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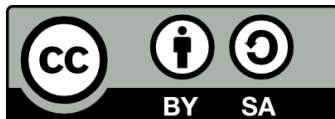
Theatre(s) in English
Re-examining national myths

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Το έργο υλοποιείται στο πλαίσιο του Επιχειρησιακού Προγράμματος «Εκπαίδευση και Δια Βίου Μάθηση» και συγχρηματοδοτείται από την Ευρωπαϊκή Ένωση (Ευρωπαϊκό Κοινωνικό Ταμείο) και από εθνικούς πόρους.



Σκοπός ενότητας

- Re-examining national myths.

Key words:

- Grand narratives.
- Archives.
- Traditionalism.
- Gender.
- Playing “critic”.

Play to study

- Marsha Norman. *The Holdup* (American).

Περιεχόμενο ενότητας

- The revival of the ancient Drama and the rage of Greek critics.

1. "I do not think there is any other country in the world," Thodoros Kritikos, the university professor and drama reviewer, has recently pointed out, " that honors the classics with so many and also such miserable productions as [Greece]. ...In our country the daily and friendly communion with the leading writers of ...theatre has familiarized us so much with them that we call them by their first name and pat them on the back" (Kritikos 16.4.1987: 152). Kritikos obviously exaggerates. Yet his comments, with their characteristic spleen, provide a direct entry into the concerns of this paper.

It is true that in the last fifteen years there have been more revivals of ancient Greek drama than in any comparable period of our history, and yet, quality aside, no age has been less sure about what a "proper" revival of ancient drama, and particularly tragedy, is. Seldom has the theatre-goer been burdened by so many competing claims. The positions taken by practitioners and critics have thrown the genre into a flurry of controversy that serves only to generate further questions that call forth still more manifestoes. Practitioners, for their part, argue that the Greek classical heritage has run its

logocentric course and that we must re-examine the appropriateness of traditional dramatic forms to our contemporary experience (Doufexis 12.4.88: 20). We can no longer act, they say, as if time has done no more than cover the text with "layers of dust" which one cleans up so as to make it respectable again. Nor can we enclose ourselves within the privilege of a highly civilized minority and make privileged isolation thematic. We have to find a way of mediating between theatrical culture and the public as a whole, which means approaching classical drama within a broader and ever-changing cultural system.

Although contemporary Greek critics cannot be grouped under any one heading, either aesthetically or professionally -- some teach in universities, others write poetry, others translate or work for the radio or review other arts as well, and others come from different ideological camps or belong to different generations --they appear relatively cohesive when the subject under discussion is ancient drama and its revival. While they generally agree that ancient drama is not an elitist art and that it should be carefully revived to accommodate, among other things, the tensions and contradictions of our postmodern times, they disagree with the way Greek and foreign artists have, thus far, pursued their goal. The overwhelming feeling seems to be that the source of evil that plagues the productions of ancient drama in contemporary Greece is crude commercialization, the ascendancy of the director and the other practitioners to a superstar status and the hasty appropriation of foreign models.

2. Since 1974, critics claim, when real money and indiscriminate institutional funding appeared in the field, ancient drama has been perceived both by Greek society and by many of its artists, mostly as a means for individuals to gain success as opposed to an end in and for itself. Very few of its devotees, critics charge, have really bothered to devote their lives to this theatre. Most of them show up in the summer, when the regular season is over, and mount "cute" artifacts devised for mass consumption, meant to offer instant satisfaction of the most superficial aesthetic needs or whims of a wide public. Those involved in the revival of ancient drama, Greek critics maintain, suffer from an "omnivorous theatrical syndrome "that" surpasses every bacchic irresponsibility" (Frangopoulos 1988:575). "They want to grasp everything and respect nothing," Georgousopoulos, the most influential critic of the country, angrily contends: "They have gone berserk ...They have courage that cannot be distinguished from audacity" (Georgousopoulos 7.7.1986:27). How far can a practitioner go, critics wonder, without sacrificing

