect—the sceptical shifts of mood and constant doubts of the characters—has perhaps a specific affinity to Estonians who, according to cultural stereotypes, are perceived as constantly in doubt, perpetually undecided about divinity and reluctant to stand up for their ideas with certainty.

Marshall had decided to emphasise the primacy of the text throughout the play, and so the stage was empty, stripped of all decoration, and had to be filled with actors, their bodies and voices alone. This was a huge responsibility for the actors and, as they confessed during interviews afterwards, one of the most challenging aspects of this production. The importance of the text, however, may seem paradoxical in light of the fact that the director, Lorna Marshall, is British and presumably knows very little Estonian (if any).

The audience was confronted with a bare white room with four doors and big windows on the side, stripped of any other decoration. The result was a stage that presents a deeply impersonal, even sterile, space, which is neither public nor private, neither dangerous (war) nor safe (home). All eight characters wore simple but clearly contemporary costumes, exhibiting no real attempt to create the impression of an ancient context. At the same time, the carefully chosen clothing carried clear symbols of status for the contemporary audience. Men involved in war (Agamemnon, Menelaos, Achilleus, messenger) were presented in simple but clearly identifiable casual military clothing (figure 2). The rest wore civilian clothes: Iphigenia was dressed in a white girlish dress, which underscored her child-like appearance and naivety towards his father's plans. Klytaimnestra appeared in a mature/married woman's costume, discreetly brown-white, and her domestic look was emphasised by the only prop of the play: baby Orestes, whom Klytaimnestra wheeled around in a blue baby carriage, thus icing the cake of her overall domestic appearance.

The chorus, composed of young married women in Euripides' original, was here condensed into one single woman (Marika Vaarik), a somewhat ageless figure whose ironic tone and clear, charismatic voice

delivered her stanzas with emphatic power (figure 3). In the hands of Vaarik the chorus' sighing for the Greek warriors seemed to entail implicitly an ironic undertone and a critique of this very naivety. Vaarik was especially impressive in delivering the end of the stanzas in such a fashion that her premonitory voice and expression continued to resonate into the scenes that followed (e.g., 781–3: *Zeusi tütar Helene aga / Tema nuttis ka palju / Kui ta mehe jättis*).

Compared to the original chorus, Vaarik was clearly more isolated and detached from the general action, and no effort was made to integrate the chorus thematically into the play. In fact, every engagement of the chorus with the actors and the action on stage in the original version was cut. The chorus never participated directly in the dialogues, never commented on the arguments of the characters and remained entirely outside the plot, assuming the position of a seemingly objective observer (being more in dialogue with the audience than with actors on stage). Furthermore, most of the delivered choral odes were extensively reduced, so that only the lines most necessary for the advancement of the plot were spoken.

This interpretation of the chorus might have obscured its function from the audience, especially given the potentially perplexing comments of the chorus, ranging from past references to visions of future events. Nevertheless, Vaarik's chorus was powerful, and despite the significant deviation from the original, this was a convincing interpretation of the play and one which resonated well in the theatre audience. In fact, the passivity of the chorus framed and isolated the story even more, so that the open-ended problems of the Greek family (of the Atreid house), which Euripides had proposed for open discussion with the chorus and the audience in the original setting of Athens, were confined in this interpretation to private/individual matters debated only among the closest family members and the immediately interested parties. Neither the audience nor the chorus was any longer invited to participate in resolving the puzzle or making decisions; their voice and opinions did not matter, and instead the audience was offered a brief glimpse of a deeply personal tragedy, which was unfolding in front of their eyes.

The empty space played a pivotal role in highlighting the importance of the actors' bodies. This was emphasised, for example, in the first meeting of Klytaimnestra, Iphigenia, and Agamemnon (607–690). The audience had already witnessed the personal struggle of Agamemnon and were informed of his final decision to sacrifice his daughter. In this scene, the clearly melancholic and disturbed Agamemnon was juxtaposed to his exhilarated daughter Iphigenia and his wife Klytaimnestra, who had no clue of Agamemnon's internal battle and agony (figure 4). The contrast was presented through a clever teasing game (making use of a pause between lines 639 and 640): Iphigenia kept running towards her father, wanting to hug him (figure 5), but Agamemnon managed to avoid her by moving away every time she came close to catching him. Agamemnon was chased by Iphigenia and they both ran around and bounced against the walls (much as in a boxing ring), creating a very potent picture of the hopelessness of the situation, in which Iphigenia is rushing towards her destruction unawares and Agamemnon beguiling her unwillingly into it. The walls symbolised the inevitability of the events and the running out of options for stopping the approaching disaster. The space was simple but symbolic, underscoring the sense of claustrophobia and fear that characterised their situation.

Similarly, Iphigenia's final song (lines 1467–1487) took the shape of a ritual. Klytaimnestra helped Iphigenia take off her white dress, so that she soon stood on stage wearing only her petticoat. Then she started running in circles and suggestively repeating verses 1471–1474. This trance-like song, accompanied with circular movements, was the culmination of the play: the helpless mother, despite her efforts, was witnessing the walking/running of her daughter towards death. For the first (and last) time in the play, Iphigenia occupied the centre of the stage, whereas Klytaimnestra was reduced to a minor figure, helpless before her daughter's decision as she was helpless before her husband's.

*IA* has been labelled a play of changes, starting from the beginning scenes in which both Menelaos and Agamemnon change their minds about the sacrifice of Iphigenia, and finishing with Iphigenia's own (unexpected) change of heart and decision to die for Greece (figure 6). Klytaimnestra seems the only figure who deviates from this general pattern: expressions of her emotions take different forms, from loud cries and lamenting to supplication and, eventually, to a silent hatred which hints clearly at the future events of this/her hapless household. Yet with all this variety of emotions, Klytaimnestra never changes her mind: her condemnation of Agamemnon's decision regarding the fate of her daughter neither diminishes nor is supplemented by any degree of empathy with Agamemnon. Perhaps because of this uncompromising nature of hers, alongside the powerful emotions of maternal love she represents, Mirtel Pohla's Klytaimnestra emerges from the play as one of its most unforgettable characters (figure 1). To be fair, Klytaimnestra's persuasiveness stems also from her narrow focus: throughout the play she refuses to take the wider context of the problem into consideration and decides to emphasise her maternal love and to blame Helen and Agamemnon for the unfair sufferings they have caused her. In the light of Klytaimnestra's straightforward and uncompromising nature, all other characters, while much more multifaceted and so 'Euripidean' in their vacillations, appear less vivid and colourful.

Pohla's powerful Klytaimnestra triumphed, for example, in the very last scene (1621–6). This is a poignant exchange between Agamemnon and Klytaimnestra, the last one demonstrating their complicated relationship and pregnant with tensions between the two characters. Agamemnon enters with the intention of delivering good news to his wife: their child is among the gods and he is thus inviting Klytaimnestra to rejoice about it. Agamemnon orders her to take Orestes and sail back home, as the ships are unmooring. He then pauses and examines his wife. It seems that he is looking for a sign from her that would assure him of her support and forgiveness, but Klytaimnestra's silence is dismissive, hatred is turning in her stomach and her heart is closed to any attempts at reconciliation. She gives Agamemnon a curt look, and from this moment on it is clear that there will never be a warm, submissive wife, waiting for Agamemnon's return. Agamemnon realises this and suddenly remembers his position—the king of Argos will never be anything but a master in his household and kingdom. He accepts the challenge, and his last cold verses to Klytaimnestra highlight the detachment of the couple. This was a very forceful coda to the entire play. The extended pause between Agamemnon's verses expressed poignantly an uneasy tension between the two, significantly advancing my own understanding of the various potential layers of the verses.

It is fascinating how topics from ancient tragedy that have not been taken up in Estonia before, presented in their original 'bare' form, start resonating in the audience. While it was perhaps slightly difficult for members of the audience to understand the very first couple of scenes—the complexity of context, difficulty of the foreign-sounding names and bad acoustics were tangible—it was soon clear that none of the debates played out on stage were unfamiliar to Estonians: issues of war and peace, domestic space against the public, soft power vs. strong power and so on are still very much part of people's everyday life. I wonder whether it was precisely the lack of decoration or ambition to create an impression of fifth-century-BC Greece that worked so successfully in establishing a timeless zone where ideas pervading all eras of history emerge and cannot leave the audience untouched.

