
ANCIENT DRAMA TODAY. ORESTEIA AND ITS STAGE FORMS

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Abstract: This study focuses on the most important stage productions of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* of the 20th century. A special emphasis is given to the possibilities of reading the tragedy, in relation to politics and social climate. Based on selected productions the study also follows the evolution of various modern directing concepts and diverse approaches to staging ancient drama. Productions of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* were often an integral part of significant changes in modern history and went beyond established ideas of how to read ancient drama.

Key words: Aeschylus, *Oresteia*, ancient tragedy, theatre production, reading, Lothar Mützel, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Vittorio Gassman, Karolos Koun, Luca Ronconi, Peter Stein, Ariane Mnouchkine, Rastislav Ballek

Many experts have taken a chance trying to answer why we are still intrigued by ancient drama. They have approached the subject from various angles, either within the contemporary or socio-political criticism context, or in relation to performance and aesthetics. Philosophers have defined the social and cultural criteria as well as the ideological latitude vital for tragedy (ancient and modern) and the tragic awareness, the consciousness of human mortality, to flourish. Freddy Decreus argues that said tragic awareness comes from the western (originally Greek) point of view and represents the essential ideas of life and death while being anything but Christian, pagan or matriarchal. The tragic awareness speaks of the mortality of human existence, the constant threat of losing the imaginary certainty. Therefore the tragic condition and endeavour leads to actions, decisions and thus to accepting responsibility (along with guilt), resulting in a response that is radical, outside of nature.¹ Tragedies also comment on one's existential, philosophical and economic situation during the times of revolution. Tragic awareness especially emerges during political and cultural crisis, finding its reflection in particular theatre pieces. Drama offers solutions to these events, and even depicts an individual taking heroic steps amid tragic circumstances. However, at the same time drama reveals the awareness of having no chance to escape, to communicate, to act reasonably or have meaningful emotions. Decreus calls such vision proto-tragic (Aeschylus' *Oresteia*), absolutely tragic (Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, Euripides' *The Bacchae* or Shakespeare's *King Lear*) and post-tragic (modern adaptation of ancient myths, such as *Phaedra's Love* by Sarah Kane or *Oresteia* by Romeo Castellucci).² Decreus' analysis provides a key to understanding the immense diversity of performances.

¹ ALTENA, Herman. The Theater of Innumerable Faces. In *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*. Ed. GREGORY, Justina. Oxford : Blackwell, 2005, p. 474.

² Ibid.

Myth is embodied in a specific form of tragedy. Greek mythology offers an abundance of powerful stories not affiliated with any religion and thus recognizable for everyone to make the stories their own. In a time of absence of big stories in literature, directors find solace in these very myths, as they deal with the universal issues and crucial questions: war and its consequences, obligations/responsibilities of those in control towards the subjected (meaning not just conflicts between nations but also between civil wars as well). Greek tragedies elaborate on the responsibility of human kind for the world they live in, as well as the existence of unpredictable forces undermining its endeavours. They embody emotions and events out of human reach and control. Thus they bring to the stage not only responsibility, but overindulgence and recklessness too. They show child sacrifices, horrendous murders, cruel vengeance and fatal consequences of human ignorance.

Greek tragedies had not only been the aesthetic norm at the time of their origin, but had also carried a political or ideological meaning which continues to be a subject of many expert debates. A significant number of exceptional female characters have their place in tragedies, despite the patriarch nature of Athens society. Many strong female characters play an important role in ancient drama despite the patriarchal nature of Athenian society. Female characters prevailed even in those plays dealing with war (Euripides' tragedies).

The mythological content of tragedies thus provides, even today, an established platform for depicting the socio-political conditions. The dramatic action taking place within the realm of mythology allows us to explore historical events as well as the consequences of human behaviour, while constantly creating a distance between the myth and reality. The spectator is given an opportunity to consider the topic close to his heart or to refuse it and deem the story as relevant only within the realm of myth. The option of maintaining such a critical distance played an important role in the modern reception of ancient drama. Greek tragedy has become a powerful tool for expressing one's disapproval of political oppression and demonstration of civil resilience during periods of censoring contemporary drama³. Social and artistic crisis can be thus considered factors for the recurrence of the western civilization's origins. On the other hand, directors had used Greek tragedy during the heyday of theatre forms as well. The Greeks tragedy's formal diversity (combination of theatre and music, dance, chorus sequences, monologues, dialogues, stichomythia, etc.) was attractive and it opened doors for disrupting theatre conventions. Other directors had decided to stay true to the form; collecting information about the authentic ancient Greek theatre performances and trying to reconstruct the original form on stage.⁴

Another large issue is the translation of Greek tragedies. Should the director decide to adopt a translation using the metric pattern, actors must submit to a very strict recital mode. Such level of stylization can surely be impressive but could also discourage those spectators used to natural acting. Verse can not only weaken the attention of spectators but the focus of actors, too. Certain skills are necessary when using the possibilities of dramatic verse, foremost finding the adequate pace of recitation.

³ This was also occurring during the World War II: Sartre's *Flies* might serve as an example, as they opened in 1943 during Paris occupation. Ancient tragedies were the barometer of politics during repressive regimes also in the countries of the Eastern bloc.

