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Ancient drama at the crossroads of civilizations

Since the last quarter of the 20th century, Greek creators seek ways of interpreting the ancient drama, through performances questioning “Greek identity” as the authentic way of directing approach. The theatrical practices expel the culturally familiar and national element and integrate the international theatrical modernism. Sometimes the audience is negative or indifferent to the performances, when these are just an imitation of foreign models, without the unique seal of one’s creativity only in order to impress. In other cases, the image of the performance can be transformed to artistic and inspired concepts with a comprehensive view, which succeeds in bringing out the dramatic poetry and elevate his stage act in the constellation of high art.

Greek directors walk side by side with their foreign colleagues as they express the major, global trends of performance and reoriented the perspectives about ancient drama.

The renewed political environment since 1974 and the economical prosperity play a significant part to these new directions. The refreshment of the Greek propositions is mostly connected with the change and the evident reformation as observed after 1980 in all social structures, included civilization. Switching to another perception of the ancient drama seems inevitable under the pressure of the “grand narrations” deposition according to Lyotard (1979) and the rise of a new era. Main factors, however, for the ancient drama’s brand new revival, remain, on the one hand the opening of Epidaurus Festival to other organizations besides Greek National Theatre and on the other hand the establishment of the International Meetings on Ancient Greek Drama in Delphi, where foreign troupes present innovative theatre productions.

In the Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus, in Delphi and in other venues, new prospects are explored. These prospects sometimes are accepted, while some others are subjected to a hail of criticism. At first the Greek critics and audience feel cautious and awkward before the “foreign” opinion about the ancient drama. On the contrary directors adopt the idea of renewal and succumb to the cultural osmosis. The artists submit their proposals for the revival of the ancient Greek drama in front of the

contemporary spectators, whose criterion is formed since the end of modernity and the gradual emergence of the era of post-modernity (Giddens, 1990). A wealth of stagings emerges and captures the global idea about reception of ancient drama. The performances move freely between the reconstruction of past material, the forms of technology and precipitation of obligation towards preserving the original text.

The entry of foreign directors in ancient theaters and in other Greek venues offers the opportunity for exchanging cultural aspects and ideas, for having a contact with the theatrical tradition of the East and intercultural theater of the West, as well as the renewal of the way of receiving dramatic poetry. The claim of the authentic interpretation of ancient drama by the Greeks alone, as well as the artistic introversion and the theatrical isolation, as inherited historical and social data, subside. Their place is granted to the Western identity and the investigation of the foreign view about tragedy. The Greek productions accept the modern directing movements and renew the approach to ancient drama using knowledge drawn from foreign productions.

In the course of searching the role the ancient drama plays in modern times, a complex symbiosis and coexistence of different opinions, views and shapes is observed. The diverse interpretations of ancient drama are rooted in theater traditions, but they also borrow ingredients from the psychoanalysis, sociology, political science. The result is analogous to the artistic choices and personal interpretative perception of the director.

The theories of interpretation, the aesthetic movements, the trends in theater analysis and stage act about the ancient drama haven't proven that the genre does not break a must. The theater movements do not set boundaries in tragedy, comedy, satirical drama. The approach of ancient drama is history developing into the crossroads of civilizations. In a single performance can coexist different codes without this incurring breakdown of style. Besides, performance is not only a theoretical construct nor leads to an idealistic place of art, but in a constructive dialogue that develops between texts and cultures, as the ancient drama belongs to the global heritage. The rift with the aesthetic choices of the past, the syncretism acting schools, the intercultural approach, the postmodernism are the main options for performing choices in ancient tragedy and comedy.

Among other manifestations of the new reception of ancient drama, the physical theater, the Japanese formalism, the political reading and postmodern version play a significant part.

In the beginning of the 80s, while the global art and literature dominates the course of modernism in a reluctance to “grand narratives” (Kaye, 1994), a Greek director, Theodoros Terzopoulos follows the opposite path of the prevailing contrasting the explanatory reason that explores the determinants of the artwork, the “*word that comes from inside the soul*” and is activated by the body (interview on Mar. McDonald, 1993: 209).

Using the body as an instrument of acting leads the actor to offer form to the character and bring to life a situation which, because of its tragic amplitude, exceeds the experience of the average viewer. The physical code becomes a primary factor of drama’s reception. The physiology of the body, expression, gesture, kinesiology, and the voice produced by the body, create a cohesive interpretative code. On the phonetic level both the articulated and the inarticulate speech, as well as the cry and further silence are included.