The war theme, supported by the contemporary military clothing of the male characters, might have had another association for the Estonian audience, something that was pointed out by an Estonian critic in one of the first reviews of the play.<sup>6</sup> NO99 happens to share its rooms with the Estonian Ministry of Defence, and the importance and/or necessity of war for a (small) society and its impact on families were being discussed in the same building where decisions on these matters are actually made. Since 2004 Estonia has been a member of NATO, and its men and women are currently represented in military operations in Afghanistan (previously also in Iraq and elsewhere). Even though the personal struggle of

Agamemnon or any other character of the play may not be comparable to the decisions of contemporary Estonians (regarding war, religion, etc.), and despite the fact that their moral dilemmas might not be straightforwardly clear or comprehensible to the contemporary audience, the basic context of the issue was intimately familiar to contemporary Estonians. Indeed, Estonia has had a difficult past filled with numerous wars and a constant struggle to assert its right to independence. The question of what one would be willing to give up in the personal domain in order to maintain the national community is as relevant to the contemporary Estonian theatregoer as it probably was, in another sense, to the fifth-century-BC Athenian.

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## notes

<sup>1</sup> Here and in the following, the English translations from Estonian are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Additionally, between big-scale productions that take an integer number, NO99 has also initiated smaller 'performances', or, as they prefer to call them, 'actions' (Estonian: aktsioon) that tackle some particularly fascinating problem/event of the political present or reflect on perennial questions such as 'what it means to be an actor/man/old/politician, etc.', and are labelled with non-integer numbers (e.g. NO66.8).

<sup>3</sup> The original interview in Estonian appears in *SIRP*.

<sup>4</sup> To give a brief example, the Estonian translation of the trochaic tetrameter in verses 320–1 reads as follows: Heitlik meel, kui kindlus puudub, võlts on, ohtlik sõbra jaoks, / soovin veenda sind, ei peaks sa raevu tõttu loobuma (— u — u — u — — || — u — u — u — / — u — u — u — — || — u — u — u —). (In fact, it is perhaps more useful to describe the verses according to the accent on the words: *Heitlik méel, kui kíndlus púudub, v'õlts on, óhtlik s'õbra jáoks, / sóovin véenda sínd, ei péaks sa ráevu t'õttu lóobuma.*) The Greek original reads: νοῦς δέ γ' οὐ βέβαιος ἄδικον κτήμα κού σαφές φίλοις. / βούλομαι δέ σ' ἐξελέγξαι, καὶ σὺ μήτ' ὀργῆς ὕπο.

The iambic trimeters in lines 49–51, for instance, are translated thus: Kord Leda thestiaad kolm tütart sünnitas: / Phoibe, Klytaimnestra, kes naiseks mulle sai, / Helene ka, kel' kosja paljud ilmusid (u — u — u — u — u — u — / — — u — u — u — u — u — / u — u — u — u — u — u —). (According to the accents: *Kord Léda théstiáad kolm t'ütart s'ünnítás* etc.) The original Greek: Ἐγένοντο Λήδα Θεστιάδι τρεῖς παρθένοι, / Φοίβη Κλυταιμίστρα τ', ἔμη Ξυνάρορος, / Ἑλένη τε: ταύτης οἱ τὰ πρῶτ' ὠλβισμένοι (...).

<sup>5</sup> The playbill is still accessible on the NO99 website ([http://no99.ee/images/files/NO66\\_kava.pdf](http://no99.ee/images/files/NO66_kava.pdf)).

<sup>6</sup> The review in Estonian appears in *Eesti Päevaleht* (<http://www.epl.ee/news/kultuur/sottaminejad-ohverdavad-sakala-tanaval-inimest.d?id=64134951>).



## Interview: Douglass Parker

**Interview by Laura Drake**

*Hunter College*

In July, 1981, and January, 1982, Laura Drake (currently assistant professor of theatre at Hunter College CUNY), then an MFA candidate in dramatic production at the University of Texas at Austin, interviewed Douglass Parker, then a Guggenheim Fellow and Professor of Classics at the same university, in connection with her thesis production of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, which used Parker's famous translation as its text. (Characteristically accommodating of a director's aims, Parker had in fact reworked much of the text for this single production, casting the Peloponnesians' speeches into comic stage Russian to suit the concerns of the late Cold War.)

The conversations were lengthy, warm, and animated, and Parker's voice can be heard vividly as it ranged over a variety of topics, both professional and personal: ancient comedy; the theory and practice of translation; Parker's own career as translator, poet, and stage performer; his friendship and collaboration with William Arrowsmith; the importance of practical performance for the understanding of dramatic literature; and the ambitions of aging jazz trombonists. Transcripts of the interviews were included as an appendix in Drake's completed thesis of 1985. They were "rediscovered" following Parker's death in 2011, in a copy of the thesis kept among his personal papers. They are here made available to a wider audience for the first time.



*Douglass Parker in the 1980s. Photo by Beverly Bardsley.*

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### FIRST INTERVIEW

*The University of Texas at Austin, July, 1981*

**Laura Drake:** Amazingly, there doesn't seem to be any published biography of you in the major reference sources. May we begin at the beginning?

**Douglass Parker:** I was born in LaPorte, Indiana, on May 27, 1927. My father edited a newspaper in LaPorte, the *LaPorte Herald-Argus*. At an advanced age, he finally figured, correctly, that unless you own a small-town newspaper there is no money in it. So he quit and began selling life insurance, which he did tolerably well at, except he never really could get away from the news, so he used to broadcast over a local station at football games and things like that.

My father was the son of a Baptist minister and his mother was the daughter of a Baptist minister. These are northern Baptists, for whatever that's worth. My mother majored in French and English at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, which is where she met my father. Eventually they worked their way to



northern Indiana, where at one point my father had held a pastorate, and so he got on the paper there.

I have one sister, six years younger than I am, who is a housewife and works as a receptionist-secretary.

I was a fat, bright kid. I went through a number of sessions with a psychiatrist at one point, and discovered I was thin and undernourished until my sister was born, when I was six, and then I got fat and with minor backslides have been fat ever since.

I got thin once in 1973, the result of a couple of massive heart attacks in '72. In fact, I had a classic myocardial infarction between acts two and three of *Antony and Cleopatra*. I was playing Enobarbus. We did it over in the Architecture Garden [at the University of Texas at Austin] and we had that business before Lepidus' party, the drunken party, but there's one point where Pompey and everybody had to get together and meet. Well, we played this upstairs, above the garden, and what it really meant was that I had to get off after talking to Antony (or was it Cleopatra?), run upstairs, go through the meeting, and then we exchange some remarks (can't remember the character I was exchanging remarks with—Carl Rubino down the hall played it). Everybody else, meanwhile, has drifted downstairs to start the party and the only way we could make it was to come in late. I would go out, run down the hall taking off my armor, come back, go through the party, and then we could break. This was the end of Act II Scene iii, I think . . . anyway, about this time I noticed the pains beginning. I had years before had chest pains and had been carrying nitro around ever since, but I'd been carrying this around too long and it didn't work. And somebody had a large coke and I drank all of that on the theory that it would help; I don't know whether it did. And then that curious logic: it is not "the show must go on," it wasn't that important. It was rather more insane. It was, "I die in Act IV anyway, I might as well make it on through." And so what the hell, I made it through that performance and one more performance, a cast party, and U.T.'s Peter Brookish production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* . . . I was pretty tired and the next day I realized I didn't want to get up. So I went into the hospital for several months. I had another heart attack a year later. I lost a lot of weight, but it always creeps back on.

**DRAKE:** What did you want to be when you grew up?

**PARKER:** I don't know. I read a lot. As I said, there is a sort of type . . . the bright, fat kid. All right. I was not arrested, but my motor development was not . . . Well, I played football in high school, although I was by no means good at it. I suppose there was a certain amount of parental pressure in this just so I wouldn't sit off and read all the time. I must have been the worst center that LaPorte High ever had, but I wasn't sent in until the difference was twenty-five points either way. On the other hand, it was a great time.

I graduated from high school in 1945 and went to the University of Michigan, only to be drafted into the Navy. It was 1945 There was V-J Day, a two-day national holiday, and I was drafted the next day.

