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ABSTRACT

Confronted with the problems imposed by the stage presentation and interpretation of ancient Greek theatre to contemporary audiences, scholars have developed four major approaches to the presentation of Greek drama over the past 70 years. The first approach, referred to as modificationist or realist, claims that communicating ancient Greek drama to a modern audience requires a total modification of the drama and a realistic presentation of the costumes, language, and even the poetic structure of the play. The adaptationist school of thought is similar in that it believes that the content and the form of the drama must conform to modern social, psychological, moral, and aesthetic values if the presentation is to be relevant to contemporary audiences. In contrast to these two views, the scholasticists rely on a scholarly interpretation based on the historical, philosophical, and literary background of the plays, while the classicists argue that the dramas must be read or presented as archeological performances, maintaining all of their original parts. Scholars do agree that the role of the chorus presents the most serious problem in presentation and that insight into the tradition, culture, history, and philosophy of Greece is essential to a revitalization of ancient Greek theatre. (MAI)

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CONTEMPORARY GREEK PRESENTATIONS
OF ANCIENT GREEK THEATRE

by

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INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 1977, Temple University's School of Communication and Theatre conducted an experimental seminar in ancient Greek drama to attend and study contemporary Greek productions in the ancient theatres of Greece. The seminar posed the following questions:

1. What specific modern approaches have taken form that underlie contemporary Greek productions?
2. Who are the scholars and artists that have studied, interpreted and presented the ancient dramas?
3. What are the main problems they faced?
4. How were these problems resolved in theatre productions?

Answers came not only from student reading of the drama and its theatrical and critical history, but most vividly from productions seen during a tour of ancient Greek cities, temples and theatres.

FOUR MODERN APPROACHES TO ANCIENT GREEK THEATRE

During the last 70 years in Greece, four major approaches regarding the presentation of ancient Greek drama have been developed. They are (1) the modificationists, (2) the adaptationists, (3) the scholasticists, and (4) the classicists (Metallinos, 1977, pp. 4-27).

The Modificationists

Sometimes called realists (Chourmouzos, 1963), this approach simply claims that the proper presentation of ancient Greek drama to modern viewers should be achieved by a total modification and a more realistic attitude towards the drama. By modifying it and translating it into the modern Greek language, modificationists believe that contemporary viewers will be able to better understand the anguish,

the hybris, the dilemmas and the destruction of the tragic or comic heroes. The realistic approach appears in all aspects of drama. For example, some modificationists have gone as far as presenting tragedies whose parts were either omitted or changed, altering the original poetic structure of the play. The language was changed and original characters became modern ones, not only in costume, but in thought as well.

For awhile, this approach had numerous followers and was somewhat successful. But, productions of this nature completely overlooked the original intent, scope and timeless beauty of the ancient Greek theater (Sideris, 1960), and due to the tremendous success of the performances of the "National Theatre" and the "Art Theatre" of Greece -- both of which followed a different approach -- the movement of the modificationists or realists died out.

In summary, the modificationists tend to change the structure of ancient Greek drama to a realistic and a modern one.

The Adaptationists

This school believes that the presentation of ancient Greek theatre to modern viewers can only be successful if the content and the form (the message and the medium) adapt to contemporary social, psychological, moral and aesthetic values. Since we are removed from the values of ancient Greece by more than 2500 years, the adaptationists claim that we are unable, today, to perceive, accept and understand their theatre. They believe that by adapting their theatre to our values it can be brought closer to the hearts of the modern spectator while still maintaining the original intent of the ancient Greek playwrights.

As a result of these beliefs, we experience on stage contemporary grotesque sex scenes and Christian dogmas replacing the ancient Greek religion, and Christ replacing the Olympian Gods. This was the case, for example, in the Art Theatre's production of Aristophanes' Peace in the Herodotus Atticus Theatre in Athens in 1977. In the Manos Katrakis presentation of Prometheus Bound, the ancient Greek god was crucified on stage in the manner of Christ.

Most theatre directors and critics interviewed feel that some adaptation is necessary for a serious revival, and contemporary audiences have received the modifications favorably. Both Alexis Minotis (Director of the National Theatre of Greece) and Karolos Koun (founder and Director of the Art Theatre of Greece) have stated that while they try to faithfully interpret the original content of the ancient Greek plays, they make adaptations in order to bring them closer to contemporary audiences.

Alexis Minotis (1977) has been working in the theatre as an actor/director for more than 50 years. He has studied theatre in Greece, Germany and America, and is one of the founders of the adaptationist school of thought. Mr. Minotis has been highly praised internationally by theatre critics for his interpretation and acting in ancient Greek drama, particularly for his roles as Sophocles' "Oedipus Rex" and "Oedipus at Colonus".