With his directing choices, Terzopoulos traces the path of Tadashi Suzuki’s theatrical teaching, who, having assimilated the Japanese tradition, stands among the founders of physical theater, Meyerhold, Artaud and Grotowski.

Despite the individual differences in the theoretical-philosophical shape and in practical applications, the above expressed the view that the body is not a tabula rasa but a space of meditation and preservation of myths, history, ideology and sufferings of every human community. According to Tadashi Suzuki “*education is the body*” (McDonald, *ibid.*: 46 and McDonald, 1989).

Terzopoulos found in the body unmanifested possibilities which emerged with arduous training of actors. His personal search for the origin of his own memory led him to *Bacchae*. Heiner Müller (1986) describes the performance of Euripides’ last tragedy as “*a journey deep into the memory landscape*”. On *Bacchae* the body becomes damaged, torn, archetypal. Th. Terzopoulos’ troupe “Attis” through strenuous exercise resulted in Dionysian excess and communion, as the believers in the religious tradition “Anastenaria” reach ecstasy or as in ancient Amfiareio the patients were ecstatic through hard exercise and overcoming pain (Mc Donald, 1993).

The "Biodynamic method" that Terzopoulos developed, was formed into dynamic expression catalepsy in *Bacchae*. All the dramatic characters of the play are in an orgiastic movement except for Pentheus who is dismembered, unable to give in to the supremacy of instinct. The Chorus reacts with triple series of simultaneous movements: the head swings, the vibrational motion of the hands into the air, knees bent as in Kabuki, and feet fixed on earth or vibrating feet. The pelvis becomes the means of the flow of energy, in correspondence with the Suzuki method (Suzuki, 1986. Sellers-Young, 2001. Sant, 2003). The actors' mobility does not happen in Agave's case who stands almost motionless and speechless holding Pentheus' head. The mouth opens wide when she realizes her actions of infanticide and perhaps raw cannibalism (Lekatsas, 1989), but acting of the biodynamic method does not allow the easy and quick reaction, while it prevents the superficial emotion, the lament and the elocutionary trained words. On the contrary, the speech is difficult, partly inarticulate and culminates in anguish. Catharsis in Terzopoulos' *Bacchae* is succeeded not according to the Aristotelian view, but according to the Freudian one, "as healing result", when the suppressed emotional tension is released through the revival of the traumatic event that Cadmus psychoanalytically recalls.

In a simultaneous way Terzopoulos directed *Bacchae* in foreign productions. In *Theban Cycle* (Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus, Germany 2002), he sought the "mania" as tragedy's core (Rufolo-Hörhagen, 2003). This performance had more formalistic elements and influences from the East. He maintained, however, the idea of physicality, the elevation of speech and the energetic power of the actors. Women and men of the Chorus were entering the Orchestra with a blood stream painted on their naked bodies, "the body's wine", from the ear to the underbelly. When Dionysus enters they fall into ecstasy which deepens as the plot progresses. Dionysus has the same blood creek on his naked chest as *Bacchae*.

The dramatic text is used by Terzopoulos in its original form with all the necessary excerpts for the moderation of the performance, which shows the secret, the obvious and the aimed meanings through the energy of the body, symbolisms, and intercultural elements. Instead, Tadashi Suzuki in the performances he presented in Greece and other countries modifies the texts of ancient tragedies, he deconstructs them and medleys them with newer European or other texts coming from the Japanese theatrical tradition. The *Trojan Women*, *Clytemnestra*, *Dionysus*, *Oedipus Rex* are the

dramatic works directed by Suzuki rearranging the Greek tragedians. The ancient drama is placed by Suzuki in a Japanese context. The *Trojan Women*, for example, in Kabuki's form, tell the history of Japan after the nuclear devastation of Hiroshima and *Clytemnestra* in No's form pictures the living conditions of Japanese women.

Unlike the classical Greek tradition about tragedy performances, Suzuki gives priority not to the speech, but to the movement, the visual element and the action as a ritual. As Terzopoulos leverages the ritual dances of Thrace, in a similar way Suzuki brings to tragedy performances the priestly movement of No's theater.

Both Tadashi Suzuki and Theodore Terzopoulos explore the ancient tragedy in the age of postmodernity by mixing the genetic codes of art. They start from the assumption that the body must be "*timeless and de-politicized*" (Suzuki, *ibid*) to manifest without preconceptions the contemporary political and social life by returning to the primitive. They train actors' bodies in febrile rhythms, lead the speech in acrobatic enunciation, alter persons in tragic masks.