⁴ Productions as attempts of reconstruction were characteristic approximately until 1950s.

Meticulous approach is required regarding both recital mode and physical component of acting. Actors must also abandon expressive facial expressions if using masks.

What also appears problematic is the religious aspect of tragedies, since the ancient concept of the divine is very much different from the Christian concept. Gods are not almighty, they do make mistakes from time to time and sometimes it's even them who embody the worst of human qualities – despite all that they are still gods. Tragedies involve rituals and prayers that are integral parts of ancient Greek culture but very distant from our culture, where there is no universal religion, nor rituals shared by the majority of spectators.

Ancient drama had thus become a challenge to each and every director or theatre-maker; it is partially limiting but also offering countless variations of text interpretation and stage form.

Oresteia as a reflection of political events?

Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (458 BC) is undoubtedly one of the most fundamental and influential drama pieces. It had gained more attention in the 19th century and subsequently became a subject of various interpretations in 20th century. *Oresteia* is generally considered a transition (of human kind) from dark ages to a higher form of society (the rule of law). Adaptations and performances across numerous countries had however reflected their foregoing political climate or social controversies. Considering the matter from the angle of theatre history, we can also follow the evolution of modern directorial concepts as well as the diversity of approaches to ancient drama adaptations by studying these performances.

Individual performances and their interpretations can be divided into three groups⁵, while this classification is solely one of many possible keys to choosing and analysing the performances.

1. Evolutionary, affirmative model – transition from chaos to modern order, while each director considered the regime he favoured (liberal, democratic, communist).
2. Ambivalent – an “open” point of view, Athena's victory is fragile and temporary.
3. Anti-affirmative model – staging *Oresteia* with a negative, critical finale. These are also labelled post-modern, since they deny everything that Athena had embodied before (progress, reason).

While Simon Goldhill considers *Oresteia* to be an outcome of Athenian democracy⁶, Mark Griffith takes a more cautious approach to the definition and sees *Oresteia* more as an advocacy for aristocratic prerogatives.⁷ Griffith also deems controversial Orestes' actions at the court and his relationship towards the Athenian judicature. When jurors take a vote in Orestes' case, Athena announces that even a straight vote will acquit Orestes, as this rule had existed in Athens. Regarding Orestes' hearing, it is challenging to decide with certainty whether Athena's vote was only symbolic or actually decisive if there had been an uneven number of jurors.

⁵ BIERL, Anton. *Die Orestie des Aischylos auf der modernen Bühne: Theoretische Konzeptionen und ihre szenische Realisierung*. Stuttgart : Metzler, 1999.

⁶ See GOLDHILL, Simon. *Aeschylus: Oresteia*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2000.

⁷ GRIFFITH, Mark. Brilliant Dynasty: Power and Politics in the *Oresteia*. In *Classical Antiquity*, 14 (1) (1995), pp. 62–129.

Other experts read *Oresteia* as a battle of sexes, when matriarchy succeeds patriarchy and thus contradicts the preferred blood bond of mother and child. Athena votes in Orestes' favour because she prefers the male sex. On the other hand, Froma Zeitlin argues that Aeschylus' view on civilization is based on controlling women as a part of Greek misogynist society⁸, as Zeitlin focused on the demonizing of women and patriarchy encouragement. Goldhill later followed up with Zeitlin's work and researched Aeschylus' ambiguous language and gender issues in civil context.⁹ The main problem here is the feminine aspect of the Eumenides and the androgynous goddess Athena. Laura McClure came with a new approach to the matter, when she studied the codes of male and female speech.¹⁰

One of the prevailing topics within the discourse are also questions regarding the staging, adequate translation or the chorus' function. Performances of various interpretations have demonstrated that no approach can be considered definitive. Many directors viewed *Oresteia* as a means of going back to the roots of Western theatre. Some performances have become fundamental within the context and history of staging ancient drama; mostly because these performances were integral parts of pivotal changes in modern history and crossed the lines of strictly established ideas about ancient theatre. The aforementioned performances were by Hans Oberländer/Ulrich von Wilamowitz (1900), Max Reinhardt (1911/1919), Dimitris Rondiris (1954), Vittorio Gassman/Pier Paolo Pasolini (1960), Luca Ronconi (1972), Peter Stein (1980), Karolos Koun (1980/1982), Peter Hall (1981), Ariane Mnouchkine (1991/93) and Romeo Castellucci (1995). The political nature of Aeschylus' drama appears to be applicable to every current context or social discourse making it easy for spectators to identify with.

As it has been mentioned before, Aeschylus' *Oresteia* had provided a mirror to social and political events throughout the history of its staging, and it has happened more than once. *Oresteia* performed during the Olympic games in 1936 can serve as an example of how a Greek tragedy can be used for propaganda; the performance directed by Lothar Mühel opened in Staatliches Schauspielhaus in Berlin. The director used a 1885 translation by Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, a renowned expert on ancient theatre. It was this very translation that ignited the *Oresteia* staging tradition throughout Germany; until then German theatres staged mostly Sophocles' *Antigone*, *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, often considered to be a trilogy.

Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* was published in 1872 and instantly brought a new perspective on Greek art, until then considered as noble and worthy of observation. According to Nietzsche, Greek tragedy was rooted in the Dionysian element, emerging in the satyr play, in dithyrambic chorus. It is this principle which annuls individuation, transposes individuals into a state of ecstasy and transforms them into members of a dancing, singing community with no limits or borders separating them from each other. Nietzsche coupled this principle with the Apollonian element, the principle of individuation; theatre of tragedy arises from the very

⁸ See ZEITLIN, Froma. *The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Mythmaking in the Oresteia of Aeschylus*. In *Arethusa* 2, (1978), pp. 149–184.

⁹ See GOLDHILL, Simon. *Language, Sexuality, Narrative: The Oresteia*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1984.

¹⁰ MCCLURE, Laura. *Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama*. Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1999.

collision between the Dionysian and Apollonian. Nietzsche also interconnected the origin of Greek theatre with archaic sacrifice ritual; Wilamowitz-Moellendorff objected to this idea and decided to revise his translation of *Oresteia* as a form of protest.¹¹ He employed a number of Christian phrases and words such as sin, hell or exclamations like “Heavens!”, thus giving the Dionysian tragedy a Christian undertone¹².

The new translation of *Oresteia* was published in 1900. The production opened at the Berlin Theater des Westens the same year (directed by Hans Oberländer), at the Vienna Burgtheater (directed by Paul Schlenther) and also in other German cities in the next years. The staging of Oberländer’s adaptation of *Oresteia* widely employed Wilamowitz-Moellendorff’s translation; music for this production was composed by Max Schilling. This adaptation had prevailed until 1911 when Max Reinhardt’s *Oresteia* opened at the Volksfestspiele in Munich and later at Circus Schuman in Berlin in 1912. Reinhardt managed to introduce Nietzsche’s vision to the stage. However, critics remained convinced about Winckelmann’s image of ancient Greek culture and deemed these productions non-Greek.¹³

Lothar Mützel used Wilamowitz-Moellendorff’s translation for his 1936 production, while eliminating the Christian terminology he had considered outdated. Mützel strived to create a connection between pre-war Germany and the Third Reich; however, his aim was not to deliver an ideological or political statement. Stage designer Traugott Müller avoided replicating the original Greek scene; for the first part of the trilogy, *Agamemnon*, he created a monumental palace. The set of the second part, *The Libation Bearers*, was dominated by a vast tomb of Agamemnon. The set of the third part of the trilogy, *The Eumenides*, was designed as a two-story structure divided into two parts, with a massive statue of the goddess Athena. While Athena’s character was significantly reduced or even omitted in earlier productions, Mützel emphasized her character greatly without making any changes to the original storyline. He focused heavily on the transition from the law of blood revenge to the democratic polis principle where arguments are valued and the election results matter.

Critics concluded a full transition from Dionysian to Apollonian, from the darkness of the first two parts of the trilogy to an unmistakable reconciliation in the third part. However it might appear unclear how possibly could be the production influenced by the Nazi ideology, many period reviews offer a closer look at the whole context. According to these, ancient drama is anything but distant from the then-current times, as the German nation recognizes and acknowledges the power of blood. Finding parallels between Aeschylus’ times and then Germany is fairly easy: *Oresteia* was in fact born from the collision of two “Weltanschauungen” (worldviews), as one world was doomed and something new arose. The transformation from Dionysian to Apollonian, as well as from archaic to classic Greece in Mützel’s production allows

¹¹ When Nietzsche published *The Birth of Tragedy*, one of the first to react was Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff who wrote a vicious pamphlet, accusing Nietzsche of betraying the principles of classic philology. Nietzsche wrote a pamphlet in return with an ironic title *We philologists*, putting up against each other the wonders of ancient Greece with the barren realm of classical philology. Wilamowitz had thus become the representative of the traditional scientific philology, making Nietzsche the representative of modern criticism as the new approach to Greek tragedy.

¹² FISCHER-LICHTE, Erika. Resurrecting Greece in Nazi Germany, In *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual. Exploring Forms of Political Theatre*. New York : Routledge, 2005, pp. 487–488.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 489.

to comprehend the “change of times” brought by the Nazis as a portrait of Germany’s rise from the World War I bloody battles trauma, from the deceitful Versailles pact and from the Weimar republic darkness towards the “light” of national socialist government. Greek theatre and Greek tragedy were seen through the prism of “exempla docent” and it was the spirit of ancient Greece that the new national German theatre was supposed to be born from. An affinity or even analogy between German and Hellenic spirit was repeatedly declared to fit this idea to the national-socialist propaganda, and in accordance with this, no other Greek tragedian was more “northern” than Aeschylus.

The persuasion of such affinity between the German and Greek spirit prevailed among German intellectuals until Goethe’s era.¹⁴ The cultural identity was based on the image of ancient Greek culture – this image later changed and was subsequently reinterpreted on a racial basis. The national-socialist ideology of *Oresteia* emerged especially within the context of its staging during the 1936 Olympics, designed in the spirit of a replica of the Ancient Olympia topography. The ceremony started with igniting the Olympic flame in the Olympia sacred circuit; the Youth Olympic Games and the grand opening of *Frankenburger Würfelspiel* (Frankenburg Dice Game) were the side events. Each of these elements had an impact on the reception of *Oresteia*, which aimed to present the Nazi Germany as the legitimate heir and successor to the ancient Greece.¹⁵ This version portrayed the human progress towards law and order and ratified the victory of Aryan race, represented by the Olympian dynasty.

Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico (INDA) staged the *Oresteia* trilogy in Syracuse after the World War II in 1948. Their concept stayed true to the naturalistic tradition. An aesthetic (as well as political) breaking point in reading Aeschylus occurred in production of *Oresteia* which opened in the revived INDA in 1961 (translated by Pier Paolo Pasolini, directed by Vittorio Gassman and Luciano Lucignani). Pasolini translated *Oresteia* upon Gassman’s request and his approach was more of a political reading, as he believes the *Oresteia* trilogy to be explicitly political. Characters of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Aegisthus, Orestes, Apollo and Athena are human, contradicting and powerful, but foremost they are symbols and mediums to express the ideas, concept and the ideology of *Oresteia*. Pasolini strived to convey the “spirit” of Aeschylus’ work as opposed to being too literal with his translation. Pasolini’s translation aspires to become an artwork on its own, translating the myth into a new code. Using modern language without archaic terminology and mannerism helped to diminish the gap between the realms of the Christian and Pagan and subsequently brought the ancient text closer to present-day spectator.

Pasolini found it unavoidable to return to the barbaric Greece and to “pre-rational” era to uncover the circumstances of today (we are talking about the 60s of the 20th century), as well as the state of (neo-capitalistic) society that erased the “tragic condition”, the painful awareness of a democratic polis citizen, and the awareness of the present-day individual – that there is no such thing as utter certainty. Paso-

¹⁴ *History of Ancient Art* by Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1764) was a crucial piece of work in this era. Winckelmann’s work was the most significant synthesis of the evolution of ancient culture and thus became the basics for classic archaeology.

¹⁵ FISCHER-LICHTE, Erika. Resurrecting Greece in Nazi Germany. In *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual. Exploring Forms of Political Theatre*. New York : Routledge, 2005, pp. 495–498.

lini considered the fear present in Aeschylus' realm to be the one factor our current anxiety comes from and which one needs to get rid of – and to find light amidst the darkness. According to Pasolini shall this existential doubt remain valid even within advanced society.

The theme of guilt and punishment dominated Pasolini's reading. Fathers who collaborated with fascism or other form of power were, historically speaking, guilty of genocide, endorsing capitalism and consumer society. Their sons who proved unable to face said powers and ignite change, were equally guilty.¹⁶

The production was heavily influenced by left wing orientation of its creators. Pasolini saw Erinyes as the defeated part of the past. Psychological categories of rational and irrational were emphasized as the opposite of new and old, while Pasolini argued that archaic, irrational remains could not be entirely suppressed for they might endanger the new order within modern society. Such situation called for a rational instance. In *The Eumenides* Athena transformed the destructive powers, Furies, into Eumenides, the vital principle of rational structure. However, Pasolini read the third part as a political text. Italy in the 1960s was according to Pasolini a country deep in the dark, only waiting for its own revolution to finally happen. Pasolini argues it is necessary to act just like Athena did: using the potential of archaic, irrational powers instead of destroying them. The "voodoo" dance at the end of *The Eumenides* represented Pasolini's positive approach towards the archaic powers. Wild dance demonstrated the freed people entering a new rational era without denying their origins – but drawing inspiration from them. The irrational element is an inherent part of them as human beings.

Pasolini revisited the theme of *Oresteia* a number of times; in 1966 he wrote *Pylades* as the fourth part to the trilogy, and created the movie *Appunti per un'Orestide africana* in 1969. Pasolini, deeply disappointed in the Italian Communist Party, began to idealize the archaic powers of blood and land embodied in the Italian village lifestyle. In *Pylades* the hero has to choose between Athena and Orestes who represent rationality, and between Electra and Erinyes who represent the primal forces. In the movie were Erinyes symbolically interconnected with the rituals of African tribes, contrasting with the empty modern postcolonial African cities.¹⁷ Pasolini strived to preserve the idea of primal and irrational uncertainty.¹⁸

When studying the political aspect of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, it is necessary to include also the staging tradition in Greece. The 1960s and 1970s were an era of experimenting with new theatrical and political language on stage. The myth of Orestes had grown into very specific mythological, anachronic and socio-political forms and became an inherent part of the debates over the recovery of theatre, national literature and contemporary poetry. The myth was a reference point during the newly established military dictatorship which translated into a dark era of censorship in Greece. Junta – the military dictatorship declared "remediation" of Greek society and state

¹⁶ VITALI, Laura. La colpa, il sacrificio e il destino degli anteroi nel teatro tragico di Pasolini. In *Il mito greco nell'opera di Pasolini*, Udine : Forum Editrice Universitaria Udinese, 2004, pp. 55–67.

¹⁷ BIERL, Anton. *Die Orestie des Aischylos auf der modernen Bühne*, Stuttgart : Verlag J. B. Metzler, 1997, pp. 40–45.