**DRAKE:** What did you do in the Navy?

**PARKER:** I played in the band. I'm a musician, you know. That's what I do mostly now. I play in a jazz band, trumpet and trombone.

At the end of the war, I went to Great Lakes and through boot camp. This must have been August, September, October of 1945, and I had a deal worked out. I was going to sing in the Bluejacket Choir. It was very good: you worked in the library, sang on Sundays, no trouble, I'd be a hundred miles from home. I had a girl who'd gone off to college at Indiana but still, no problem. And unfortunately, the Navy

works in mysterious ways and before that could get confirmed, the whole bunch of us got shipped out and I spent my naval career in Memphis. And in Memphis, Tennessee, I played in a band. The trombone can do a lot for you in this world. It is a little cumbersome to carry, and I think I prefer playing the trumpet, but anyhow I'm a trombonist at heart. There's a metaphysical difference but there's no point in going into it.

Anyway, I played in a band and I booked movies and I worked for the welfare and recreation department. And occasionally we'd put on a show, and I found I could play a good drunk.

**DRAKE:** You seem to have had both interest and talent in the performing arts. How did you end up in classics?

**PARKER:** Maybe because it was odd, maybe because the classes were small. It was something I was good at. At about age 19 I hadn't considered being an actor. Acting was something I liked to do, but in LaPorte, Indiana, there aren't that many theaters that you can hang around. I liked to watch it and be in it.

**DRAKE:** So when you were 19?

**PARKER:** I was in the Navy, and I was spending my time booking movies and playing in the band and reading a lot; and it appeared to me that the only real prophesy that I've ever had was that playing the trombone was a very uncertain way to make a living. So, I'd better do something else. I'd had one year of college—oh, the big things, of course: doctor (then I saw my sister's tonsils being removed and that cured me of that), lawyer . . . Anyhow, I went off to Michigan and you have to put something down on your application when they ask what you're going to be, so I said "pre-law." The reason I said pre-law is that you can take anything. And I wanted to take everything.

Anyhow, I think I finally got into the classics because I took German. We used to go at seven o'clock in the morning. We had this high school teacher who'd gotten a certificate in German (this was in 1943), and she wanted to teach German. So her third year Latin class met at seven o'clock in the morning, and for that whole year we learned German. Then I went off to Michigan and I found myself answering to the question, "what language are you going to take?" "German." On the basis of Muriel Russell's jamming German in Latin class for a year, I found myself taking a second-year college German class. I had a term, I went into the Navy, and when I came back I added Latin (I'd had Latin in high school and liked it). So I took some Latin and I took some more German, I took some French. My father had had a year of Greek in college and he was always saying two words from Xenophon meaning, "from thence he or they went on," generally referring to an army. This sounded interesting so I took Greek. Then one day I turned around and I was taking languages and liking it very much, and if you're taking Greek, Latin, French and German, nine times out of ten you become a classicist: there's nothing else to do. And that's where it was.

I edited *The Gargoyle*, the college humor magazine at Michigan. We used to have lovely times burying the dirty jokes so many levels down that the censors wouldn't possibly get it. I hung around with poets because . . . There is a writer of light bedroom comedies, nothing sleazy because it isn't the age for sleazy; he was popular in the teens and twenties of the century: Avery Hopwood. And Avery Hopwood left the University of Michigan an inordinate amount of money out of which they gave some of the most illustrious writing prizes. And in order to qualify for the Hopwoods, you had to take a course in English, in creative writing, so I took the course in creative writing and hung around with the people. The only difference was, they were writing fiction and I was writing poetry. And finally, in my senior year, I could be at least halfway funny without all that sophomoric nastiness of the world. And I won a Hopwood in my senior year and it was enough to buy an engagement ring for my wife.

And then I went off to graduate study in classics at Princeton. So at graduate school you forget about all that [poetry, humor] until Arrowsmith talked to me that afternoon and said, "why not do this [meaning translating Aristophanes]?" There was no time . . .

**DRAKE:** What about acting in graduate school?

**PARKER:** I didn't act again until somebody at U.C. Riverside was putting on *The Duchess of Malfi* and, "We need a doctor, can you act?" And my eyes got as big as saucers and started to turn pinwheels, and I said, "Of course, certainly." And after a while, I did judges. I was an avvocatore. In *Volpone* I played two of them. And then we did *Two Noble Kinsmen* [at the University of Texas at Austin] and I played Theseus. Again, my weight was up and somebody made reference to that heroic statue, nude unfortunately, of Balzac. Anyway, probably the greatest time and certainly the leanest I ever had was in *Epicocene*.

I love Jonson. I once had a theory: there are Shakespeareans in the world and there are Jonsonians, just as there are Menandrians in the world and there are Aristophanists. And I'm a Jonsonian and an Aristophanist. I can understand how people can be Shakespeareans and Menandrians, but that's not what I am. Playing Morose [again, at U.T. Austin] was just absolutely the most wonderful thing in the world. And then of course we stopped after that. And after a while we began radio drama and we did the various things. Of the things, *Gawain* I think works best; it's also the one that can be listened to in one sitting. Even *Beowulf* takes a while. For the rest, it's marvelous. The *Iliad* is beautiful. We got Fitzgerald, who is the translator, down here to talk, and they played his talk on KUT and started out on the *Iliad*, and for the next 42 hours it was the *Iliad*.

**DRAKE:** What do you want to do now?

**PARKER:** All I want to do now is to be able to play the trumpet the way Miles Davis did in 1956. I don't necessarily like the way he plays in 1981, but I like the way he played in '56. Even '66.

**DRAKE:** Is the jazz he's doing now too much like pop for you?

**PARKER:** No, I just don't like fusion that much. You know, it's not that I mind the heavy bass; it's just that the stuff doesn't hit somehow.

It's just what I want to be able to do. You're fifty-five years old, and what do you want to do? Well, I want to play the trumpet.

**DRAKE:** Why do you want to play the trumpet?

**PARKER:** Because I play the trombone. There's something very deep in that. I've not been able to figure out what it is.

**DRAKE:** If you could narrow the field down to a single literary figure who had the greatest influence on your own writing or on your thinking about writing, who would it be?

**PARKER:** Ezra Pound.

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**SECOND INTERVIEW**

*The University of Texas at Austin, January, 1982*

**DRAKE:** When did you start writing poetry?

**PARKER:** I guess it popped up in high school and continued when I got to college. I wasn't sure quite how you did it . . . I wasn't sure. I knew there were rules and I wanted to be sure that everyone knew that I had a number of 'em handy.

**DRAKE:** Have you published your poetry?

**PARKER:** Not in books and I do it infrequently. I send things out, I have my . . . the great verse cycle; unfortunately it does best when I deliver it myself. The working title—it started in 1979 and there are thirty-one poems in it—is *Zeus in Therapy*. I did it at Liberty Lunch and I do it occasionally when I can get two English speakers trapped in a corner, but it's simply a series of what he says to the psychiatrist, who is unnamed and who never speaks, just at any given time.

**DRAKE:** Your dissertation, *Epicurean Imagery in Lucretius' De Rerum Natura*: does "epicurean" in this case refer to sensual delights or . . . ?

**PARKER:** Actually Epicurean in this case is not really delightful. It comes from an ambiguity in the word "Epicurean." Epicurus had a theory of knowledge and what I was trying to do was develop a theory based on his epistemology, which is about as philosophical as I ever got. I can figure out Epicureanism in Lucretius. But it was by no means delightful. It comes down to be fairly literal. It was just an idea. One of the things in that poem is, it's a philosophical poem. And philosophers and poets, no matter how much they protest, aren't doing the same thing. That's the big question in the Lucretius. In the classics generally, you find people you like and find reasons to work with them. Aristophanes because he's funny and dirty and so on. The Lucretius because, well, if they can figure out Lucretius . . .