The Eastern theatrical forms are emerging in European dramaturgy and direction from the first decades of the 20th century and having an intercultural influence on modern theater. Meyerhold, Brecht and Artaud use the Asian tradition in order to renew the art. The pioneers are followed by Wilson, Grotowski, Schechner, Barba, Brook and Mnouchkine. The later indulge more in acting codes and the form of the Asian and African theater despite the themes and the exoticism. As part of the 60s and 70s avant garde, a theatrical trend is developed that incorporates alien cultural influences in the local national tradition. At the same time, directors from Japan mainly adopt classical texts of the Western world with a preference in Shakespeare and the Greek tragic poets. After 1980, the Japanese Tadashi Suzuki and Yukio Ninagawa excel as directors in the western repertoire, both at home and in the West.

Yukio Ninagawa chose as directing view the composition of traditions in ancient drama performances. From the five Greek tragedies that he directed, *Medea* (1983/84) and *Oedipus Rex* (2004) were presented in Athens.

Ninagawa's staging proposal of the ancient drama broke down the walls of the delimitation of the tragedy as a cultural asset in the western world only. The merging of cultures, which was achieved in *Medea* and *Oedipus Rex* inspired Greek directors

and renewed the way they approach the drama. Theodore Terzopoulos, Michael Marmarinos and Nikaiti Kontouri are referred as such examples.

Kontouri chose to give a Japanese taste to her first ancient drama directing in 1996 (National Theater Archive). *Medea* that was assigned by the National Theatre to the director was presented in Greece and on an international tour. Kontouri directed *Medea* with formalistic aesthetics. The symbolic attributes of the objects and movement were emphasized. *Opsis* was separated from *Lexis* so the performance became unbalanced. The boundless stylization, the ritual movement, makeup -white and black like a mask- showed clearly that it was Japanese formalistic elements.

The imprint of Japanese reception appeared to the *Persians* which Nikaiti Kontouri directed in the production of the National Theatre of Northern Greece (2014). It was an uneven performance of different styles from Episode to Episode. The part of Atossa was interpreted by Akis Sakellariou. He maintained Kabuki's gestural code, which the Greek audience had known by Mikijiro Hira, leading actor in Ninagawa's *Medea*. However, even though japanism was obvious in Atossa's external appearance, acting didn't go further into character. Chorus appeared in Parodos holding empty shirts which were lit internally. In this symbolic way, was represented the death of the youth of Persia, which was to be lost in Greece. Chorus' costumes were referred to the clothes of samurai. Theatrical conventions and symbols were scattered in the show, as in No theater, where nothing is depicted realistically. The makeup of the Messenger as a mask of mud, water from which Xerxes appeared, the ramp-like stage covering most of the *Orchestra*, create associative reduction in Japanese theater.

Kontouri in *Medea* and *Persians* followed proven ethnological codes but used only the look of the eastern tradition. In these performances, the form was recognizable, the references were identified but the dialogue between the image and the word did not reveal the specific proposal for the ancient drama and productive osmosis of cultures.

The social and political upheavals that happened in the second half of the 20th century permeated the entire theater. Especially since May of '68 and for about two decades the so called political theater is used as means of political change.

Peter Stein's direction of *Oresteia* in 1980 (1985 in Greece) balances the extreme trends and marks a turning point (Flashar, 1991). Stein maintained and pointed out the political elements of the trilogy based on the idea "of returning to the poet". The idea is defined as return to the integrity of the original text. It is not associated with the archaic or the historical revival nor with the old forms of directing, but with the attempt to make the *Lexis* of ancient tragedy comprehensible to the spectators of the modern world. During the process of "returning", the ancient drama is capable of functioning as a link between the past and the present and enlightening the modern world for the understanding of History.

With distinct political targeting Andrej Wajda directed Sophocles' *Antigone* in 1984 in Poland and 1989 in Greece. The view of directing was determined by the imposition of martial law in Poland in 1981. Wajda's approach emphatically highlights the confrontation of the individual with the power's authority, as well as the contrast between personal ethics and politics (Wajda Website). The directorial mark is expressed by the verse of Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz «As long as I live will yell from the bottom of my heart - No" from his poem *Antigone*.

The transfer of the Sophocles tragedy in the contemporary historical circumstances was not a trick out of context, but it became the foundation for the political and moral attitude of a community, which was involved in a specific political situation. Wajda chose *Antigone* to display the human archetype that rebels because they do not accept evil's triumph. In order to ensure the reception of the political meaning by the audience, Wajda used a modern presentation with contemporary costumes and props.