¹⁸ Pasolini set both Myth of Orestes and Myth of Oedipus to African environment. The movie *Edipo re* (Oedipus Rex) of world-wide renown was shot in Morocco.

from dubious elements. Restricting inappropriate literature, music and movies was one of the tools of protection against harmful ideology of communism, anti-national beliefs and Western decadence. It was Aeschylus who proved to be a suitable candidate for the programme of both ethical and cultural reformation.

After brutal suppression of students' protest at the campus of the Polytechnic University in 1973, classic literature became a medium for the young generation, a tool of self-expression.¹⁹ Radical movements turned to classic works within a whole alternative culture tradition. Some renowned figures of the classic reinterpretation trend were found among Greek Marxists and communists – Kostas Varnalis, Vasilis Rotas and Yiannis Ritsos.²⁰ They demanded the acknowledgment of ancient texts as the norm for new analysis of the socio-political order. Greek left-wing oriented artists identified mostly with those ancient works which portrayed the notorious Greek love for freedom, resistance against oppression, redemption from slavery and injustice, and compassion with the fellow man's ordeal.²¹ Aeschylus' *The Persians* and *Prometheus Bound*, Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Philoctetes*, as well as Euripides' *The Trojan Women* were those among most favoured as an expression of resistance against the authorities.

Oresteia, the immaculate portrayal of power was considered a possible threat to the military dictatorship and highlighted those hot political and cultural topics discussed passionately or even worth fighting for. In 1973 *Oresteia* had become integrated in the political debate of left-wing oriented students. Politically engaged students of the Faculty of Theatre Studies of the University of Athens performed an ambitious production of *Oresteia* in the Theatre of Herodes Atticus; and they did it during a truly crucial era of military dictatorship (protesting students had occupied the Faculty of Law just two months before). Despite the poor documentation of the production, it appears that the creators strived to be inventive and focused heavily on the stage setting, costumes and visual effects. Using red fabric delivered a powerful symbolic meaning: first, it was the red carpet imperious Agamemnon stepped on, later it was the net he sprayed with his own blood. Orestes covered the dead bodies of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra with the very same piece of cloth and lastly it became the clothing for the Furies. This massive fabric was employed at the end of the trilogy as it came down from the ceiling towards the orchestra, covering the spectators in the first few rows along with all of the actors onstage. That year spectators often witnessed spreading the red carpet for the members of right-wing junta; the performance's message was quite clear. Theatrical reference of red fabric was an example of delivering such a visual message that is very difficult for the censors to foresee.²²

A more recent production is worth mentioning in this context – an awarded

¹⁹ VAN STEEN, Gonda. Rolling out the red carpet: Power 'play' in modern Greek versions of the Myth of Orestes from the 1960s and 1970s (I). In *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, Vol. 9, No.1 (2002), pp. 51–95.

²⁰ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had great influence on the perception of ancient art, as they had both glorified the era and its works.

²¹ Some identified Orestes' courage and his resistance towards tyranny with life of Aeschylus himself, who had endured the rise and fall of tyrant Hippo.

²² VAN STEEN, Gonda. Rolling out the Red Carpet: Power „play“ in Modern Greek Versions of the Myth of Orestes from the 1960s and 1970s (I). In *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, Vol. 9, No.1 (2002), pp. 51–95.

production of *Oresteia*, directed by Karolos Koun who also employed the red fabric as a remembrance of said events (six years after the fall of the military regime). Koun had rediscovered the ritual, he engaged the chorus along with the audience. Koun's image of Greece is that of a country rising from the depths of dictatorship, delivering a political message that conveys doubts of the recent past.²³ Koun focused on dramatizing the idea of collective guilt and encouraged self-questioning instead of defaming the tyrants or creating a dictatorship drama. Court verdict was not supposed to give the final answer – but time and progress towards democracy. It is doubts that allow the spectator to synchronically see the past, the present and the future.²⁴

The 1970s were marked by a deep sense of political embitterment as Italian artists took resort in their own theatrical adaptations. Luca Ronconi's epic production of *Oresteia* (1972) has not been adequately appreciated to date despite its being a sign of new trend in style of directing. Ronconi was also influenced by psychology theories, mostly by C. G. Jung's reading of the Myth of Orestes and his definition of Orestes complex (analogy with the Oedipus complex). Ronconi was intrigued whether rituals are lost forever or could be preserved for the new era. Ronconi's final technique used in creating this production could be defined as a mixture of styles. He employed three acting methods in staging each of the three parts of the trilogy: *Agamemnon* carried a strict ritual reverence, creating powerful images (related to prehistoric and medieval times), *The Libation Bearers* was staged as a civil revenge play (related to renaissance) and *The Eumenides* was designed as a future-focused utopia (related to the modern era).

