

S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

5:2 2019

SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

Founded by Guido Avezù, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri

<i>Executive Editor</i>	Guido Avezù.
<i>General Editors</i>	Guido Avezù, Silvia Bigliuzzi.
<i>Editorial Board</i>	Simona Brunetti, Francesco Lupi, Nicola Pasqualicchio, Susan Payne, Gherardo Ugolini.
<i>Managing Editor</i>	Francesco Lupi.
<i>Assistant Managing Editors</i>	Valentina Adami, Emanuel Stelzer, Roberta Zaroni.
<i>Books Reviews Editors</i>	Chiara Battisti, Sidia Fiorato
<i>Staff</i>	Francesco Dall'Olio, Bianca Del Villano, Marco Duranti, Carina Louise Fernandes, Maria Serena Marchesi, Antonietta Provenza, Savina Stevanato.
<i>Advisory Board</i>	Anna Maria Belardinelli, Anton Bierl, Enoch Brater, Jean-Christophe Cavallin, Richard Allen Cave, Rosy Colombo, Claudia Corti, Marco De Marinis, Tobias Döring, Pavel Drábek, Paul Edmondson, Keir Douglas Elam, Ewan Fernie, Patrick Finglass, Enrico Giaccherini, Mark Griffith, Daniela Guardamagna, Stephen Halliwell, Robert Henke, Pierre Judet de la Combe, Eric Nicholson, Guido Paduano, Franco Perrelli, Didier Plassard, Donna Shalev, Susanne Wofford.

Copyright © 2019 SKENÈ
Published in December 2019
All rights reserved.
ISSN 2421-4353

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means
without permission from the publisher.
SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies
<http://skenejournal.skeneproject.it>
info@skeneproject.it

Dir. Resp. (aut. Trib. di Verona): Guido Avezù
P.O. Box 149 c/o Mail Boxes Etc. (MBE150) – Viale Col. Galliano, 51, 37138, Verona (I)

Contents

MANUELA GIORDANO – <i>Athenian Power: Seven Against Thebes and the Democracy-in-Arms</i>	5
VASILIKI KOUSOULINI – <i>Restraining the Song of her Mistress and Saving the Oikos? Nurses in Euripides' Medea, Hippolytus and Andromache</i>	19
FRANCESCO DALL'OLIO – <i>A Liar Tells the Truth: the Dramatic Function of the Vice in Cambises</i>	43
ELENA PELLONE – <i>King Lear: Everything Comes of Nothing and the Great Stage of Fools</i>	65
ROBERT WILLIAM HAYNES – <i>Replacing the Romantic Plantation: Horton Foote's Dramatic Engagement from Gone with the Wind (The Musical) to Convicts</i>	81
MARTINA TREU – <i>Erase and Rewrite. Ancient Texts, Modern Palimpsests</i>	101
Special Section	
CAMILLA CAPORICCI – <i>Emanuel Stelzer, Portraits in Early Modern English Drama: Visual Culture, Play-Texts, and Performances</i> , Abingdon and New York: Routledge	127
MARIA ELISA MONTIRONI – <i>Roberta Mullini, Parlare per non farsi sentire. L'a parte nei drammi di Shakespeare</i> , Roma: Bulzoni	133
GIOIA ANGELETTI – <i>Tradition and Revolution in Scottish Drama and Theatre: An Open Debate?</i>	139
ALESSANDRO CLERICUZIO – <i>Dirk Gindt, Tennessee Williams in Sweden and France, 1945-1965. Cultural Translations, Sexual Anxieties and Racial Fantasies</i> , London and New York: Methuen	149
GHERARDO UGOLINI – <i>Women Against War. The Trojan Women, Helen, and Lysistrata at Syracuse</i>	155

GHERARDO UGOLINI*

Women Against War. *The Trojan Women*, *Helen*, and *Lysistrata* at Syracuse

Abstract

Two tragedies by Euripides (*Helen* and *The Trojan Women*) and a comedy by Aristophanes (*Lysistrata*) were presented at the 55th Festival of Greek Theatre at Syracuse (10 May-6 July 2019) on the theme 'women and war'. The productions of the three plays were not, however, equally successful from an artistic point of view. Davide Livermore, a director whose main field is opera, was able, with his staging of *Helen*, to create a spectacle both ground-breaking and courageous, by projecting Euripides' original work into a visionary and fantastic cosmos where different literary genres (tragedy, comedy, melodrama, *opera buffa*), different temporal dimensions and sensory perceptions mingle and overlap. The staging of *The Trojan Women* by the French director Muriel Mayette-Holtz (too great a distance between scenography and original text) and that of *Lysistrata* by Tullio Solenghi (overstated didacticism) were not as artistically effective.