Asked about his present productions of ancient Greek theatre, Mr. Minotis replied that he is "interpreting the texts, the ancient Greek content of the play". He claims that contemporary directors often do not pay attention to or misinterpret the original text as it was written for the stage by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides,

Aristophanes. He denounces the modificationists' approach, and is opposed to total stylization or the extreme classical approach. He has made considerable adaptations which have brought the ancient Greek theatre closer to the aesthetic values of the contemporary viewer. Still, Mr. Minotis is somewhat uncertain as to the proper interpretation of the chorus, exempting any folk elements in the chorica of the drama.

Karolos Koun (1977) is considered one of the greatest directors in modern Greece and his interpretations of ancient Greek drama have been internationally praised. He is an adaptationist claiming that a director has to keep one foot in the past and one in the present, bridging the two on stage. He, too, claims that he attempts to "interpret the original texts with contemporary approaches, techniques, and guidelines dictated by current values". Explaining the reasons for the internationally acclaimed success of Aristophanes' comedies he has directed and presented, Koun thinks that it is due to the interpretation of old and timeless ideas, concepts, etc., with modern symbols and reasoning. The heroes of Aristophanes comedies as they are presented on stage are immediately identifiable by theatre audiences because they compare with heroes of today. More than any other theatre director of the adaptationists school, Koun adapts issues of the past to those of today. Koun argues that the production of an ancient Greek drama for contemporary viewers must stimulate "visually and spiritually" the intellect and the emotions of the average contemporary spectator, Greek or otherwise.

He managed to successfully present, in Aristophanes comedies, the political problems of the Athenians of the 5th Century B.C., adapting them to those political problems of any country or city in the world, but foremost to the contemporary Athenians and Greeks. Koun is among the few Greek theatre directors who recognizes the applicability and the direct impact of ancient Greek drama on international audiences. He argues that the messages, the conflicts, the agonies and the dilemmas contained in characters of ancient Greek dramas are timeless and universal, characteristic of all mankind.

Contemporary theatre critics seem to agree that the adaptationist approach to ancient Greek theatre "motivates a greater number of contemporary viewers" (Terzakis, 1965) and "translates more faithfully the meanings, the values, and the messages of the ancient Greek playwrights" (Chourmouziou, 1963).

In summary, the adaptationists tend to impose contemporary views in the translation of both the form and the concepts of the ancient Greek dramas.

The Scholasticists

This school, also called Stylizationists (Chourmouziou, 1965), believes that a successful presentation of an ancient Greek drama can only be achieved if it has a scholarly base in the historical, philosophical and literary study of the plays (which have survived). They believe that studying the ancient Greek dramas is the clue to presenting them as the authors themselves intended, and this in turn will lead to a greater impact on modern spectators without distorting, modifying or compromising these treasures of ancient Greece. Scholarly

analysis and study of the history and arts, particularly the literature of ancient Greece as it is reflected in the remaining texts, will vividly reveal the actual "symbol" of Oedipus, the "message" of Lysistrata, the "hate" of Medea, the "fall" of Prometheus, etc.

There is, however, some disagreement among the scholasticists. Socrates Karantinos (1969) who is one of the founders of this school of thought and a guest lecturer in the seminar, believes that although the scholastic study of these texts can provide production guidelines, we must ourselves interpret those parts of the dramas that need clarification, for they cannot be understood by the majority of the contemporary viewers. We must continue our efforts (by modifying or adapting) at scholastically interpreting the ancient Greek theatre. For example, says Karantinos, the heroes in ancient Greek drama should wear masks and thick soled shoes (cothornus), and the members of the chorus should always recite in unison.

On the specific question of the position of the chorus in ancient Greek drama, Professor Karantinos first stressed the important role of the chorus to the entire structure of the drama (both tragedies and comedies) and second, his belief that the chorus should remain *approsopos* (Greek: faceless). He opposes any modernization or individualization of the members of the chorus and he views them as a unit which moves, dances, recites, gestures, and reacts in unison, squarely, solidly, impersonally as a group. This view is also shared by Takis Mouzenidis (1965), a widely known theatre director who has extensively researched and directed ancient Greek drama while working for the National Theatre of Greece.

Aimilios Chourmouziou (1963), however, claims that the use of masks and cothorn impersonalize the characters, and persistent unison recitation of the chorica (parts of the chorus), removes the reality that underlines a tragedy or comedy and leaves the modern spectator unmoved and apathetic, indifferent to the emotional and aesthetic content of the drama.

In summary, the scholasticists view the ancient Greek theatre through the eyes of the historian, persistently interpreting its content yet maintaining its ancient original form.

The Classicists or Archeologists

This group believes the exact opposite of the modification-ists or realists. Considering that the ancient Greek theatre is a product of the classical period of Greece, reflecting all values (social, economic, political, psychological, intellectual and aesthetic) of that era, any attempt to modify it, to adapt our values to it, or to present it in a stylized manner foreign to the times, fails drastically.