This concept was present at every semiotic level of the performance. Ronconi used a translation by a renowned philologist and Grecist, Mario Untersteiner. The production ran for six and a half hours, even though the used version of the translation had been obviously reduced. The setting was rather simple – wooden construction with a variable backdrop, representing the fore part of the palace with a wide staircase. The principle of fusing styles emerged from the combination of antique-style and modern costumes and decorations. Ritual props (such as the bread of sacrifice; dissected lamb and its blood that characters and the chorus used to dip their hands in; black sand on the staircase resembling blood clots) were used on stage along with present-day objects (cello, spinet, typewriter or books). Ronconi's highbrow theatre was an experiment carried out within the framework of a new semiotic theory²⁵ and employed an eclectic method to integrate diverse approaches framing the current intellectual discourse. Remains of structuralism and poststructuralism blended with directing ideas, transforming *Oresteia* into a portrayal of an individual's experience with fragmentation; a portrayal of the evolution starting in the ambiguous past, continuing into the world of today where an individual human being feels nothing but

²³ Ibid, pp. 195–235.

²⁴ Koun's approach towards ancient drama was in stark opposition to the monumental scenic productions in the National Theatre of Athens. Within his own aesthetics, Koun endorsed the concept of "folk expressionism", employing visual and musical elements from the byzantine, oriental and folklore traditions, as he considered them to be deeply rooted in the life of Greek nation. Koun saw ancient drama as a living part of contemporary Greek culture.

²⁵ Apart from Foucault, Ronconi was influenced by structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, postmodern semiotics and linguistics, Jacques Derrida's deconstructive theory of literature and new anthropology.

alienation. It was for the very first time that the ending of *The Eumenides* was read as negative and anti-affirmative.²⁶

Peter Stein staged *Oresteia* in 1980 and had experimented with ancient texts exercises six years before in the project *Antikenprojekt I*. Stein argued that many acting methods had been created far back in ancient Greek theatre and he set a goal for his theatre company to rediscover these methods. Stein demonstrated that even a text only known to a few can deliver a message about experience and problems of the current generation. The value of theatre as a political tool does not only lie in announcing facts or suggesting solutions; however, it can find its own specific means of exploring those aspects of human existence that help to form the awareness of audience. Stein's *Oresteia* opened at Berlin's Schaubühne after eighteen months of rehearsals. The director had created his own German translation in prose and worked with the Greek original as well. Stein succeeded in producing a truly diachronic, eight-hour long performance which incorporated various periods with costumes of diverse cultures. The Chorus of old men in *Agamemnon* appeared dressed in blazers, dark glasses and hats resembling the fashion of the 1940s, while Clytemnestra donned either a uniform-like long skirt suit, or a midi-length pencil skirt and a white blouse with a red hem (as she was standing above the dead bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra, still holding the sword dripping with blood). Stein could not resist reminding the audience of the kind of guilt and fear that is disguised in places where they live – regardless of whether it's ancient Mycenae or Germany at its highest point of prosperity.²⁷ Stein also gave a subtitle to the last part of the trilogy, *The Eumenides – The Vampires Bless the City* (Die Vampiren segnen die Stadt), which is the very part Max Reinhardt failed to stage successfully. The adaptation put emphasis on the court scene presided by Athena, as the Areopagite Council acquitted Orestes. By the end of the performance, as the spectators started to leave the theatre, the judge would repeat the process of black and white voting stones over and over, like a machine. Blood revenge was thus based on the citizens' decision replaced by the rule of law and such statehood shall be preserved in the present day.²⁸

To some extent Stein's reading followed Reinhardt's concept of *Oedipus the King*. Stein strived to challenge the traditional relationship between the audience and actors (just like Reinhardt): he made the audience sit on the floor and designed only an aisle for the chorus. Palace too resembled Reinhardt's set. Despite Stein's production reflecting on earlier directing methods, its political message was all about today. *Eumenides* wore dresses of the same scarlet fabric in which were covered the dead bodies from the previous part. This was a clear indication that the democracy just being born was far from untarnished.

Productions from the end of 1980s and the beginning of 1990s echoed the political changes in Eastern Europe. Ariane Mnouchkine's *Les Atrides* opened in her theatre La Cartoucherie and it has become one of the most acclaimed productions of that time. Mnouchkine's tetralogy came to life one step at a time: *Iphigenia in Aulis* and

²⁶ BIERL, Anton. *Die Orestie des Aischylos auf der modernen Bühne*, Stuttgart : Verlag J. B. Metzler, 1997, p. 21.

²⁷ CHIOLES, J. The *Oresteia* and the Avant-Garde: Three Decades of Discourse, In *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. 22–23.

²⁸ FLASHAR, Hellmut. *Inszenierung der Antike*, München : Verlag C. H. Beck, 2009, pp. 255–256.