the integrity of the text? How far is not too far? Artists should be reminded, maintains Lygizos, a critic whose distaste for modern revivals has remained consistent through the years, that they are "the vehicles (organum) for the transmission of the meanings and messages of the author. The author legislates and the artist interprets." And if he is an ingenious interpreter, he will probably equal the original vision, but never surpass it. No one can touch, he contends, "the deepest essence of tragedy; only the form can be re-interpreted" (Lygizos 1984:10). The classics, the argument goes, for better or worse, gave us with their work a final version of their understanding of the world and its myths. Whoever questions this understanding has to propose another one in a different form; but whoever undermines it is "dishonest" (Georgousopoulos 30.6.1986:25). After all, Prof. Kritikos contends, "classical plays are not knickers to be stretched or shrunk indefinitely, depending on the size of the leg" or the size of the market. They are by-products of a particular epoch, a particular artistic use. "They are sensitive organisms that fall apart if you exercise violence on them" (Kritikos 15.8.2986:102). Directors have to learn, critics assert, to look at the classical text as an organic whole, complete within itself and with each part related to every other. Their guiding principle must be the voice (phone) of the first creator (rather than the voice of the box office or of instantaneous fame), for it is there that the deepest meaning of the text lies. His word is all we have, and that we must treasure in both our translations and in our productions (Andronikos 27.8.1989:54).

Without rejecting performance or relegating it to a minor status, critics warn against the replacement of the proto-text by either alien or external elements. All ideas, forms and values are not necessarily wrong, the argument goes, because we have learned them from our predecessors. Isn't the reality, Lignadis wonders, of, say The Persians or Bacchae similar to ours? How much do we differ from their ideas of siege, famine, genocide, the fate of the defeated? Ancient discourse, the same critic argues, has perfected itself to the point that it has become and a "living organism" (the Aristotelian zoon). We cannot develop indiscriminately any point of view only to show our freedom from all constraints. In our writing and in our reading, the critic concludes, we are bound to encounter an archival network that governs (or should govern) to a large degree, our practice. After all, we are Greeks and we partake of our tradition (Lignadis 1988: 185-190). That does not mean, of course, the advocates of valid interpretations argue, that we must be "faithful" to the degree of using performance merely as translation of the playscript to the stage. Classical plays, like words in a poem, do not

"translate" in a one-to-one relationship of reference. In order to function, artists must carefully "retranslate" them into the new idiom, renaming principles of practice where appropriate, but especially naming indigenous principles of practice -- based on language, temperament, local rhythms and traditions -- applying those to explicate their practice. But whatever *mise-en-scene* practitioners devise for the needs of their production, they have to make sure, critics warn, that they do justice to the essence of tragedy, which is to bring us face to face with the depths of human pain, the "signified already there" out of which human life molds itself. Eliminating the "tyranny" of this truth, is like eliminating everything the text stands for. It is like using the set without its foundations. By actively invading the autonomy of the text, its visual concepts, its inner rhythms, its emotional tensions and structural arrangements, by a new and insubordinate commentary that puts in question all the attributes of dramatic meaning, we not only deceive the public that goes to see a classical play, but we also stretch the text beyond its limits. We give the impression that classical playwriting is faulty in its perception of life and theatre and that one can do anything with it. This deconstructive practice, critics maintain, might occasionally produce good theatre, but not necessarily tragedy. The production will be a departure from the original, in which case we have a new play that should be interpreted differently.

3. What puzzles and frequently enrages Greek critics is the ease with which Greek practitioners imitate theatrical models developed by various cultures as diverse as the Japanese, the American, the German or the French. Instead of turning to Greek culture for inspiration, artists sell out their legacy in order to copy models that are most of the time inappropriate. In fact, critics charge, Greek artists have committed "adultery" so many times that they have forgotten where their own bed is: they have forgotten, as the director Solomos put the case, that it is their "duty" to open the foreigners' eyes "instead of losing ours in order to copy them." As long as "we copy foreign artists," the same director asserts, "we will continue to exhibit our culture in the front window of our tourist shop... . We do not love our field. We love easy profit. We import ideas, innovations and impressions which we cover with a layer of shadow theatre and oriental music and sell them as products made in Greece. And this is no different from exposing the country to international ridicule" (Solomos 1986: 20,18).