Wajda's suggestion is not innovative neither it challenges the subversion of the classic idea. His directing attempted to bring out the tragedy's contradictions through a new contextual framework and put History on stage through the mediation of ancient drama. The performance arrived in Greece five years after the first presentation in Poland. History had overtaken the events and the production seemed untimely and rather indifferent, having an overt goal and little to do with the core of Sophocles tragedy. The idea of the tragedy's modernization resulted to dividing the critics both in Poland and Greece. When George Steiner attended Wajda's performance in 1984, described the Polish *Antigone* as the starting point for a new sense of tragedy (Flashar, *ibid*: 298).

Steiner's estimation operated as foreshadowing for later performances, for instance the adapted *Ajax* directed by Peter Sellars (1986).

If Wajda's *Antigone* raised in theater the problem of Polish people and Sellars' *Ajax* brought criticism against the American superpower, then Vassilis Papavassileiou's *Ajax* represented a historical person, Aris Velouchiotis, leader of the resistance against the Nazis. The dark pathways of politics, expediency and treachery constituted the parallel axes upon which the performance was built.

The production belonged to the National Theatre of Northern Greece and it was presented for the first time in Epidaurus in 1996 in a volley of negative reviews, a few positive ones and a cold greeting from the audience (NTNG archive).

The performance was organized upon the idea that Greeks perceived and lived their recent history as a tragedy; this term is used by Papavassileiou to define "the civil passion" and its exacerbation the years after 1945 (Papavassileiou, 1996). The director supported that *Ajax's* transfer in the time, the space and the conditions of the civil war was legitimate, since Sophocles altered the Homeric tradition and attached to the mythical hero characteristics of the 5th century.

The electronic means of sound transmission were widely used in the NTNG's performance. Papavassileiou adopted a point of view, according to which the ancient mask operated as a loudspeaker, which nowadays can be replaced by the use of microphone. The loudspeaker sound and the speeches produced by a radio indicate the physical absence and mark the speech's political function, which is not the discourse of a person but that of a mask. "*The loudspeaker is the façade of politics*", displays Papavassileiou. For this reason, Ajax delivers his final monologue through a loudspeaker and having his back turned towards the audience. He is the victim of a superpower, of Athena or a partisan leader, and of schemer politicians.

When Ajax dies, darkness follows. This allows the transition to the second part of the tragedy, which restricts "*the heroic in the place of politics*" and it gets form by Papavassileiou as memorial.

Papavassileiou, Wajda, Sellars and Stein partially, perceived the ancient Greek drama as an open political text and lead it to an open theatrical act. They familiarized the audience with the myth and they shed light to certain aspects of the drama that were morphologically subordinated to the representation of political events. The reinterpretation and the refraction of history through the ancient dramatists'

manuscripts or the subsequent adaptations did not meet the audience's or the reviewers' approval due to aesthetic sense, such as in the representation of the Greek political adventure, or due to ideological reasons or because the contemporary politics when reflected in the theatrical stage, do not regard itself positively but rather intolerably.

New light to the search for the evolution of ancient drama is shed through the lenses of metamodernism, who, ‘*while lacking theoretical accuracy*’ (Pavis 2006: 37), is appropriate in principal for dramaturgy and direction. The term describes, in a generic fashion, traits, that can be allocated to the philosophical thoughts of Roland Barthes regarding the death of the author, of Mikhail Bakhtin about dialogism, of Julia Kristeva about intertextuality, and of Gilles Deleuze about random repetition, of Jacques Derrida about deconstruction and “*différance*”, of Jean-François Lyotard about the collapse of grand narratives.

Meaning as absence of it carries through in directors' work. The cancelation of theatrical speech or text offered post-modernists the chance to highlight different aspects of the theatrical phenomenon.

Often are the adaptations of classical plays in a post-modernist manner. Timeless plays become unrecognizable, as for postmodernism a text is just a surface to explore in conditions of reading. Classical plays are undermined by the violation of structure, the revocation of time-sequences, the squandering of the signified, the exposure to subjectivism. The postmodern receptions do not reject ancient drama. Foreign and Greek directors approach tragedy with transformative mood. The Greek audience met the postmodern version of tragical play from the early *Alcestis* that was directed by Giannis Chouvardas in 1984. Later performances were *Oresteia* by Dimitris Lignadis (2005), *Agamemnon* by Angela Brouskou (2008), *Prometheus* by Bob Wilson (2001), *Oresteia* by Yuko Senga in 2002. Reception was mixed. From total rejection to enthusiasm, from indifference to anger, the whole spectrum of responses was noted.