KEYWORDS: Euripides; Aristophanes; Syracuse; Greek tragedy; Davide Livermore; Muriel Mayette-Holtz; Tullio Solenghi

The theme 'women and war' was the *fil rouge* between the three plays presented at the 55th season of the Teatro Greco at Syracuse in 2019. Two tragedies and a comedy were performed: *The Trojan Women* and *Helen* by Euripides and *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes. The organizers' selection finds its justification above all from the point of view of chronology: the three dramas were originally staged for the first time in Athens one after the other within a few years, between 415 and 411 BC, when the city was facing one of the most difficult moments of a long war that ended in its defeat. These were the years of the Athenian expedition to Sicily (415-413) which ended in the disastrous conquest of the Athenian troops; and, also, the period in which there were sensational upheavals in the constitution, with the *coup d'état* on the part of the oligarchs in 411 and the successive restoration of democracy. Besides this, the three works have various other things in common; in the first place there emerges a strong anti-militaristic feeling, or at least a sceptical and critical attitude towards war (the immediate reference in the two tragedies by Euripides is the Trojan war, but for the audience the allusion to the war in progress at that moment must have been obvious). Moreover, all three plays focus on strong female leads, women like Helen, like Lysistrata, or like the Trojan women, who raise their voices in condemnation of the fact that it is always women who are the first victims of any war. Nevertheless, despite these thematic issues in common, the final impression,

* University of Verona – gherardo.ugolini@univr.it

from an artistic perspective, of the various productions of the three plays is very uneven. The director of *Helen*, Davide Livermore, it must be emphasized, staged a ground-breaking, courageous spectacle, totally entralling the audience from beginning to end with his creation of an imaginary and fantastic atmosphere within which are mingled and overlaid different literary genres, different temporal dimensions and sensory perceptions. But neither the production of *The Trojan Women* by the French director Muriel Mayette-Holtz nor that of *Lysistrata* by Tullio Solenghi could be considered equally successful.

1. *Helen*

Helen is a very unusual tragedy both from the point of view of dramaturgical structure, and from that of the characterization of the protagonists. It must have been disconcerting for the Athenian audiences at the end of the fifth century; certainly the changes in tenor which go from dramatic to comic even reaching the grotesque render it atypical and difficult to place in a specific pigeonhole.¹ It does not correspond in any way to the idea of tragedy elaborated by Aristotle in the *Poetics*, but neither does it meet the requirements of the conventional modern theory of the tragic, which tends towards insoluble conflict and dark, blood-soaked conclusions. The critics have defined it in various ways which go from ‘tragicomedy’ to ‘romantic comedy’, from ‘tragedy of intrigue’ to ‘escape tragedy’. One thing is certain: at centre-stage is the heroine we all know, or at least think we know, Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, Menelaus’ wife, queen of Sparta, who eloped with Paris and caused the Trojan war. But Euripides proposes an alternative myth to Homer’s celebrated version, one which had already been adopted by the poet Stesichorus,² and the Athenian playwright develops further: Helen never really left for Troy with Paris, she was carried to Egypt by Hermes, by the will of Hera, and placed under the protection of Proteus. An *eidolon* was sent to Troy instead of her, a ghost made of air, an empty simulacrum identical in all ways to the Spartan queen (Eur. *Hel.* 31-6). At the opening of the play, Helen is already in Egypt, the imprisoned guest of king Theoclymenus, successor to the throne of Proteus, and for seventeen years has been waiting for the arrival of her husband Menelaus while remaining faithful to him and resisting the advances of Theoclymenus who wants to marry her. Euripides creates a “new” Helen,³ chaste and innocent, tormented by anguish for her undeserved ill-repute to the point of hating her own beauty, the cause of so much disaster (Eur. *Hel.* 236-7, 262-6). The arrival of Menelaus, shipwrecked off the coast

¹ Perhaps it is because of its composite non-sequential nature that *Helen* has had relatively little fortune on the modern stage. At the Greek Theatre in Syracuse, for example, it had not been staged before now for the last forty years. The last production was in 1978 directed by Roberto Guicciardini, translation by Carlo Diano, protagonist Lydia Alfonsi.