A still prevailing view among local critics is that of ancient drama as mainly a "Greek affair". Their contention is that ancient art cannot be easily transported, let alone absorbed, into the international dramatic repertoire.

Only the technique travels; tradition stays within its own country. And that explains, according to them, why foreign practitioners are more daring with their transcultural experiments than their Greek counterparts. After all, for non-Greeks ancient drama is a neutral ground that they take for granted. Whenever they resort to it, it is simply for practical reasons. They are hardly interested in preserving any continuities or unities. Nor are they interested in preserving anything Greek in it. Greece is but a memory, a mask, a pretext for something else. Their major concern is how to increase the readability of the plays, how to give them a certain notion of "hominess" and thus enable their spectators to flesh out the old structures by a series of formal rules that derive from their native experience (Varopoulou 22.5.1988:60).

So to find the "code" of Greek theatre, Georgousopoulos declares, "one should risk a dive into the innermost layers of its tradition," rather than seek refuge to either principles of impressionism or principle of undigested interculturalism. The confrontation of dramatic text and performance should not be the haphazard and thoughtless assembly of heterogeneous material in the name of modernization, but a carefully considered system of "colossal analogies and associations" that will lead to a fresh and synthetic reading of the old text, a reading based as much as possible on the peculiarities and continuities of Greek culture and its received patterns (Georgousopoulos 1984:188; also 8.8.1989:23). Where else can Greek artists find, the same critic wonders, better material for the revival of tragedy than in the Greek Orthodox Church, the only topos that still resembles, with its semi-choruses, its exits and entrances, its divine drama and its crowd of participating (and not judging) onlookers, the workings of the old theatre? If this tradition is not enough, he concludes, for a sound revival of ancient tragedy, then "we better give up our efforts and continue concocting our beautiful performance post cards" (Georgousopoulos 1984:28). The pseudo imitations of foreign models, be it Kabuki techniques, Brechtian techniques or Hollywood spectacular effects, critics claim, "distort the foundations of the poetics of Greek drama" (Lygizos 1984:18 19). Just like soda water, they help our digestion, and the tourists' digestion after a gargantuan meal at a local taverna.

4. This rage that characterizes the ideas of Greek critics, although farfetched sometimes, is to a certain extent understandable. After all, contemporary practice has defied many accepted premises of what we have come to expect from the revival of ancient drama, premises derived primarily from the conventions of a long logocentric tradition, that have so come to dominate our view of ancient stage that it is still difficult for critics to endorse

strategies that question long tested values and codes. This paradigm as regards the recent revivals of ancient drama could be summarized as follows: 1) Classical drama is a treasure house of experience, if not form, that can still inspire our contemporary life. It contains elements of truth about human life that should be respected at all cost. It cannot be treated as a container into which anyone can pour his/her precious cultural content. 2) A sound revival of ancient drama requires, above all, a close reading of the text and its formal attributes. The stage cannot be used as the topos to fill in with the sounds of the director's tricks and vanity. Nor can it be used as an alibi for a tentative show of smartness. 3) The non verbal channels that Greek and foreign practitioners use so extensively is nothing more than too much showing that tells very little; it is an index to our indifference to meaning that allows technique to triumph over imagination. And if technique is everything and if telling impossible, why do the classics at all, whose primary goal is to address the mind rather than the eye? 4) Blindly to follow foreign models is like saying that there is a lack of auto-reflection from within. The challenge to contemporary Greeks is to derive principles of theatrical practice primarily from the Greek tradition itself as defined in the idiom of 2500 years of dramatic history and also in the idiom which constitutes the language of modern Greece. Only an in depth investigation of the fundamental manifestations (synchronic and diachronic) of Greek folk and religious culture can lead to a sound aesthetic for the revival of ancient drama and to a more constructive incorporation of international scholarship. And 5) last, but not least, it is the responsibility of the State, as Prof. Andronikos says, to put an end to the vandalization of the classics by refusing to sponsor people who "shamelessly" torture with their "insane alchemies" the "unfortunate body" of Greece's most precious legacy which, unlike other cultural icons (the Parthenon, for example), is left totally unprotected and thus an easy prey in the hands of various experts (Andronikos 27.8.1989: 54). We want people "who have vision, an opinion and a thesis," Georgousopoulos asserts; "not people who resort to superfluties to cover the nakedness within" (Georgousopoulos 20.7.1987: 23). In this way, as Angelos Terzakis once wrote, echoing Matthew Arnold, "charlatanism shall have no entrance" (Terzakis 6.4.1954).