My perpetual, "I'll-never-finish-it-but" project is a translation of the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnos. Nonnos died about 450 AD and wrote an epic in forty-eight books on everything the god Dionysus ever did and he had the funniest sense of language that anybody ever had. I have a whole thing I do on improvisation, although I usually think of it as musical improvisation: it's where the river meets the road. This is where they stick you up in front of a crowd and say "do something" and you gotta do it. That's where it's important. That's why I love playing in the band. Anyhow, the connection is, I've got a paper I've been working on. It's an idea for a book. It has some record of improvisation from antiquity. This was not musical improvisation, it was verbal. In the 2nd century AD your movie stars were rhetoricians: Lucian, Apuleius, people who went around and talked. And the great point is, improvisation. Somebody says, "Talk about . . .," you ask the audience what they want you to talk about and then you do it. And we've got some of the choicest bits of Nonnos preserved and also a statement of his on the whole process and why it's really not fair to judge him on this, and this just before he goes and blows the roof off.

**DRAKE:** Have you ever translated tragedy?

**PARKER:** I started to translate the *Persians* and I got . . . I don't do well with tragedy and I just blew it off. The reference to my translation of the *Persians* was put in the introduction to the *Wasps* more as a sort of pious hope. I was trying to make Aeschylus sound like Gerard Manley Hopkins, and it came out, I think, absolutely incomprehensible. The Greek is strange, and I decided I'd make it stranger but it didn't work.

What I did—and it was very good, though people say it doesn't sound like him—I did one tragedy, and it was wild. It was put on once. And that's the *Thyestes* of Seneca. Old blood and gore, and that was fun. And I have seen it once, done by a madman at Cornell in 1971. He did it on Halloween, which was a good idea. What intrigues me was that he was working on his doctorate in theater history and working on Ibsen, and of all the things in the world, he comes up and does this, and his company did it beautifully. I translated it with as much rhetoric as I could muster. I had read Ted Hughes' translation—well, version of somebody else's translation of Seneca's *Oedipus* and thought, "Jesus!" That made me stop for three years. I thought, well, he's done it; and then began thinking, that's not what I want to do. I wanted to do something else. Then I did two comedies by Terence, the *Eunuch* and the *Phormio*.

**DRAKE:** Has anyone ever produced these?

**PARKER:** Yeah. They don't come out so often. The *Eunuch* does pretty well; the *Phormio* could stand some revision. We taped it once here. The taping did not come off well, but I suddenly saw how the end ought to go and so I rewrote the end for the taping and it's beautiful. The only trouble is, it sounds as though Terence were the funniest Plautus you ever heard. I just said well, what the hell, let it all hang out. It has some of the greatest lines I ever wrote and I almost wish Terence had. I had a friend at U.C. Riverside who put on a performance of *Mandragola* and . . . Let me say one other thing about the friend. He majored in drama at the University of Tennessee. He may still be in the literature. He did a volume some years back of interviews with various dramatic coaches, Strasberg and people like that. Bob Hethmon was his name. But he put on the *Mandragola*, and at one point when the monk is coming out and making one of his beautiful soliloquies, of course referring to the young wife's getting pregnant by the Baron, "Nothing can come from nothing" was one of the lines. In the audience was one of my colleagues who was finishing his dissertation on Renaissance skepticism in *King Lear*, and he heard "Nothing can come from nothing," which is a line from Lucretius and skeptical as all hell, and he ran up and grabbed Hethmon and he said, "What's the Italian for that, Bob?" and Bob, who still had a Tennessee drawl, said, "Wuhl, I jes' put thet in m'self." So there went a beautiful theory . . . It would have been lovely if Machiavelli had said it.

**DRAKE:** You mentioned in our last interview that your first encounter with William Arrowsmith was in graduate school at Princeton.

**PARKER:** I went there in '49. In the Fall of 1951, Bill Arrowsmith, a Rhodes scholar who'd graduated from Princeton in '48, came back from Oxford. They had a sort of system during those years. I don't know if it was cheap labor or what, but people who had bachelor's degrees in English would be brought back and the university would put them on as instructors for awhile. So he was teaching. We were together at Princeton that fall and I showed him some poetry that I'd written and along in the spring of 1952. I had finished my dissertation and was sitting there, "there" being the library at Princeton, and we were just talking about what the hell was going to happen, and Bill said, "How would you like to translate Aristophanes?" He was one of the founders of the *Hudson Review*, a little magazine that published poetry, and had translated by this time, I think, the *Bacchae*. I know he was working on the *Bacchae* then, and perhaps the *Cyclops* of Euripides for the Chicago series. And I thought, hell, it might be a good idea: fun. And so I got a job as an instructor at Yale, my wife and I moved up to New Haven that fall and Arrowsmith decided that he would continue in the profession and so dropped being an instructor and did graduate work and wrote a dissertation. I was at New Haven for three years (1952–55). He left Princeton in '53 and came up to Wesleyan, which wasn't too far away from New Haven, and taught there for a year, '53 to '54. And then eventually, in the fall of '54, he went out to the University of California at Riverside, where they had just opened a new liberal-arts campus. And a year later it sounded like the New Jerusalem and I went out. And the New Jerusalem had cutworms, but it was a good place to be.

Arrowsmith was there the year before I got there and the first year I was there, and then he went off on a fellowship to Italy and extended it for a year. When he got back to the country he didn't go to California, he came here [to the University of Texas at Austin]. All this time, I should've been, and well, I started out translating. Well, the first play I translated was the play I knew best and liked best, which was the *Acharnians*. So I started out on that.

My theory at the time was what I thought [Richmond] Lattimore had been doing. His theory was, that if you translated as closely as you could the Greek into "good English," whatever that is, and got it so that there were five beats in the line and hacked it out for the next . . . , you would have a good translation. It didn't take me too long to realize that that was just impossible. You know, that's no way to do anything. Well, the solution came a long time later, but I'd keep hacking at it and then it just seemed to be so bloody much I'd just let it go.

So I got out to California in '55 and Arrowsmith was there, and he was good at hassling, and then he went to Italy and he'd keep writing back, "How is the *Acharnians*?" I got through it in a horrible version which I think I threw away, but, you know, I just . . . I was going to do this thing, and I think by the time I got through with it I had some inkling of what to do but I really didn't know what it was.

In the Summer of 1957, somebody thought they'd like to do the *Lysistrata*, so I started that and got a little way into it but not much, and in, well, going on into the late '50's Arrowsmith came back from Italy and said....he'd gone over there to write a book on Euripides, but what he was doing was translating Aristophanes, and he'd made his way about halfway through the *Plutus*, which I don't think he ever finished, and had done the *Birds*. And he said, "Look, I see how we ought to do this thing." And I said, "Hey, fine." By this time I was working somewhat on the *Lysistrata* and had gotten pretty well through it, but it was pretty bloody awful, and had started on the *Wasps*, which in a way I like better than whatever else I did but I don't think anybody else does. There were just . . . things. But anyway, I came down here. In the bad old days, Texas was full of boondoggles, and one of the boondoggles was, You Can Get Money For Anybody To Do Anything. The money was in this case just to get my plane fare from California to Austin and back again. I came down here to look at a new acquisition by the library, so I did that and spent the rest of the time talking to Arrowsmith about how to translate Aristophanes.

And so I arrived back home in January of 1959 and everything was fine, except Jesus Christ, it just had to be done over. But at least there wasn't this [sustained pressure gesture]. You know it was sort of a glorious feeling of freedom. You do it, you be funny, and let the chips fall where they may. [Slight pause]. It's not really that way. You have to be very careful. Everything is important, but my great failing about it was to overdo it. The idea was to try to get, what did Jonson say, "language such as men do use" and at the same time make it eloquent. So I got back and started out again.