The classicists argue that the only two ways to present and preserve the ancient Greek dramas are either to read them (in classrooms and other gatherings of the knowledgeable) or present them as archeological performances maintaining all the parts, the lines, the form, the style and the language of the original texts. Obviously, the classicists want to present an "archaic" performance which will require the viewer to remove himself from the present. The viewer must imaginatively transfer himself to the ancient Greek world, walking and interacting with the people who lived more than three thousand years ago in a society whose values are different from ours in many respects.

A production that follows the line of the classicist maintains a language which is archaic and unintelligible, consists of stage excessories that are out moded, and has to be performed during the day which is impractical. The chorus is created as a unit which seems foreign, separate from the action of the drama. The heroes are totally expressionless, unrealistically tall, and use pompus and unnatural voices on stage. The productions of Linos Karzes, one of the founders of this school of thought, has been severely criticized by Athenian theatre critics. The spectators are left unmoved and indifferent (Karantinos, 1969, Terzakis, 1965, Chourmousios, 1963). Obviously, the classicists only concern is to present a spectacle of ancient Greek drama with archeological merit. They ignore the dramatic content and its emotional and aesthetic impact to recreate "archeologically true" form.

In summary, the classicists see the ancient Greek theatre as an archeological phenomenon valuable only as a museum piece.

The Role of Chorus in Ancient Greek Theatre

Mrs. Dora Stratou and Mr. Vasilios Papachristou, researchers and experts on Greek folk dancing (both lectured in the seminar), provided their views on the subject of the chorus in ancient Greek drama. They specifically commented on the problems imposed by the physical presence of the chorus, its interpretation, and its staging.

Dora Stratou (1966) is director and founder of the National Greek Folk Dancing Group bearing her name. Mrs. Stratou has devoted her life to research, choreography and stage presentation of more than 200 Greek folk dances. She has researched the costumes, folk music and folk traditions of all regions of Greece. Her Greek folk

dancing group, partially funded by the Greek government, has traveled and performed in all parts of the world. They appear regularly at the theatre of Philapapou near the Acropolis in Athens built specifically for her group's performances.

Mrs. Stratou has written a book and numerous articles on the subject of Greek folk dances and lore. Our entire seminar was invited to her theatre of Philapapou where we saw the performances of some 20 folk dances and discussed with her the role of Greek folk dancing in the revival of ancient Greek drama. Mrs. Stratou argues that the chorica which require dancing, should be enriched with the particular style, rhythm and steps found in Greek folk dances. Like Lillian Lawler (1962, 1942), Mrs. Stratou sees a close connection between existing dances and the ancient ones. Although there have been drastic changes, additions, modifications, etc., in most Greek folk dances, their styles and form remain unchanged.

Mrs. Stratou deplores the fact that all contemporary theatre directors who are responsible for presenting ancient Greek dramas do not know the folk history and traditions of Greece, and insist on ignoring the role of folklore in the revival of the chorus in ancient Greek dramas. Mrs. Stratou seems to agree with Katerina Kakoure (1965) whose research stressed the importance of the dances in the roots and the structure of the theatre.

Vasilios Papachristou (1960, 1972) is an instructor of Greek folk dance, a researcher on the subject, author of two books on Greek folk dancing, and presently director of the Greek folk dancing group Lykion Ellinidon in Salonika, Greece. Since he is not a theatre director, but a specialist in Greek folk dancing, our concern was to

find out how old some of the Greek folk dances are, and what changes occurred that might have altered the forms of existing dances. Mr. Papachristou was totally convinced that today's folk dances originated in antiquity. Consequently, he concludes, the application of some of these dances to the chorus is mandatory. He too was critical of the fact that theatre directors have ignored this factor, and he speculated that if steps and choreographical formations found in Greek folk dances are applied to the chorus, contemporary viewers will have a better understanding of ancient Greek theatre.

Also a lecturer, these views were shared by Prof. John Anton (1977), who argued that there are numerous elements of ancient Greece present in modern Greece, and these elements could be used to bridge the gap created between the past and the present. Dr. Anton, a Professor of Philosophy at Emory University, provided a philosopher's point of view about the efforts to revitalize ancient Greek theatre and concluded that some of the crucial problems inherent in the presentation of ancient Greek drama to contemporary audiences could be overcome if producers and directors understood the spirit of ancient Greek historians, philosophers, artists and playwrights, and would study the mentality, the values, and the traditions of the Greeks of today.

CONCLUSIONS

The scholars of ancient Greek theatre (including those who lectured to the seminar in Greece) seem to agree that the major problem imposed by the modern production, presentation and interpretation of ancient Greek drama to contemporary viewers is the role of

the chorus in tragedies and comedies and that the ultimate success of the revival of ancient Greek theatre lies in the directors understanding of the content of the text and the entire philosophical basis of ancient and modern Greek thought.

Obviously, additional production attempts, experimentation, and systematic and scholastical studies are needed to solve the complex problems of the revival of ancient Greek theatre.

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