Dionysus Since 69

Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the
Third Millennium

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Introduction

Why Greek Tragedy in the Late Twentieth Century?

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By May 1968 the President and the administration of the most powerful state in the world found themselves in an unprecedented crisis. US involvement in an armed conflict—the war in Vietnam—was opposed not only by large portions of the world but by the mainstream consensus of domestic American opinion. On 6 June the last hope was shattered that a president with an anti-war ticket could be elected the following November. Bobby Kennedy was assassinated. The very day after, 6 June, a play opened in New York. Richard Schechner's *Dionysus in 69* was a socially, politically, and above all theatrically radical interpretation of Euripides' tragedy *Bacchae*. The crisis in American society which was dividing doves from hawks, young from old, long-haired from short-haired, and prophets of sexual and psychic liberation from moral conservatives, found thrilling and lucid theatrical expression in the mighty Dionysiac explosion taking place in a vast space called the Performing Garage in downtown New York City.

This book is about the reawakening of interest in Greek tragedy heralded by Schechner's remarkable production. This reawakening was just one result of the seismic political and cultural shifts marking the end of the 1960s. Greek tragedy began to be performed on a quantitatively far greater scale, from more radical political perspectives, and in more adventurous performance styles than it had been before. This demands an attempt at explanation. All revolutions, including cultural and aesthetic ones, of course have their harbingers. There had been sporadic productions of Greek tragedy before the 1968-9 watershed. They rarely challenged mainstream political ideology, or indeed the performance traditions of western naturalism, but there were exceptions. In 1965 it was the cancellation of a planned *Antigone* in South Africa...
which eventually inspired Athol Fugard’s *The Island* of 1973 (see Hardwick’s chapter in this volume). *Persians* was important in 1965–6; Karolos Koun’s version revolutionized attitudes to the potential of the chorus as ‘protagonist’ (see Wiles), while Mattias Braun’s East German production, which had premiered in 1960, was revived in order to protest against US policy in Vietnam (see Hall). The 1960s also saw one or two interesting experiments with operas on Greek tragic themes (see Brown). Yet the tidal wave of productions of Greek tragic theatre which was about to flow was of a different nature and order.

More Greek tragedy has been performed in the last thirty years than at any point in history since Greco-Roman antiquity. Translated, adapted, staged, sung, danced, parodied, filmed, enacted, Greek tragedy has proved magnetic to writers and directors searching for new ways in which to pose questions to contemporary society and to push back the boundaries of theatre. The mythical, dysfunctional, conflicted world portrayed in the archetypal plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides has become one of the most important cultural and aesthetic prisms through which the real, dysfunctional, conflicted world of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries has refracted its own image.

In Euripides’ *Bacchae* Dionysus challenges many of the social, chronological, spatial, and other boundaries with which the ancient Greeks tried to demarcate and control the world around them: he is an effeminate male, an ancient god of youthful appearance, a Greek god who leads hordes of oriental barbarians, a god worshipped both in the untamed wild and within the walls of the civilized city, the tutelary deity of both tragic and comic theatre, instigator of total ecstasy but also absolute terror. Recently Dionysus, the theatre-god of the ancient Greeks, has transcended nearly all boundaries created by time, space, and cultural tradition, for staging Greek tragedy is now emphatically an international, even worldwide phenomenon. This seminal art-form, born two and a half thousand years ago in democratic Athens, rediscovered in the Renaissance as prestigious pan-European cultural property, has evolved in recent decades into a global medium. Since 1969 Greek tragedies have been performed in every continent of the world and in many languages: Dionysus has now crazed his Bacchants in Cameroon (Figure 1) and at the

**Figure 1.** Agaue taunted by the Rastafarian-influenced Dionysos of *Les Bacchantes inspirées par Euriptide* at the Goethe-Institut, Yaoundé, Cameroon (1992).
Beijing Opera. He has entranced directors, authors, actors, and audiences in Hawaii, Malaysia, and Mexico as well as in Britain, France, and Germany. Over the last three decades the Australian Ajax, the Georgian Medea, the Taiwanese Antigone, the Japanese Electra, the African and Egyptian Oedipus, the Colombian Clytemnestra and the Muscovite, Philippine, and Brazilian Trojan Women have enthralled audiences quite as much as their West European and North American counterparts.