Agamemnon opened in 1990, *The Libation Bearers* followed a year later and *The Eumenides* opened in 1992. Mnouchkine added Euripides' *Iphigenia* to Aeschylus' trilogy to get a deeper understanding of the characters' actions – Clytemnestra thus became more likeable despite her behaviour. Mnouchkine based her work on a new translation, to which she had contributed herself. The sequential opening of the four productions showed obvious differences in the artistic concepts. Mnouchkine embarked on a journey digressing from the Western theatre realism and drew inspiration both visual and physical from theatre of the East, foremost Indian Kathakali. Both eastern and western traditions were incorporated in the first productions through dances inspired by Kathakali, voluminous colourful costumes and bold facial painting. Chorus delivered its lines between individual choreography acts and the whole performance was dominated by dance and music. Mnouchkine was convinced about the utmost importance of chorus dances in ancient tragedy and thus she attempted to reconstruct their vital role – her attempt however was not servile, she used the ever alive energy of Kathakali and Bharatanatyam dance. Stage setting, music, light, gestures, voices and movements of actors moved the space – Ariane Mnouchkine called it *écriture corporelle* – bodily writing, vocabulary of gestures appearing throughout the performance. A story almost forgotten was unveiled once again. The simple set consisting of a terracotta roof, surrounded by walls and gate represented a historically specific cosmos.²⁹ The universal space resembled a bullfighting arena. Mnouchkine's *Eumenides* took a more historic approach compared to the original depiction of the Furies/*Eumenides* and their irrational power that had to be tamed and eclipsed by male rational power. Even though *Les Atrides* were positively received, there were a couple of critical voices as well. Sallie Goetsch reacted to sexually biased translation (Lattimore) which ignored some sexual implications in the original Greek expressions. She also objected to Mnouchkine's neglecting Clytemnestra's character – in Aeschylus' text she is portrayed as a dominant, majestic character that downplays all the male ones.³⁰ *Eumenides* were illustrated very much as ghosts/souls, always accompanied by a swarm of black, blood-thirsty, red-eyed demons that looked like dogs or orangutans. Furies were supposed to become the fusion of the divine (supernatural) with the animal element – however, onstage they appeared too comical to maintain their credibility and gravity. Critics also addressed the scene when Apollo defends Orestes, claiming he is not responsible for his mother's death, as he is not related to her. Apollo thus appeared as a weak character, unable to set Orestes free, needing Athena's help. When the acquitted Orestes leaves the scene and Furies transform into *Eumenides*, the solution seems to be far from definitive – the Furies might still return.

Conforming to those philosophical trends established in France, Mnouchkine considered the anthropologic and mythical-ritual dimension of the trilogy above any other aspects. Her production followed the evolution from chaos to order, from darkness to enlightenment, reading the text as a tool for conveying numerous messages. Some of the critical reactions to *Les Atrides* might have been a result of a too

²⁹ BRYANT-BERTAIL, Sarah. Gender, Empire and Body Politic as Mise en Scene: Mnouchkine's *Les Atrides*. In: *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 1., pp. 1–30.

³⁰ Mnouchkine was accused of "playing against the text", of not reading it correctly. See GOETSCH, Sallie. Playing Against the Text. *Les Atrides* and the History of Reading Aeschylus. In *TDR*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (1994), pp. 75–95.

strong preoccupation by the Western theatre tradition; Mnouchkine's production might have felt too distant. Also, the canonical nature of the text might have been a factor, as there are certain correlations to it. Mnouchkine had rediscovered ritual within drama and she allowed for tragedy to follow its Greek roots, using space, body and music in their entirety. She challenged the audience to become a part of the performance's ritual, to feel remorse and sorrow of their own tragedies, and thus she discovered Aristotle's tragedy at its best.³¹ Since Mnouchkine's production reflected on current events, it was impossible for the new climate not to influence the ending of the cycle – calling for peace in *The Eumenides* sounded more passionately, with undertones of historic scepticism and hopelessness.³²

Oresteia was only staged twice in Slovakia³³, where the number of staged ancient dramas is generally very low. The Academy of Arts in Banská Bystrica opened the production *Olympic Air or One Flew over Oresteia* in 2006 and the Slovak National Theatre staged *Oresteia* in 2012, adapted and directed by Rastislav Ballek. The translating tradition is no richer than the staging tradition, therefore Ballek decided to work with the only existing Slovak translation of *Oresteia* by Vojtech Mihálik from 1988. Ballek made several changes in the production, just like any other director. The original text became shorter, bringing most of the attention to the first part of the trilogy, *Agamemnon*. The set, at first austere and minimalistic, became gradually replete with various objects, pieces of fabric, dissection tables and paper boats, while also employing a film projector. Ballek experimented with the stage form and engaged the first couple of rows which he had covered in black plastic bags. The spectator found himself audibly and visually attacked, with very disturbing, almost Sartre-esque buzzing of flies getting under the skin. Digression from the original text also translated into gradual appearing of characters with no lines in the given scene (Electra, Aegisthus, god Apollo), and some of the characters were almost unidentifiable (Iphigenia). Ballek had also reduced the chorus, dividing the text between the narrator/commentator, two soldiers and an old man. The black and red contrast of costumes and the set heralded the upcoming gory events. Instead of the ceremonial purple carpet was Agamemnon awaited with blood-coloured, draped pieces of cloth, indicating his fate. The set, abundant with props, was a mess and it got even more intense with the expressive acting. Nobody listened to Clytemnestra's notorious monologue of mothers' rights. The gold-painted god Apollo either just paraded around, or hung out and smoked, just like Aegisthus. Electra tried to warn Agamemnon a number of times, but to no avail. The naturalistic effect peaked in the scene of Agamemnon's murder; Aegisthus later feasted on Agamemnon's corpse, reminding us of the family's infamous history. However, it appeared that essence of the tragedy and its reading dissolved within the culmination of the countless details.