² See fr. 192 and fr. 193 Page. A similar tale, but in a different and more rationalistic form is to be found in Herodotus, 2.112-20. On the ancient variants of the Helen myth see Brillante 2001/02 and Brillante-Bettini 2014.

³ The syntagm τὴν καινὴν Ἑλένην, “the new Helen”, or also “the strange Helen”, referring to Euripides’ play appears in Aristophanes, *The Women Celebrating the Thesmophoria*, 850.

of Egypt on his voyage back from Troy, is the first stage of her return home and her redemption in the eyes of the world.

The production of *Helen* at Syracuse by Davide Livermore, well-known for his direction of opera, but here at his first experience of Greek tragedy,⁴ is founded on his awareness of the atypicality of Euripides' text, and of his realization that this allows the director to give free rein to his creative impulse. And there can be no doubt of the fact that he has exploited all the experience he has gained in the field of opera, especially in view of the close analogies between this tragedy and his staging of *Attila* by Giuseppe Verdi that opened the 2018/19 season at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan. These include the lavish use of audio-visual aids and the sophisticated hybridization of the costumes with a conspicuous use of elegant eighteenth-century attire and a scattering of white wigs. In a note which appears in the theatre programme with the title "Do you believe in ghosts?", Livermore writes:

I love *Helen* because it is an unusual tragedy, whose outlines blur into an ironic game; the conclusion seems to taunt people who try to reduce art to a list of categories constrained within the pedantic obedience of cast-iron rules. No-one dies in *Helen*. And they smile rather as they do in Elizabethan tragedies, which actually seem a bit distant to us, despite our intellectual effort, because they let the components of tragedy and comedy coexist, without anatomizing life and its qualities, in a way which is to us somehow a little too individual, free ... English. Perhaps for this, too, *Helen* has not been performed for the last forty years because it does not correspond to the expectations of the sort of criticism that loves to put labels on things, but rather demands that the critics themselves remain unbiassed, open to the acceptance of another dimension, perhaps simply to being modern. (Livermore 2019: 30)⁵

The most spectacular feature of Livermore's staging is without doubt the transformation of the circular orchestra of the Teatro Greco of Syracuse into an enor-

⁴ *Helen* by Euripides, director Davide Livermore, Italian translation Walter Lapini, scenic project Davide Livermore, costumes Gianluca Falaschi, music Andrea Chenna, lighting Antonio Castro, cast: Laura Marinoni (Helen), Viola Marietti (Teucer), Sax Nicosia (Menelaus), Mariagrazia Solano (Old Woman), Simonetta Cartia (Theonoe), Giancarlo Judica Cordiglia (Theoclymenus), Linda Gennari and Maria Chiara Centorami (Messengers), Federica Quartana (Coryphaeus), Bruno Di Chiara, Marcello Gravina, Django Guerzoni, Giancarlo Latina, Silvio Laviano, Turi Moricca, Vladimir Randazzo and Marouane Zotti (Chorus and Dioscuri), students of the Accademia d'arte del dramma antico della Fondazione Inda (Chorus). First performance: Syracuse, Greek Theatre, May 9th 2019. The performance was repeated 13-14 September 2019 at the Teatro Romano at Verona: owing to the evident difference in space between the stage in Verona and the enormous orchestra of the Teatro Greco in Syracuse, it was necessary to carry out a series of adaptations in the staging and a complete rethinking of the production.

⁵ "Amo *Elena* perché è una tragedia atipica, da contorni che sfumano in un giuoco ironico; il finale poi sembra irridere coloro che cercano di fare dell'arte un elenco di categorie che debbano pedantemente rispondere a regole fisse. In *Elena* non si muore. E si sorride come nelle tragedie elisabettiane, che in fondo ci risultano sempre un po' lontane nonostante i nostri sforzi intellettuali, perché capaci di lasciare convivere le componenti del tragico e del comico, capaci di non vivisezionare la vita e le sue componenti in un modo un po' troppo laico, libero ... inglese. Forse anche per questo *Elena* non viene rappresentata da oltre quattro decenni, perché non risponde a nessuna aspettativa della critica che etichetta, ma chiede a chi critica di essere libero da attese, aperto ad accettare un altro livello, forse semplicemente moderno."