Complete suggestions of postmodern directing about the ancient tragedy have proposed the German Karin Neuhäuser and Michail Marmarinos.

Neuhäuser directed in 2006 in Frankfurt's Schauspiel *Oresteia* by Aeschylus. This performance was presented one year later in the ancient theater of Epidaurus.

Oresteia had clear traits of a postmodern staging. Karin Neuhäuser dismantled Chorus and the tragical style of the play, created playful situations, included idiolects, added irony, surprised through the unexpected and the spontaneous, taught rhetorical schemes. She showed that text is unstable. However through the instability it can be recreated, following the spirit of the writer. The *Mythos* was not betrayed. It was interpreted, but in absence of the tragical scope. It might have lost the tragic element, but it won in theatricality. In *Eumenides* the ethos of poetical speech was overthrown, but the director found analogies with the help of metaphor and sharp satire regarding ethics nowadays that are born with the help of the “almighty” image. Neuhäuser balanced the play in an axis of irony about the metaneoteric age, as a counterpoint to the failure of earlier ages. The show climaxed in different spheres, ranging from the political destructure in *Agamemnon*, to the postwar social chaos in guilt-struck Germany, to the fully post-modern aesthetic of *Eumenides*.

A complete post-modern aspect was directed by Michail Marmarinos in *Hercules Furens* of Euripides, in a three-hour production of the National Theater of Greece, in 2011, in Epidaurus. The director received the play as a modern metaphor that can be interpreted in the historical frame of the economical, ethical and cultural crisis with which Greece struggles in the first two decades of the 21st century.

In Euripides’ tragedy, Hercules, as Marmarinos interprets him, is a symbol of the suffering Greece and Chorus is seen as the Greek people in the years of the economical crisis. The term “Furens – Mainomenos” is received by Marmarinos as a modern commentary to the ancient term of “mania”. Transferred to current affairs, manic are the people who transcend the concept of raging, of citizens who swarmed the great plazas of European cities, in order to protest about austerity, poverty, total waste of public resources and the incompetent politicians. Although a distinctive trait of postmodernism is considered “de-politicization” (Pavis, 1992: 70), Marmarinos brings out the political aspect of the drama in a meta-theatrical environment (Abel, 1963: 45-6).

To achieve his goals, the director dissolves the text, injects text of other writers, proverbs, folk singing, and uses paralinguistic codes. The current political vocabulary is injected in tragical poetry. The audience listens to terms like “apocalypse”, “transparency” and “dissemblance” and unwillingly distances the play from the time in which it was written, connecting it with the present.

According to Marmarino's standard point of view, the members of the Chorus act as a collective power and at the same time as individuals (Ioannidou, 2011). They create a gap between the dramatic persona and the text talking in third person, using phrases like "someone said". The separation of the dramatic person from its speech addresses to the audience the problem of reevaluating the *Mythos* and the context of the ancient drama. The postmodern dispute of the one and only universal truth, which can interpret every phenomenon, is present in this show. The abuzz narrative Chorus repeats, adds and announces things irrelevant to the drama. Because the Chorus represents on the one hand the collective powers that reflect the collective memory and the mutual passions, on the other hand the individuals that act as ironic narrators and commentators of History, becomes clear the critique of the performance towards the "great narrations" of Euripides that cannot fully explain the historical experience (Manteli, 2014).

The de-politicization that is declared by postmodernism finds no application in Marmarinos' performance, despite the directing code can be subsumed in postmodernism (Auslander 1997). Political affairs run straight through the text, the images, the acting and kinesiology. The use of the microphone adds political subtext through paralinguistic codes. Political insinuations appear in Parodos when the Chorus mourns about Greece's destiny, again through the microphone, in a way that creates a threatening atmosphere. In Exodus, isolation, coldness and alienation of the Chorus indicate the way Greeks react to the collapse of their country. The tragedy of Euripides *Hercules Furens* was presented to the audience through an authentic postmodern approach. The undermining of the established values, the end of "great narratives", the vagueness, the heterogeny, the decay of institutions and the disintegration are components of postmodernism not as a theoretical scheme, but they are reality and History in which the audience lives. The audience is asked to recognize itself in the stage spectacle of Greek ancient drama.

Marmarinos, Chouvardas, Neuhäuser, Wilson and other postmodern directors handle the ancient drama with absolute freedom and create new forms of spectacle in a new era that has already come. The innovative performances, however, demand spectators who are free of stereotypes and searching of meaning. The audience of the postmodern directing passes from the commitment to the original dramatic text into its deconstruction and from the homogeneity and unity of style into fragmentation.

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