Minimalistic approach in the second part of the trilogy brought more balance. A king sized bed, shared by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus dominated the set. Mumy of dead Agamemnon was seated in the armchair across the room, as a memento

³¹ McDONALD, Marianne. The Atrocities of Les Atrides: Mnouchkine's Tragic Vision. In *Theatre Forum*, Vol. 1, (Spring 1992), pp. 12–19.

³² HLAVÁČOVÁ, Anna. On the art of Ariane Mnouchkine. Available at <http://www.ostium.sk/sk/o-arianemnouchkine-a-jej-umeni/>.

³³ To compare, Czech theatres staged ten productions.

of the committed crime. Orestes and Pylades often crossed the auditorium, having to find their way through the sacks distributed in the whole space (Pylades and Apollo were played by the same actor).

The third part, *The Eumenides*, had a distinctly different style from the other two parts. Apollo's priestess Pythia had stepped outside the curtain and set an almost cabaret mood. She herself acted as a spokeswoman of the Furies, haunting Orestes, even though she is Apollo's priestess in Aeschylus' original drama. Apollo had defended Orestes' actions but Athena was to make the final decision. Did Orestes have the right to kill Clytemnestra? Whose side is the law on? Nonchalant Athena did acquit Orestes, however, the feelings were mixed in the end: citizens had not participated in the court, they sat in the first rows of the auditorium, leaving the courtroom chairs on the stage empty. The final scene had thus become a parody of justice, celebrated by everyone. It raised questions about the meaning of democracy and statehood but also pointed fingers at lethargic and passive citizens who had caused the fall of justice.

The production had brought some controversy among critics. They praised Ballek for his efforts to be modern and spectacular, but they reproached the extreme naturalism of the production: "The most disputable element of the creative approach is the ever-present naturalism that is not only outside the scope of the ancient staging canon but it doesn't even go beneath the surface. It is futile to have shocking dissection tables on the stage when we don't really see the relationships being dissected and the individual mini-scenes are lacking their inner truth."³⁴ The chaos of actions (mainly in the first part) also instigated negative comments: "The chaos within actions got most of the audience's attention but it was also distracting and decentralizing the focus. The spectator deliberately caught up on the events, trying to navigate through them. The essential information often faded or dissolved altogether."³⁵

Naturally, it is impossible to expect a resurrection of ancient tragedy on a modern stage but it is feasible to at least respect its ancient morphology. Dramaturgical adaptation of such a challenging text is very intricate. Reducing the redundant mythological material, chorus parts and long monologues is often insufficient. It is vital to enrich the text with new meanings and motives. Ballek had merely scratched the surface: "... he stripped the play off its metaphysics and confronted us with a flat, merely horizontal, fragmented realm where there's no verticality, no hope."³⁶

Ballek's production strived to be minimalistic, simple and civil but it resulted in lack of relation and homogeneity between the individual elements. The production could be labelled anti-affirmative within the European context, as the last part of the trilogy criticizes and denies those values represented by goddess Athena – wisdom and justice.

³⁴ ULÍČIANSKA, Zuzana. Pitevný stôl je zbytočný, ak si nerozpitveme aj vzťahy. (Dissection table is futile unless we dissect the relationships as well.) In *Sme*, 28 October 2012. Available at <http://kultura.sme.sk/c/6584610/pitevny-stol-je-zbytocny-ak-si-nerozpitveme-aj-vztahy.html#ixzz3cNmsHRc0>.

³⁵ ŠIMKOVÁ, Soňa. Oresteia bez vyššieho princípu aj bez občanov, alebo nevražдите si matky! (Oresteia without the higher principle and without citizens, or don't murder your mothers!) : Aischylos: Oresteia. In *Monitoring Slovak theatres* [online], 31. 12. 2012. Available at <http://www.monitoringdivadiel.sk/recenzie/recenzia/oresteia-bez-vyssieho-principu-aj-bez-obcanov-alebo-nevrazdite-si-matky/>.

³⁶ Ibid.

Conclusion

This study analyses various angles of reading Aeschylus' *Oresteia* based on selected significant productions of the play from the 20th century. The selection purposefully considers productions from a wide spectrum of countries and periods, including various political backgrounds. Production of Lothar Müthel, performed in the shadow of the Nazi regime during the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin had narrowed down the content of the play to a battle of Aryans and the "Untermenschen" (sub-humans). Productions of Pasolini and Gassman (1960) were characterised by the left-wing inclination in the post-fascist Italy. Productions of Luca Ronconi (1972) and Peter Stein (1982) indicated new courses in directing, as their concepts were influenced by modern semiotic theories. Theatre had also become a political tool. The phenomena of returning to *Oresteia* (and to Myth of Orestes in general) in Greece during the military dictatorship in 1960–1970 is highly intriguing – and a proof of how powerful and revolutionary theatre can be. Tetralogy by Ariane Mnouchkine gradually staged during 1991–1993 was heavily influenced by Asian theatre and its success can be seen as a confirmation of the possibility to interconnect theatre traditions of different cultures. The last production in the selection was a Slovak production of *Oresteia* (2012), directed by Rastislav Ballek who had incorporated modern directing styles. This is a rare addition to the impoverished staging tradition of ancient drama in Slovakia. The study concludes that even a text originated centuries ago has the capacity to reflect on current social discourse.

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