I used to . . . Oh, Lord! Maybe the pressure . . . I was getting near the end of my assistant professorship, my marriage was in a rough period, and I used to work through the day. My wife would go to bed—we had a four-bedroom house but we had three kids and us—and my wife would go to bed and I would set up a card table and put a typewriter on it and start banging away at the typewriter until I fell asleep. This is still the late '50's, early '60's, and Dexedrine was not considered a harmful drug, and so, you know, I'd go along fine. I was great. I would sleep from 5 a.m. until 7, and get up and go through the day, and everything would be fine except by about Thursday I'd fall on my face. But it began to work out, and I began to get really obsessed, which is, I think, the only way to do something. You get so you think like that. I'd stand around at cocktail parties thinking up dirty jokes, and then I'd think, "Is this what my mother, my mother and father, raised their boy to do?" And, you know, "That's foul. How can I make it fouler?" And then wonder who I could tell about it. But eventually, it must have been 1960, I finished the



*Acharnians* and I had the *Wasps* pretty well done, and all this time the *Lysistrata* is sort of hanging fire. There were some things I'd done originally that would still stand up because they were lyrics. On lyrics, I finally decided early on you've got to make poems out of them or it doesn't work, and it being a comedy, they've got to rhyme. Tragedy can go on free verse or whatever you want, but comedy has to have form so you can kick the hell out of it. So I had a fellowship at the Center for Hellenic Studies in D.C. in 1961–62 and I still had the introduction to do for the *Wasps*, and so I did this, and all the time, whenever I had nothing else to do and couldn't really talk myself out of it, I would go back to the *Lysistrata*. And at times I'd get going and then, going straight through, the first two hundred lines went fine, and then there's the lovely bit where . . . I loved the Oath. What I loved about the Oath was, you wrote one line, you wrote two. And then suddenly I realized I hated the Oath, because I decided that in order for it to sound like an Oath it had to rhyme. I was going along like crazy. The first scene was forming itself, everything was clear in my head—this must be about 1962 or something and I was back in California—but everything was out of the way, and I'd go back . . . nothing. I got up to that damned Oath, in a week I was up there, and then suddenly, for the next six weeks, I could not write a line. I'd look at it, and the problem is, oh Lord, things like: "But remain to his advances icily pure," which had to rhyme with something, and it just stopped me dead. And then some things would work and some things wouldn't work and finally by the end of 1963 I had done it. I didn't like the end, I still don't like the end, but I was literally so sick of that play, I hated it so much, that I could not do anything else. I had done an ending at one time, I realized what I wanted, but the will was gone. I could not stand it anymore. I got it off and wrote an introduction that was such a downer that they cut the hell out of it. Anyway, by the beginning of 1964, in fact, it might even be scheduled down in the library as, "copyright 1963, published in 1964," or something like that; simply, they were waiting for my introduction. Anyway, it was off and it was done, and Aristophanes was done and I wasn't going to do anything else.

Along that spring, there came a letter from a Hungarian refugee who was a director at U.C. Davis. His name was (and is) Robi Sarlos, and he said that he had seen the announcement of what I'd done in the Michigan catalog, and that he wanted to put it on in the fall. Now, that threw me. I'd seen Bill's [William Arrowsmith's] *Clouds* put on by Washington, by Catholic University in Washington—talk about cutting! And that isn't a "dirty" play, although they did some interesting things. But the thought of it being put on was intriguing. Well, that was in the bad old days of California, and the bad old days in California were like the bad old days in Texas. The gimmick was that it was all one big university and you could—I was on a statewide committee and we used to hold meetings at a different campus every other month, and you could fly to these meetings, and out of some fund or other our fare would be paid. (Eventually a friend of mine on another committee was killed, going from the airport somewhere near UCLA. The helicopter crashed into the Disneyland parking lot.) Anyway, I got money and flew up to Davis where they were putting it on, and they were about three weeks into rehearsal and I was thinking, my God, they learned the lines! I'd forgotten them by this time. This was in the fall of '64 and so I talked to him about this other ending, due to the fact that they had this thrust stage and they wanted to get everybody off, and if they put down the lights in that crazy place people would fall into the trap and off the sides and everything. So, we had them gradually peel off, leaving *Lysistrata* and the Commissioner, and never mind the relationship between them, it plays and no point to argue about that. It was right after the '64 elections, and the line that goes, "Cold water diplomacy, pah!" got into trouble because everybody thought I had said, "Goldwater diplomacy, pah!" and we got these weird reviews one time: "the introduction of modern politics in the last scene seemed suddenly out of place," and, *modern politics?* Bill [Arrowsmith] gets more political than I ever got, although I don't suppose his *Knights* will ever come out in the fashion where *Demos* looks suspiciously like Eisenhower.

So we went along and in '66, being the bad old days, I got another year off and we went to England. I did the *Ecclesiazousae*, or most of it, and finished that and came back, and we were going ahead with the

series. [Arrowsmith] got Tim Reynolds to do the *Peace*. Tim was a mad poet, tremendously brilliant, and the most undisciplined person I've ever known in my life. He translated the *Peace*, and if you think Demos looking like Eisenhower was something, Polemos, the God of War, had his hair slicked back and wore granny glasses and was a dead ringer for Robert McNamara, who was Secretary of Defense then. Anyway, that was so bad that [The University of] Michigan [Press] had suddenly gotten around to readers on their staff who screamed, "A good Johnsonian liberal!" or something like that. This was the beginning of '67 and they said, "We can't print that," and Arrowsmith said, "You can't do that, I'm the editor of this series and you're abrogating my rights as editor." One thing led to another, and Michigan pulled out of the series. The prior right to it was held by the reprint house, the New American Library, and then [Arrowsmith] had to go out and hunt up a hardback publisher. Well, editors, particularly at places like NAL [New American Library], change, and change with frequency, and so eventually the whole thing went to hell. The last development that I've heard since then . . . let's see: I did four: *Acharnians*, *Wasps*, *Lysistrata*, and *Ecclesiazousae*; Arrowsmith did two: the *Clouds* and the *Birds*; Lattimore did one: *Frogs*, which is really in another mode, you can tell, which is fine for him. I don't think it works as well for comedy, but his translations of tragedies are absolutely marvelous. Tim Reynolds and the *Peace* sort of brought everything effectively to a stop. I saw Arrowsmith last year and the thought was, I had started doing the *Plutus*, which isn't riotous, but I thought a play about economics might do as well now as a play about sex did in the '60's. I was really the beneficiary of a lot of things simply because people being sexually liberated and "how better to be sexually liberated" fit the *Lysistrata*. And so the thought was that Bill [Arrowsmith] would finish the *Knights* and I would do the *Plutus*. Bill used to do the *Knights* in coffee houses. Did you know that there were coffee houses in Austin? In the late '50's there were coffee houses in Austin. And Arrowsmith and Bob Sonkowsky, who was on the Classics faculty and was a good actor and has a glorious voice—one of the big organs—Arrowsmith and Sonkowsky used to go around and do readings of the prologue of the *Knights* for the very good reason that that was all that Bill had finished. So he would do the *Knights* and clean up the *Thesmo*, because the *Thesmo*—if I get far away from the text at times, and I have been known to do this, the *Thesmo* goes . . . well, the trolleys don't run there anymore. So I would do the *Plutus*, which I'd started on, and the *Peace*, which I'd really wanted to do. And that would finish out the set. Eleven. There's one other one in there. Guy Davenport, who's a good translator—a better poet than he is a translator, funny man—translated the twelfth. The twelfth play was going to be the *Dyskolos* (*The Boor*) of Menander. In the late '60's, '66-'67 it came in, and they were going to do it, and then they didn't do it. And there's a translation out by Carol Moulton that the New American Library published that must be connected with the situation somehow. I think Eric Segal had something to do with getting it taken out, but I haven't heard anything more about it. So, that's it at this moment. Arrowsmith is now at Emory in Atlanta and he teaches there half a year and he teaches wherever he wants half a year.

On the other hand, when I got here, I started acting again, as I told you. I'd done some at Riverside. That was because we had a small student body and we needed live people to do the roles. And then along in the early '70's we began doing the productions here at U.T. —the requisite nuts in the English and Classics departments—culminating in the radio drama series for KUT in '79.

**DRAKE:** Let's talk a little about the *Lysistrata* and theories of translation. How much of your translation is Aristophanes' text and how much your own poetry?

**PARKER:** Look, you stick yourself back here [indicating his office] behind a million books, and you look around you, and you find that a surprising number of them speak to you, but some of 'em reach out and grab you by the throat and say, "I'm not going to let you go." That does it. And partly, it was Arrowsmith, feeling that it ought to be done. He used to write me, and I'd send off pages and the blood was all over them. It was . . . I finally figured out that this was the hardest thing in the world that I knew how to do.

But I would send agony, agony going through the post, and it would come back. I remember, I would have built somebody up: I have a line that's kind of a touchstone from the *Acharnians* simply because I remember it for the way things ought to go. It doesn't go like this except in the Greek. The dirt-poor Megarian who wants to sell his two daughters comes to market, and when he first comes onstage, it comes out in English, "Emporium of Athens, highest hope and deepest desire of all my people, I want to take this opportunity to wish you-all a heartfelt howdy-do." And of course that comes from a slightly smaller thing in the Greek.