mous piscina, a lake that becomes the stage. This is an evocative background for the movements both of the actors and also of the props, the rusted wreck of Menelaus' ship (in Livermore's re-creation this becomes a nineteenth-century English brig with a broken mainmast), which the king of Sparta drags behind him laboriously on the end of a rope, Helen's remote-controlled armchair which she uses to move about the stage, the over-stylized altar to Proteus, a harp and various other things. Besides symbolizing the sea, the body of water provides a key towards the interpretation of *Helen*: it is the storehouse of memory where recollections of the past accumulate; every so often they re-emerge, bringing with them the flotsam and jetsam of the myth. It is a mirror in which Helen regards her image, an essential element in a drama which plays upon the idea of the double.⁶ Furthermore,



Fig. 1: Helen (Laura Marinoni) and the Chorus. Photo Franca Centaro/AFI Siracusa

the water acts as a haunting musical instrument which interacts with the actors' movements through sensors which transform these movements into fountains of harmonious sound. The correspondence between image and music is a vital part of this spectacle; Andrea Chenna arranged his score as a collage in which his original music, composed especially for the play, is mingled with the sounds produced by the underwater sensors and with passages from Ravel, Boccherini, Mozart and Bellini. This potpourri, or patchwork, of different melodies accompanies and sustains the sudden fluctuations of style effected during the staging.

As a background there towers a huge screen of 60 square metres on which appear for the whole duration of the play images of tempest-tossed seas, skies over-

⁶ See Fusillo 1997.

cast by leaden clouds, often split by sudden lightning. These images, expressing the primordial strength of nature, alternate with depictions of an aged Helen, caught in close-up with white hair and a wrinkled face, giving the idea that the whole story represented on the stage is nothing but reminiscence on the part of the protagonist, who has already experienced these happenings and now re-evokes the past by giving her own version of it. But onstage, Helen is young and fascinating. When the play opens she appears with a black veil over her face (perhaps to suggest her condition as the hapless victim of divine will), and while she moves from place to place on a remote-controlled floating armchair she tells the story of her life, despairing for the ill-repute that sullies her fair name (Fig.1). The Helen revisited by Livermore is a woman who is carrying on an interior dialogue with herself, one who has reached a crossroads in her life, having just concluded one of the stages of her existence and is now searching for a key to her own identity. She no longer wants to be a seductive *femme fatale*, but a faithful wife awaiting her husband's return.⁷ The actor



Fig. 2: Menelaus (Sax Nicosia) and his shipwreck. Photo Bianca Burgo/AFI Siracusa

Laura Marinoni is at home in the part of a Helen who fluctuates between resignation and the urge to fight back, between suffering and lightness of heart, between despair and parody. Occasionally, however, her acting tends towards an exaggerated verbal emphasis where there is no real need for this. Sax Nicosia, in the part of the shipwrecked Menelaus, adopts a more suitably restrained style, though full of self-assurance and pride, in his long red overcoat, army boots, and the wreck of his ship

⁷ Euripides' aim here to redeem Helen's reputation, which had been blackened unjustly through a betrayal that she had not perpetrated and a war that she had not caused, is the same that moves the orator Gorgias when he writes his *Encomium of Helen* at about the same time.

that he does not want to abandon. Livermore's Menelaus is never a straightforward *miles gloriosus*, not even when he relates the heroic deeds of Troy, but neither is he a degraded and humiliated figure, unable to find his way or realize what is happening. On the contrary, he seems to have his own existential dimension: he is a man who wishes he had never been born, in the throes of despair, amazed at the ordeals he has had to undergo and that he is still having to endure, but he never complains, conscious always of his glorious history as a warlord. From this perspective the director openly parts company with a certain sort of interpretation that persists in the degradation of the hero as a characteristic of Euripides' dramaturgy.

The recognition scene between Helen and Menelaus signals the turning-point in the dramatic action. It is a key scene whose significance is archetypal when compared with many agnition scenes typical of later theatre. The director seems almost to have ignored the difference evinced by the husband and wife in their relative ability to understand,⁸ but concentrates on the aspects of the melodramatic duet which already seem implicit in Euripides' text. Livermore's direction concludes the agnition scene with a passionate kiss that Helen plants on the mouth of a bewildered Menelaus as the ultimate proof of her love and fidelity. From this moment on the play veers once and for all in the direction of romantic comedy or melodrama. The Chorus that until now were clothed from head to toe in the black garments of mourning throw these off to reveal themselves bare-chested in long black skirts, and dance around carrying silver candelabra and goblets of spumante. They move gracefully, with stylized gestures, fluctuating between courtly decorum and joyous abandon. The solution adopted by Livermore for the Chorus – notorious for being the most difficult testing ground for the staging of Greek tragedy – is all contained within his intended re-visitation of opera. Instead of the Greek prisoners held in Egypt (as in Euripides) the director invents strange, ambiguous figures, somewhat androgynous, rather perturbing and very surreal.