5. Thus far I have barely outlined a sizable body of criticism. I have ignored vital distinctions: for instance I have said nothing about the contribution of contemporary critics and practitioners to our better understanding of ancient drama. I have deliberately placed by emphasis on

the readings of mainstream critics simply because they are the ones who, through their access to academia, course syllabi, literary anthologies, publishing houses, newspapers, radio and television programs, the national drama schools and the various festivals and committees, directly affect the people's assumptions about what kind of person can be a literary genius, what the role of the director vis-a-vis the classical text could be, what kinds of subjects great dramatic literature can discuss, their notions of who can be a hero and who cannot, notions of what constitutes significant activity or a significant issue and so on. At the same time however, it would be very difficult to argue that any logos can be so absolute as to cover the whole spectrum of cultural activity in any country, and it is certainly not the case in contemporary Greece. Admittedly, there has been, in the last few years, an increasing interest in the social context of ancient art by younger scholars (especially Greek-Americans) and artists familiar with international trends and the whole debate over the revival of the classics (Patsalidis 1989: 68-78). There is of course little agreement as to what precisely might constitute this radical shift of perspectives. But the mere emergence of this issue -- or, better, of this new framework for asking questions about the revival of ancient drama, its modes, and its possible manifestations -- confronts Greek critics and artists with a major and puzzling cultural phenomenon that they will soon have to deal with. After all, the intercultural reality of the European Common Market does not leave much choice. These performances from Europe and the rest of the world, as Varopoulou remarks, should be a signal for everyone to stop and think about what "revival" means and where ancient drama is heading (Varopoulou 27.3.1988: 60).

As I have argued elsewhere, mainstream Greek criticism and practice have reached a point where they must discuss the revival of the classics in their homeland more systematically and on different grounds (Patsalidis 1989:68-70). This not to say that the prevailing formalist, text-oriented approaches, with their emphasis upon the internal attributes of the artwork (style, rules, conventions, thematics, semiotic codes, intertextuality) should be dismissed, unless of course one wishes to deny all value for formal interpretations. Nor is to say that the overall judgments and fears of Greek critics and many practitioners are totally baseless. We are, indeed, disturbed by the crude commercializing of the classics and the gradual and unchecked penetration of culture by the ethos of the market, as we are all concerned about the cheap experimentation of many self-proclaimed conquistadors of ancient drama. After all, not all experiments have been successful, nor have

they been truly imaginative. Yet, the point I try to make here is that thinking of classical theatre and the possibilities of its revival solely in terms of Aristotle's poetics, or in terms of its "Greekness", its eternal verity, its unmediated spirit and its aesthetic closure is not enough. What I sense is needed now is a critique of issues, of values and of social conditions that shape stage discourse, in other words, an opening up to influences and new areas of practical and critical interest (history, anthropology, ideology, interculturalism) that would not only furnish new directions about how to approach the sacred status of the past but would also help define its present utility and its present position vis-a-vis mass culture. Whether we like it or not we cannot insulate "true" art from the market in order to resist its commercialization, in the same way that we cannot ignore the fact that ancient drama, like all drama, is, among other things, a product directly related to more collective forms of mentality and to systems of power that determine/d its significance. From my perspective this means that to successfully mediate between ancient art and the public as a whole we must first find a way to interrogate and investigate our materials (content, stylistic and linguistic practices, racial and gender relations) and then proceed to find analogies in our systems of power and performance. And this is what Yiannis Kakleas attempted to do with his "heavy metal" version of Aristophanes' Frogs (1990). Instead of providing us with the standard "folk version" of the play with its shadow theatre and commedia dell'arte techniques, Kakleas used the text in order to criticize the state of affairs of our rapidly decaying urban civilization. To do so he contextualized its aesthetics and ideology in a specifically intercultural experience where Dionysus was played as a stoned punk, Hercules as a ridiculous beach boy, the doorkeeper Aeacus as a paraplegic punk in a wheelchair, and the chorus of Frogs and Muses as Vampires and Amazons in leather pants, high heeled boots and chains dangling around their necks. For their playing area he devised a claustrophobic environment that resembled a devastated German military headquarters at the end of the second world war and a deserted Castle of Count Dracula. For two hours the spectators were mercilessly "bombarded" by images, sounds and improbable forms coming directly from the world of video clips, soap operas, horror films, rock music and the underground drug culture. And if the curtain calls are any evidence of a successful performance, then there is no doubt that Kakleas' reading reached his audience. By localizing his text in time and place, through carefully selected spatial and audio-visual analogies, Kakleas immersed it in a sociological matrix that domesticated it and thus made it more accessible to