It's what it makes you do. And finally, sometimes it makes you do too much; and when I once translated five lines of Greek into fifty-six lines of English, I got back a very choleric note from Arrowsmith saying, "Don't do that," and he said it rather more violently. I don't know. You have to expand to a certain extent. Actually, there's a system which is not the best in the world, but there is one. English rhetoric takes a little more space to work in than Greek rhetoric. We've had a lot more time to fool around with it [English rhetoric]. And also, your audience doesn't know everything that the Greek audience did, so you have to euclre them into thinking they did. So you bootleg in bits of information without having it sound like Sheridan in *The Critic* (the play within the play): two Englishmen are talking, and one says, "Elizabeth, you know, is Britain's noble queen," and then the protatic character looks and says, "She is." And somebody asks, "Why, if he knows all this, does he go on telling him?" And the answer is, "Well, what the deuce, the audience has to find out somehow." The audience has to find out, but you can't let them know they're finding out. You have to sort of bury it in there and make people talk. Anyhow, you have to get in this much rhetoric here, and that has to balance somehow with something else, and fifty-six lines for five is ridiculous. But one time I had a huge parabasis where sixty lines of Greek went into two hundred, and that had to be, shall we say, chopped severely.

I'm in love with sound. And about the *Lysistrata*, the woman who played her at Davis, during the third week of rehearsal . . . Remember the line that goes something like, "to the couch for scutching and plucking"? Well, she turned to someone in the audience (she didn't know I was there) and said, "Well, here go the tongue-twisters." I hadn't thought of it that way, but I love consonant clusters. I love assonance. One thing. At Cornell, they got a professor over from the Speech Department and she worked—thing was, they were doing two big productions and this was a minor one—and she worked like a slave with those kids, and by the end of the rehearsal period, they could enunciate English, which helped a great deal. Otherwise they would have been totally incomprehensible.

In Aristophanes, when people say, for instance, the Megarian greeting, it's funny. The problem with tragedy, say, *Thyestes*, is that it's balanced on a knife's edge, and if you let it go over, well. It's like any good Jacobean play, where the language is so wild that if anybody says it wrong the whole house is going to dissolve in laughter. It's going to go crazy. And sometimes, you can't keep it from doing that. I don't know if there's any way to cut the laugh at the end of the *Revenger's Tragedy*. That's just impossible to cut. It's where Spurio finds that the Duke his father is dead and has a horribly scarred face, which they seemed to like in Jacobean melodrama, and everybody for four acts has been talking in this riotous polysyllabic English, and Spurio comes over and he looks at his father and he says, "what, old Dad, dead?" At the time I saw it in Cambridge [Gr. Britain], the whole house went up. There is absolutely no way—you try to imagine breaking up the text, but the playwright surely meant it, because Tourneur or whoever wrote the play has too good an ear to perpetrate something like that and not mean it.

About translation, there are two quotes I like by Thelonious Monk. The first is, "The cats I like are the cats who take chances", and the other is, "Sometimes I play a tune I've never heard before." On the other hand, with the translation of Aristophanes, sometimes I call it "the riskless risk," because after all, I ain't the author. The author died somewhere around the time 388 BC. Me? I don't use it, I think, to promote

political ideas. I'm not apolitical but I'm not your terribly political animal, although I got my linguistic politics. But when I think about it, there is quite a lot that I don't send off because I didn't follow a certain risk. That's putting *me* out there. The risks have been different. One of the risks is getting up in front of an audience and trying to blow the roof off.

**DRAKE:** Since you mentioned politics in connection with Aristophanes, what do you think about a recent theory of Aristophanic theatre being closely allied to the Epic Theatre of Brecht? I didn't get that myself from your text. I thought Aristophanes was maybe more like Ionesco.

**PARKER:** Well, let's see: it was during the daytime so the lights were on—I suppose that's sort of like Epic Theatre. Is it that it's political? Is that what they're driving at?

**DRAKE:** Well, I think it centers around the whole idea of what theater is supposed to do, what is the worth of theater in society. For instance, Cedric Whitman said,

Far from having any interest in inculcating any values, political or moral, [Aristophanes] created, as any poet ought, a myth of his own time. Aristophanic comedy is a powerful refractor of that society, more concerned with spiritual wholeness than with political or economic details." [From Cedric Whitman: *Aristophanes and the Comic Hero* pp. 2-3.]

I was wondering what you might think about that. The book that the quote is taken from came out the same year that your translation of the *Lysistrata* did.

**PARKER:** My God, that's right. [Long silence]. There's a story about T. S. Eliot in the '50's on himself addressing a seminar at the University of Chicago, and they were talking about *Prufrock*, and they would ask him, "What did you mean by . . . ?" and he'd look at them, and look sort of puzzled, and they'd say, "What about those lines, 'I grow old, I grow old, I wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled'?" and while he was pausing to think of a response, somebody else said, "I have always thought it meant that when you get old, you shrink," and Eliot's reply was, "You know, that's very good." And, I don't know. My first reaction to Whitman was, "Jeez, that's nice, I wish I'd said that." I don't know what it means, but I wish I'd said it.

**DRAKE:** I guess he was kind of leading into his theory of the comic hero, the individual as microcosm, the comic hero as the universe of the play . . .

**PARKER:** Yeah. The only trouble I have with that is that he sometimes takes the wrong character as the comic hero.

I find it hard as hell to talk about Aristophanes. I can talk about a play of Aristophanes', and I guess there was a time I could talk about Aristophanes, because I had to. I of course spend a lot of time on structural stuff, saying a play is built this way, and you do various things, and form is very important because . . . So you can beat the hell out of it with a stick, and it is absolutely essential that it be funny. And of course it has a message, but it seems to be more a part of the genre than anything else. I mean, you have to have a message because comedy has to have a message.

**DRAKE:** Right. It seems to be one of the conventions, like slapstick or knockabout farce.

**PARKER:** Yeah. I doubt if I can come out writing this, but I might as well say it to you. I don't know. It seems to be the thing to say today. I haven't talked much about saying things about Aristophanes. I like what he made me do, which is stupid, but, well not stupid, but it's nothing to build a theory of antiquity

on. He was . . . You can argue about him politically: you can call him a rock-ribbed conservative who happened to be for peace, or maybe he wasn't a rock-ribbed conservative.

**DRAKE:** Well he was certainly a political satirist.

**PARKER:** Oh yeah, sure, a satirist. But I think he loved Euripides. You can just imagine the audience saying "What's he gonna get him on this year?"

There's a line in the *Ecclesiazousae*—it's the scene where the young man, distressingly at the phallic stage, is being dragged back and forth by the three ugliest women in the world. And at one point he stops and says, "Why waste money on bucket hooks? Just get a little old lady and let 'er down in the well and up comes the bucket, gripped in a vise." And that's the sort of crazy detail you find in Aristophanes. It just stops everything dead and still the scene goes back and forth and back and forth. I haven't seen it much since it's not the most put-on play in the world, and a lot of it doesn't hang together and you wish he'd done something with the ending, and things like that. But still, a lot of it's funny. He's got a lot of chutzpah, the self-confidence that says, I can drop this and put it in the corner for awhile, and then go back and pick it up and it's still going to work. This is sort of marvelous. I think Jonson can do this, and well, Shakespeare can certainly do this, I suppose. Your basic great playwright can do it. Even your basically pretty good playwright can do it. Plautus can do it.

I had a class the other day where we were talking about this. This play was from the *Pseudolus* and it comes after one of the great scenes: the Whoremaster has been talking to the girls, saying, "It's my birthday and so I want you to put out particularly," and then he goes through why, X and Y, and the girl I always want to call Appassionata Von Climax but isn't turns and says, "Why should we particularly when all you want is money, money, money?" and then back and forth because today is his birthday, etc., and then everybody goes offstage and there's this little boy who comes on and says, "It's not much fun being a boy slave in a whorehouse, especially if you're not an attractive boy slave," and he does five minutes on this, and the only thing you can think is that everybody else is off changing madly because they have to come on as somebody else. Here's where I find myself—and then you go back to the play. And everybody is sort of wondering, what does this have to do with the price of anything? And, it's sort of poignant, but if you throw it out of the play it won't make any difference. That's one of the nice things about Old Comedy, about Aristophanic comedy.