The minor characters as well are subject to an original portrayal. Theoclymenus, for example (here interpreted splendidly by Giancarlo Judica Cordiglia), a personage who is usually considered to be an unscrupulous Eastern sovereign, an arrogant, dull-witted despot, who does not live up to the ethical values of his father Proteus, appears in this production as a king in love, transformed into a powdered cicisbeo in the costume of an eighteenth-century ruler, fragile, over-indulged and slightly effeminate. He allows himself to be deceived by the astute Greek couple, and although he threatens his sister Theonoe, who has betrayed him, with the death sentence, in the end he surrenders immediately, offering no resistance to the exhortations of the Dioscuri Castor and Pollux, and accepts his fate with resignation. Simonetta Cartia's interpretation of Theonoe, the Egyptian king's sister, was also effective. Theonoe is a prophetess who knows the truth of things and has no hesitation in putting this knowledge at the service of just causes, even at the cost of going against her own and her family's interests. Euripides projects on to this 'holy' figure a positive ideal of religious feeling in the context of a controversy that in the play has to do particularly with mantic wisdom, accused of being fallible and mendacious (Eur. *Hel.* 744-57) and also against a background of epochal doubt when even faith in the gods was

⁸ See on this subject Mureddu 2005.

called into question.⁹ Livermore makes Theonoe wear the large wig of a court lady and conveys the idea of her divine afflatus through a soprano voice, cast upon the panorama of heavenly bodies we see hurtling across the giant screen, and torrents of ritual incense that accompany her progress (Eur. *Hel.* 865-72).

By fully exploiting Walter Lapini's precise linear translation, which was carried out with the idea of being utilized on the stage, Livermore has succeeded in projecting Euripides' play into a fantastic, atemporal dreamworld, in which ancient, neoclassical-eighteenth-century and modern elements (among the latter, the besom broom used by the palace servant, and the unexpected cigarette) are jumbled together in no apparent order. With such an approach it seems to go without saying that the political dimension of the drama, that at Euripides' time must have been very apparent, in particular from the point of view of antimilitarism and anti-war-mongering, hardly comes across at all.¹⁰ The scene with Teucer (Eur. *Hel.* 68-163), for example, that in the original play has an emblematic value in that it serves to illustrate the disastrous consequences of the Trojan war on someone like Teucer, a Greek soldier overwhelmed by events through no fault of his own (he lost his brother Ajax, was disowned by his father, and was forced to flee with no possessions to found a new realm). In Livermore's production he takes on a new significance. The role is played by a woman (Viola Marietti), who is dressed exactly like Helen to the point that she seems the mirror image of the Spartan queen. This is clearly meant as an underscoring of the theme of the double (the two women lift up a mirror between them), almost as if Teucer is nothing but the reflection of Helen's consciousness, an oneiric projection of her guilty conscience.

Even so, there is at least one clearly political moment to be met with in Livermore's *Helen*. When the old serving-woman in Theoclymenus' palace drives king Menelaus away so unkindly, as he is reduced to beggary after being shipwrecked on the coast of Egypt, she tells him to go somewhere else, and explains to him, "Here, in our country, the harbours are closed!"¹¹ and it is of no use for the Spartan king to object "But I am the survivor of a shipwreck and such victims are sacred"¹² referring to the Pan-Hellenic *nomos*, a custom that stipulated the duty to succour the shipwrecked. This exchange of words had a particular significance for the audience

⁹ See Eur. *Hel.* 1137-42: ὄ τι θεὸς ἢ μὴ θεὸς ἢ τὸ μέσον / τίς φησ' ἐρευνήσας βροτῶν / μακρότατον πέρασ εὐρεῖν / ὅς τὰ θεῶν ἔσορᾷ / δεῦρο καὶ αὐθις ἐκέϊσε / καὶ πάλιν ἀντιλόγοις / πηδῶντ' ἀνεπίστοις τύχαις; ("What is god, or what is not god, or what is in between – what mortal says he has found it by searching the farthest limit, when he sees divine affairs leaping here and there again and back, in contradictory and unexpected chances?"). All the passages from *Helen* are quoted from Murray's edition (Euripides 1902) and from the translation by E.P. Coleridge (Euripides 1938).