the contemporary spectator.

If seeing a familiar play in a familiar code is an exercise in recognition, then seeing a familiar play in an unfamiliar code is an exercise in cultural transformation. And that is the case of Thodoros Terzopoulos' production of Euripides' Bacchae (1986). Terzopoulos, known for his adventurous projects and his fascination with such Eastern forms as Bunkaru and Kabuki, took Euripides' text and opened it up to a non-Western culture (the Japanese), in order to celebrate its inherent theatricality and at the same time experiment with the possibilities of a sex-free, age-free and race-free theatre. Clearly the Bacchae's delirium perfectly fit his purpose. With a small cast of five actors and actresses Terzopoulos wove an elliptical stage syntax (a mixture of ancient and modern Greek, of Western and Eastern codes), full of unexpected connections and points of view, whose ultimate goal was to convey the ecstasy of stage transformation. To do away with the text's complete sentence, complete plot and complete character --all the hallmarks of the rage for closure-- Terzopoulos refracted each speech through a multi-vocal, multi-cultural prism that defeated any attempt to identify a coherent, unified speaker. The result was a pluralistic subject that could not be reduced to representing either male or female. And why not, say the critics echoing the director. Don't we all live in a fragmented world where everybody craves for power and ecstasy? There are so many opposite perspectives from which one can view the same event. We can no longer share a consensus of assumptions to evaluate a situation. Dionysus is in everybody. And so is Pentheas. Victimizer and victimized share the same écriture.

Short of a panoramic interpretation of ancient cultural history, what these and other recent efforts offer* is precisely this kind of anxiety to move on, to explore new things in the light of new configurations in the world of new markets, new theories and new technologies. What permeates their work is the feeling that what the classics convey, among other things, is not just an aesthetic but also an ideology that defines and extends its authority or power over others (including art). With this hypothesis as their point of departure they re-situate their text in the sociocultural sites of its production, in order to understand how this text was produced in its unique historical specificity, and then proceed to relocate its analogical significance in our own socio-cultural milieu.

6. This analysis could greatly be expanded, but these suggestions must suffice. In this essay I have not spoken of changes in the form and tone of dramatic revivals through fifteen years of rather turbulent history.

Furthermore, I have not spoken of the impact of the political situation on these attempts. What I hope I have accomplished, nonetheless, is to have given concrete enough form to the fears of some of our best known critics about the fate of ancient drama in a fast changing Greek reality. What expression these fears take in the future, when the issues raised by the intense theoretical and practical debate that is going on now in Europe and the U.S can no longer be ignored or marginalized, remains to be seen. For the time being I sense, at least in the best practical and theoretical work, the groundwork for future readings.

Note

* I have in mind here the "irreverent" readings of Iphigenie in Aulis (Theatro Kaessarianis, 1980) and The Trojan Women (National Theatre, Epidaurus, 1983) by Stavros Doufexis, the ceremonial and highly politicized interpretations of Suppliants and Phoenician Women (Epidaurus 1979,1990) by Nicos Charalambous and The Cyprus Theatre Organization, the feminist version of Helen (1988) and Medea (1990) by Andreas Voutsinas and the State Theatre of Northern Greece, and the exciting and very promising folk version of Electra by Kostas Tsianos (Thessaliko, 1988), based on the local traditions of Thessaly.

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