Greek tragedy has always been special, but it is particularly special to our specific moment in human history. It is true that a few of the Greek comedies by Aristophanes are sometimes staged outside Greece, for example Stephen Sondheim’s *Frogs,* performed in Yale University Swimming Pool in 1974 by a cast including Meryl Streep and Sigourney Weaver. Much more recently, Luca Ronconi’s satirical realization of the same play, and Sean O’Lirian’s circus adaptation for the National Theatre in *Birds,* both premiered in 2002. It is also true that the best of the Roman tragedies by Seneca have enjoyed important revivals: in 1968, at the beginning of the era traced in this book’s narrative, Peter Brook (one of an increasingly small group of prominent directors never to have attempted a Greek tragedy).

1 The Cameron production of a modernized French version of Euripides (not Soyinka) was performed by the Francophone La Troupe d’Ébène, directed by Louis Hemlet. It dramatized the rejection of a new version influenced Rastafarian cult by a modern African businessman: see Breitinger (1996), 253. The Chinese production of *Bacchae* was directed by Chen Shaheing (1996), a former Beijing Opera actor, who became interested in the Greek classical repertoire after moving to work in the United States in 1987.

2 *Dionysus 96: The Bacchae of Euripides* (a reworking of Schechner’s *Dionysus in 69*) was performed by an all-female cast at the University of Hawaii in Manoa (directed by Ramon Arjona IV). In 2001 the controversial Malaysian movie director U-Wei Shem was invited by his Ministry of Culture to stage a Malay adaptation of *Bacchae* (www.asianweek.com/asianweek/97/04/feature2, accessed 25 June 2002).

3 On the African Oedipus see Macintosh (2002). Arabic adaptations of *Oedipus Tyrannus* by Ali Salem and Fawzi Fahmi were performed in Cairo in 1970 and 1977 respectively. Pieces from *Trojan Women* were performed in ancient Greek by students at the Russian Academy of Theatre Arts in March 2002; on other Greek tragedies at the Tagonia Theatre, Moscow, in the 1980s see Smoliansky (1999), 392. *Muslim Women,* an adaptation of *Trojan Women,* written by Saddam Omran, while he was the Philippine Chairman of the Commission of Human Rights, was produced in Manila in 1998. The Brazilian *Trojan Women,* performed by the Macau theatre company, was directed by Antunes Filho at the 11th International Istanbul Theatre Festival in June 1999.

4 The production was directed by Burt Shevelove and opened on 20 May.

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acknowledging that the eye of history in fifty or a hundred years from now will see causes, consequences, contexts, and patterns as yet invisible to us.

It already looks as though a revival of the epic film set in ancient Greece or Rome is imminent in the early third millennium. Following the success of Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000), we await the release of blockbuster films based on Steven Pressfield's *Gates of Fire: An Epic Novel of the Battle of Thermopylae* (1998), Valerio Manfredi's trilogy of novels about Alexander the Great (1998), and even on the *Iliad*. Yet we can also already see that in the middle of the 1960s, theatrical interest in ancient Greek drama replaced cinematic interests in spectacles and in imperial Rome. For the two important strands in the performance reception of classical Greece and Rome from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s were both cinematic. There were numerous popular Italian 'peplum' movies, which used ancient myths about Hercules or Aphrodite as opportunities for the display of special effects and gorgeous bodies of both sexes (a light-hearted genre which reached its widest audience through an American example, *Jason and the Argonauts*, in 1963, and lies behind the mildly sexualized use of classical imagery which has continued to appear in advertising and the fashion industry*). But there was also a rash of extremely significant and serious American films set against the background of ancient Rome. They almost all used triangular and even rectangular relationships involving pugnacious Romans, Christians, Jews, and Arabs to work through issues relating not only to the Middle East but also to the anti-communist persecutions led by Senator Joseph McCarthy, blacklisting, censorship, imperial responsibilities, the role of the military, and the possibility of a just war. These issues were related to the USA's self-definition as world leader in the face of what was perceived to be an increasingly threatening Soviet Union. The films included William Wyler's *Ben Hur* (1959), Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960), and Richard Fleischer's *Barabbas* (1962).

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6 David Renisoff is currently adapting the *Iliad* for Warner Bros.


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The Roman epic movie as a genre reached its zenith in 1959–62, just as the Berlin Wall was initiated. Yet the genre's basic motifs of armies, miracles, mad emperors, and slave uprisings began, with Joseph Manciewicz's *Cleopatra* and Antony Mann's *Fall of the Roman Empire* (1963 and 1964 respectively), to give way to more ironic approaches. By the middle of the 1960s both the 'peplum' and the 'epic' history film were dead, a cultural shift related to the social and psychic changes involved in the questioning of middle American 'suburban' values, and above all the worldwide challenges to long prevalent notions of empire and the rights of First World states to intervene abroad. The mirror of the Roman empire no longer worked in the increasingly complicated imagination of the First World; attempts to make popular cinema out of Greek history, with the exception of Rudolph Maté's *The Three Hundred Spartans* of 1962 (a transparent legitimation of NATO at the time of the erection of the Berlin Wall), never took off at all. By 1969 films interested in classical antiquity were profoundly non-epic and heralded the turn towards Greek theatre as the most important avenue to Mediterranean antiquity in modern entertainment. Pasolini's *Edipo Re* (1967) and Fellini's *Satyricon* (1969), both pessimistic films by Italian directors, reveal new artistic responses, both anti-authoritarian and subversive angles, to the challenge posed by the legacy of antiquity. 8