**DRAKE:** What about early critical influences regarding literature?

**PARKER:** I grew up or was educated at the time of the New Criticism, when Cleanth Brooks and people were telling you how to read things. And unity was very important: there was a place for everything and everything in its place, and everything had to work, like "Where? Why? What?" And then you find Aristophanes and you suddenly realize the play could be a half hour long. It could be twenty minutes shorter in text, and frequently it is shorter because people cut the dirty lines. And it's not going to make much difference. It's infinitely extensible, and when you get into New Comedy, into Terence, it took me a long time to appreciate what he did. You're like a slalom racer, you've got to go through all the gates in the right order, and there are lots of gates because you've got a terrific amount of information to feed people and you can't add much more.

**DRAKE:** Plot becomes much more crucial.

**PARKER:** Yeah. You chuck out an Aristophanic scene and it's not going to be a terrible loss, and you could probably put one in.

**DRAKE:** Is the song that the chorus sings, after the key to the play (and you apparently agree with that, that the "bug-in-the-eye" scene is the key to the "civilizing force of love"), is that song a parabasis? Does it serve as one? It is clear in his other plays but not in the *Lysistrata*.

**PARKER:** There isn't a parabasis in the *Lysistrata*, except, no, the thing that serves as a parabasis is right before the paratragic scene, when Lysistrata comes out speaking Old High Euripides, right before this when the two choruses are still fighting and they "strip for action." That is the parabasis. The only trouble with the parabasis is that it lacks the parabasis proper, that is, the argument. Something happened during the teens of the 5th century, where you had a lot of people talking like crazy to the audience. He picks it up again in the *Frogs* and there's sort of one in the *Birds*, but for the most part it's gone. Whatever it was that led the author to say, in the form of the chorus, "We've got something to say to you. The author is very annoyed with the way you treated his play last year," or, "The author is overjoyed with the way you treated his play last year and hopes that you'll possess the same good sense that you did then."

**DRAKE:** The commercial.

**PARKER:** Yeah. But you don't do it, and you certainly don't do it by the time you get to the iambic scenes. There's sort of a quasi-one in the *Thesmophoria*, but they're still speaking as women in the play and they don't get out of it and talk about the playwright.

**DRAKE:** In the *Thesmophoria* it sounds more like agitprop than it does like playwright-to-audience.

**PARKER:** Yeah. They're still doing their business. They're pulling back from the action a little, but not back and out, which was what they used to do, which is sort of a pity. I suppose that's what they mean by Brechtian. He's always telling you, "This is a play," as if you didn't know.

**DRAKE:** There's a bit of agitprop feeling to the song I was speaking of, the one after the bug-in-the-eye scene. At least I got more of a sense of that than that it was put there so everybody backstage could change. You mentioned in a lecture that you had become sort of stuck with the form of the song, that you'd thought up the first verse and then had to do the whole rest of it in the same meter.

**PARKER:** Yeah. The trouble was, the first verse demanded an explanation, and so that went in and was fine, form seemed more important than matter, at least to the point where I couldn't cut it down any more. Oh, I suppose I could have, you can do anything. I could have had somebody step forward and say, "Ladies and gentlemen, for an adequate understanding of what is going on, let us understand that frequently, in plays of this sort . . ." You do what you can get away with.

**DRAKE:** I need to talk to you about disparate time frames, Aristophanes' and our own. I think I need to justify why I came to you in a mad frenzy and said, "What if the Spartans were Russians?" and I even said I'd do it, I'd duplicate the meter, the rhyme scheme, anything. And then of course you said you'd do it, and it came right off the top of your head whereas for me it would have been a terrific struggle. I think what I was trying to get at with the Whitman quote was that the details of the conflict aren't as crucial as the unity of the main character in action. The main character is an archetype and all the others are types, almost as if they were subpersonalities. So if the antiwar theme was merely an easily accepted convention for Aristophanes' audience, why not telescope this into the 20th century for our audience, and let Greece stand for Western Civilization, and let the socialistic oligarchy become Russia rather than Sparta, with the imperialist democracy as the United States and its allies?



**PARKER:** Well, of course I had written it in American Mountain dialect, but I love to do Russian. I disagreed with your one-world theory at first, but it came off pretty well at the end and, as I say, I don't like the ending I wrote anyway, and anything somebody can do to get it off with a flourish is okay.

I'm not too sure if the play is all that cosmopolitan, but then I guess it depends on what you do for an ending, and I really like the ending. What is the song?

**DRAKE:** The Russian folkdance "Korobushka," to which you wrote the lyrics for the "Sonk of Peeg."

**PARKER:** It's nice to have the melody beforehand, which I don't usually do. One time I went through the *Wasps* and I had in my head the "Overture to the Merry Wives of Windsor" by Nicolai. I had to throw it out, it was absolutely awful. But oh, it was fun.

**DRAKE:** Your stuff sings so well on its own. And speaking of music and language, of course you don't usually write in the music when you translate, just as you don't write in the spectacle, or very much of it. How much do you think the text will bear? How much needs to be message units and how much can afford to go into music, into pure sound?

**PARKER:** You try to do it at the same time, and sometimes it do and sometimes it don't. "No balls at all" for example only occurs once in the Greek. But it seemed logical that it should occur twice, in one half of the chorus and then in the other half.

I like the song, too; if it wasn't there, it oughta be, and so sometimes it goes in. Arrowsmith once said—here, I think, when he was teaching a course on Euripides . . . Somebody asked, "Why does Pentheus say that?" and his reply was very simple: "Well, when I wrote that, I meant . . ." and the class had to point out to him that Euripides had written the line and that was what they were asking about. Why do people say what they say when they say it? I found Terence terribly hard because the dialogue's like this [indicates tight]. I'd hate to be translating Noel Coward into Latin or something.

**DRAKE:** Aristotle rates spectacle the least important dramatic element in tragedy, but here we're talking about comedy. This has to be funny, you've got to have some spectacle. There are so many obvious times when the text calls for the production to be quite spectacular.

**PARKER:** Yeah, I think so. But hell, it was the late '50's. I didn't know how they were going to do the Kinesias/Myrrhine scene. Maybe she could bring a small tent onstage, maybe they'd put it in complete blackness . . .

**DRAKE:** That scene is a very funny scene without any stage representation at all. It reads funny. The set-ups are so clear.

There's something childlike about the quality of Aristophanes' humor, it's all so innocent, really, there's nothing dirty or prurient about it. I thought the text called for really whole-hog use of phalloi for the young men.

**PARKER:** The large size helped. If you'd cut them down two-thirds, you'd have run into trouble.

**DRAKE:** No doubt about it. We had to be grotesque or we ran the risk of being taken seriously. In an earlier reading, I toyed with the idea of doing production in antebellum costume, having the soldiers' swords stand for the phalloi, having them become utterly clumsy with them during the required

moments . . .

**PARKER:** Something like night-sticks can work, too. This was what they used at Davis. And they held them like that, and it took about ten seconds to establish the convention, and everybody knew what was going on.

**DRAKE:** As I understand it, the chorus were not supposed to have phalloi.

**PARKER:** No. I get quite insistent on that. I suppose the reason I stressed it in that play is that I wanted to be sure that it was a chorus of old people, old women and old men, and not people who got together as nubile and erect in the next scene. It's this against which the whole thing is played. I saw a production in Athens which was done up on a hill, a sort of theater they'd gotten together for tourists. It was being done in modern Greek, and *Lysistrata* was played by an eminent tragic actress. It was interesting. What they'd done was to take the prologue, and then take the entrance of the chorus, then the conflict of the chorus (which usually occurs after the *agon*) was attached to the *parodos*, so that you had about forty minutes of wonderful chorus, and then you returned to this cold, austere Commissioner. This was in about the Spring of '66 and the colonels had just taken over or were about to take over, but they got fairly embarrassed by this. So it wasn't played phallic at all. All the men were behind huge and fairly authentic shields. But the play itself seemed, not like an insult, but an interruption, because the chorus was so much more interesting. They were funny, and they were active, and they didn't have to worry about the phallic problem, and they didn't have to be dignified, and oh, it was nice.