The 1960s were a remarkable decade. But 1968, the year in which our main story begins, stands out as a year in which seismic global shifts in political consciousness took place. The year 1968, quite simply, brought an end to the ideological settlement of the early post-war period. Greece itself, the ancestral home of both democracy and tragedy, had just fallen victim to a brutal military dictatorship which, until its collapse in 1974, banned many of the ancient plays (see further Hall, Chapter 6 below). International sympathy with the oppressed people of Greece certainly helped awaken interest in their theatre. But this is only one small part of a much larger story; 1968 was fundamentally to challenge both international alignments and power relations between different ethnic groups, sexes (and up to a point socioeconomic classes) within individual countries. Struggles framed in the media as
clashes between authoritarian and radical forces were fought all over the world; young people were openly challenging the establishment run by their parents and grandparents. It was a sign of the times that the play Jan Kott chose to direct at the University Theater in Berkeley that year was the Greek tragedy most marked by overt inter-generational conflict, Euripides' "Orestes." Protest movements, led in many cases by students and other young people, and urging pacifist, civil rights, anti-racist, and women's liberationist causes, were perceived as achieving unprecedented successes: the fatal showdown between police and anti-war demonstrators at the Democratic Convention in Chicago in August was felt to have forced the US government to announce a halt to the bombing in Vietnam. Violent riots and suppression of them, footage of which circulated on the television screens of the world, featured in North America, Mexico, Paris, London, Northern Ireland, Prague, South Africa, and elsewhere. In April Martin Luther King was assassinated, sparking riots across America. In May millions of French students and workers put up their famous barricades, held the country to ransom, and forced changes in the hierarchical French education system. In August the Soviet Union invaded an increasingly dissident Czechoslovakia. In September women's liberation groups staged a widely publicized protest at the Miss America Contest in Atlantic City, an occasion which prompted the first attested use of the term 'bra-burning' to derogate feminists. By the end of this momentous year it began to seem that practically nothing was impossible; with the launching in December of Apollo 8, the first US mission to orbit the moon, the human race seemed to have entered an entirely new—exciting but disturbing—era. Young people added to their excitement at the political developments in the outside world by transforming their inner worlds through unprecedented experimentation with psychedelic drugs. They also readied in their own new cultural forms and media, especially television, radio stations and rock music, which had pronounced Dionysian elements and imagery—psychoactive substances, long hair, patterned garments, exaggerated prissiness, ecstatic crowds and loud percussion. Jim Morrison, the lead singer of the Doors whose albums were all released between 1967 and 1971, the self-styled omnipotent 'lizard king', encouraged his fans to see him as a human dedicated to Dionysus, god of drama and ecstasy. 

SEX

The sexual forces unleashed in this period, with their focuses on authority, imperialism, and sexual politics, are suggestive of reasons why Greek tragedy has proven so attractive subsequent. This volume divides these reasons into four broad (although always interrelated) categories: social, political, theatrical, and cultural. The order in which the categories are presented does not indicate a hierarchy of perceived importance. Yet the section on sex and the "Sex War" comes first partly because the most pressing reason for the recent renaissance of Greek tragedy in performance has been the rise and continuing impact of the feminist movement. From the 1857 Divorce Act in Britain to the early eighteenth century Northern European campaigns for women's emancipation in the late twentieth century, Greek tragedy has increasingly been rediscovered when women's rights have climbed to the top of society's agenda. Indeed, it had already been observed with approval, by Aristophanes, Plato, Pliny, and Origen (among others) that Greek tragedy gave a voice to the problems created by conflict between the sexes.

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10 Although no bras were actually burnt, an article in the New York Times of 8 September quoted one angry contest organiser as using the term.
11 The space programmes were more relevant to the global reception of Greek tragedy than might be imagined. In a pathbreaking paper on the reception of Greek tragedy, Helene Foley pointed out that a recent Chinese translator of Oedipus Tyrannus referred to all the gods generically as Apollo, since he could count on his audience's ability to recognize this name from the US space programme (Foley 1999), 1-2.