**DRAKE:** I looked at a lot of translations during the preparation of this production, and everybody seems to end theirs in a kind of quiet little peaceful ballad, too, and I was wondering if that was textual.

**PARKER:** There's something funny about the ending. It's not really a peaceful ballad: you have the business of the Spartans shouting out a prayer to Athene, which is pretty remarkable in itself. It does lack "How do we get this off the stage?" One wonders exactly what they would say? I suppose they could just march out.

**DRAKE:** That's what I saw, obviously. It fits the text and it fits a theory of moving many bodies around the stage during the 5th century.

I mentioned earlier that you appeared to agree that the key to the play occurs in the bug-in-the-eye scene between the two semichoruses. This was based upon my discovery of a note you had written to yourself after viewing a rehearsal at Lubbock, in which you said, "It's not animal sex, not rut. The 'thole' of the play is the bug-in-the-eye scene." That had been my gut reaction to the play after the first reading, too. But I am wondering what you meant exactly by "sex as the civilizing force of love."

**PARKER:** Do you remember *Eros*, supposed to be "genteel pornography," that came out in the '60's? It's hard to believe that was twenty years ago. Well, their idea of *Lysistrata* was to throw the antiwar politics out of the play completely. And if you do that, then o.k., I guess you can have people couple a lot onstage, but then you've got no play. I mean, this other thing about the acropolis being the mount of Venus, too, well, you know it is; otherwise, it is the female genitalia, although not as wildly as it was at Lubbock, where it was like a cervical dilation; but that's certainly how it works together. And the men finally get into the citadel from which they've been shut out. This is what pulls it all together; otherwise, jokes about not being able to do something you want are stock-in-trade comedy and they're tired. I mean, the Kinesias/Myrrhine scene is funny for awhile, until you realize he hasn't changed anything. And if Kinesias does succeed, and goes to bed with her, then it has to mean something.

It's also a peculiarly moral play. It's a very moral play. There was all the business which I covered up—maybe I was trying for form a bit too much—but they are supposed to . . . There's a German film version from the '30's which I've never seen but I've heard of. When the men are locked out of the bedrooms, you immediately see them tearing down to the nearest whorehouse, which is just as wrong as it can be, because Aristophanes takes particular care to get this out. What he's talking about is married love, and he's talking about married love just as much as Aeschylus is talking about it in the *Oresteia*. If you throw the sex out, you've got a rather dull play about politics. And if you throw the politics out, you've got a rather dull play about sex. And it's everything: everything fits. There have been a lot of feminist writings on the play. I read an article recently, when I found myself in Kentucky having to talk about women and Aristophanes or something, but just a good article on this subject actually trying to disprove something which it proved: that the acropolis is the "sanctum sanctorum" which must be achieved, even as it is objectified and women are objectified, and the real key occurs when the old men and old women agree to accept the fiction of the bug in the eye.

**DRAKE:** That scene is so poignant from the standpoint of character. I saw that as a moment approaching realism, with plenty of characterizing detail played by the actors. That's a far cry from the symbolic action of Lysistrata or the stereotypical behavior of the other principals. The only way it seems to me to make sense is getting back to Whitman, and the Jungian bases of literary and dramatic criticism brought out in an excellent study of your whole series by Kenneth MacLeish, that yes, Aristophanic comedy is thematic, but that theme is character. The universe of the play is the main character, it's her world, and that's why it can be inclusive of so many things, such as why the men don't resort to prostitutes or each other in order to relieve their sexual tensions.

**PARKER:** Yeah, except for the reference to Kleisthenes—he was the house homosexual for twenty years: "You want a pathic? Don't turn your back on Kleisthenes, etc." But you know, Aristophanes says "Kleisthenes," the audience falls down, and the poor guy must have been unhappy. But you know, he's mentioned there, and the dildoes are mentioned.

**DRAKE:** You mentioned the article on feminism and Aristophanes. I didn't see any feminism in this play at all. I think what you mentioned about the morality of the play is significant, that it's married love he's talking about, a return to the status quo, not female supremacy as a desired goal.

**PARKER:** All they were trying to do in the article was trying to point out how women were treated in this period. You've got to take something absolutely objective, and what was absolutely objective in this play was Aristophanes himself. And he was certainly, it seems to me, as sympathetic a portrayer of women as you're going to find around that time, but he certainly knew . . . Well, how the hell do I know? But he certainly sounded like he knew what women sounded like. They sound like people, not like men playing women, as though he could treat them with objectivity, but to see where they're funny. I think Kleonike is very funny. She's a lush but she's funny.

**DRAKE:** Have you ever directed any of your own stuff?

**PARKER:** No. I figure that the director knows a helluva lot more about what they're doing. I know what I wanted, I knew what I wanted, and I'm frequently, when I see what directors have done, surprised as hell, though it's sometimes because I've forgotten and sometimes because it's new. But when somebody does exactly what I want because it's in the words, I know, "Yep, that's it." And sometimes you don't write it right and it comes out in various ways. For example, I wrote in the *Lysistrata*, how do women talk? In the '60's? Not that the words are different, but the pattern's different. And you can't . . . I wanted

to make them talk like women talking that fantastic near-language which is whatever it is in their own right, not like men talking like women which is something else again. But I thought of *Lysistrata*, when I was doing this, as somebody who would be president of the local garden club. And the first performance, at Davis, I saw this debate. Well, you know as well as anybody who has ever had anything to do with the play, what do you *do* there? How do you keep the audience's attention when people are talking at length about things like raucous caucuses, for God's sake? I mean it sounds good but what do they care about this forest of names that he's going to lay on? And I had this idea, *Lysistrata* and sex . . . How would she get the idea? Only if she were really interested. And Debbie, who played *Lysistrata* in that Davis production, it was just her and the Commissioner onstage, the choruses had pulled back. She started talking and there was a lot of movement at first, and then she stared this hip movement. And there were my words, but she was doing it completely differently. My God, she did everything except a Barbizon roll and throw it in his face. And, you know, it would work at City Hall.

**DRAKE:** You've been extremely generous and tolerant with this work in particular, especially with regard to directorial interpretation. It must take a tremendous amount of separation from your work to accept so good naturedly the modifications that directors have imposed upon it, including my own.

**PARKER:** Yeah, separation is part of it. The other is him [Aristophanes]. He wrote it, I didn't. One story: there was one time . . . Bill Sharp, who the last I knew was still teaching and directing at Emerson, did Arrowsmith's version of Euripides' *Heracles*, and Sharp said, "I finally had to exclude him from rehearsals, because he'd say, 'No, it doesn't go that way, it means this and that.'" And that probably did something to me. I don't know whether I made a resolution at this point or what, but by God, I will never interfere with the director. I will ask something, but hell, it's the director's play. I put it together, I see things. I don't see everything, and still I'm just grateful that they put it on. There are times when you want to shake somebody, I mean for ineptitude, not for another interpretation. If you have to do it, to say, "This doesn't work, if he does that with line two hundred how does it work with line seven hundred?" generally you can learn something from it and it's like seeing something new every time.

It was a great deal of fun to put it over in Russian. I saw a production at Lubbock where the Kinesias/Myrrhine scene was . . . I didn't know whether they were going to make it. Not because they weren't good actors, they did a very good job of it. It just made you realize, what do you do on the south plains for entertainment? One of them was going to reach orgasm before that scene was over and I didn't know which one and I, my God, I didn't know if I was going to be able to make it out of town.

I would like to see it done sometime with dancers. In that case, I would really have to do my threatened rewrite of the ending. I know what I wanted to do with the end, at least half of it. Keeping the southern dialect, to do the last song, have the Spartans do country and western. Country and western lyrics don't exactly come to me in my sleep, but I think that's what it needs and I think it would be fun.

**DRAKE:** It would be fun to do it with dancers, and a country and western-song would have a lot of popular appeal as well as fitting in stylistically with the Spartan dialect.

Thank you for your adaptation of the Spartans from *Mountain Men* to Russians for this production, and thank you for generously granting these interviews and sharing your personal collection of letters, reviews, and other production information on the *Lysistrata*. They will be an invaluable aid to the preparation of this thesis.