¹⁰ "We suffered in vain for the sake of a cloud?" (νεφέλης ἄρ' ἄλλως εἶχομεν πόνους πέρι; Menelaus' disillusioned old trooper asks himself v. 706; "You are fools, who try to win a reputation for virtue through war and marshalled lines of spears, senselessly putting an end to mortal troubles" (ἄφρονες ὅσοι τὰς ἀρετὰς πολέμῳ / λόγχασι τ' ἀλκαίου δορὸς / κτᾶσθε, πόνους ἀμαθῶς θνα- / τῶν καταπαυόμενοι), the Chorus sings at vv. 1151-4. The antimilitaristic reading is the one most preferred in modern re-interpretations of the Helen myth. See above all the poem *Helen* by Giorgios Seferis, Nobel Prize for Literature 1963.

¹¹ "Qui da noi i porti sono chiusi!"

¹² "Ma io sono un naufrago e il naufrago è sacro".

at Syracuse: the pertinence to the present state of affairs in the Mediterranean and the various political disputes triggered a visible reaction and prolonged applause.¹³ In this case Livermore deliberately interpolates Lapini's translation, but without disturbing Euripides' meaning in the original, where, indeed, the tragedian writes (449-50):

ΜΕ. ναυαγὸς ἦκω ξένος, ἀσύλητον γένος.

ΓΕ. οἶκον πρὸς ἄλλον νῦν τιν' ἀντὶ τοῦδ' ἴθι.

[MEN. Come as a shipwrecked man and a guest; such people are safe from violence. OLD WOMAN Well, go to some other house instead of this one.]

The final sequence is remarkable. It is another interpolation by Livermore, this time with no equivalent in Euripides, but one that clinches the director's interpretation and provides an oneiric hermeneutical key. After the epiphany of the Dioscuri (Marcello Gravina and Vladimir Randazzo), *dei ex machina*, dressed in long white robes glittering with sequins, and their announcement of the future destiny of Menelaus and Helen, the stage/lake or at this point, perhaps, sea that swallows up its shipwrecked victims, is dyed red like the blood shed in war. Suddenly we realize – this is the interpretative perspective offered – that the whole story is simply the reminiscing of a Helen who is already old and who has relived her adventures in a long flashback. One at a time every one of the characters who has appeared on the stage dies, and only the aged Helen remains, with her rapidly fading memories. The lake now becomes a marsh of stygian darkness into which sink the bodies of the dead and with them their memories, too. It may be that Davide Livermore derived this intelligent and fascinating idea for his staging of the text from the pages of Lucian of Samosata, the 2nd century AD writer who was the first one to reflect, through the paradigm of Helen's beauty, upon the transience of the human condition,¹⁴ or from those of the Greek poet Ghiannis Ritsos who, in 1970, wrote a drama entitled *Helen*, a long monologue in which the aged Queen, during the last days of her life cared for by insolent handmaids, tells an anonymous guest of her memories of youth and the few things that remain to her.¹⁵ In this way the unexpected final sequence reiterates the questions asked of the spectator at the beginning of this and every play: is what has been seen on the stage true or false? Is this the story that really happened or is it the projection of a mind clouded by the mists of time, of old age? The question remains unanswered, as a mournful, poignant lament accompanies the last movements of a Helen more fragile than ever, alone and forsaken.

¹³ It is curious that in this case it is a Greek victim of shipwreck, a westerner, who is refused shelter in an African harbour – exactly the opposite of what is happening in the world today.

¹⁴ See Lucian of Samosata, *True Story*, 2.25-6 and *Dialogues of the Dead*, 18.

¹⁵ *Helen* by Ritsos is included with other poems in the collection *The Fourth Dimension* (English translation Ritsos 1993). On the use of mythological paradigms in Ritsos' poetry see Chambers 1992.

2 *The Trojan Women*

The strong point of *The Trojan Women*¹⁶ staged by the French director Muriel Mayette-Holtz – at her first experience with a Greek tragedy, but otherwise a tried and tested member of her profession (she was the first woman to direct the prestigious Comédie Française) – is the scene project curated by the Milanese architect Stefano Boeri, who had 300 tree-trunks transported to Syracuse from a forest in Carnia, in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region, where they had been uprooted by a natural disaster in October 2018. The entire orchestra of the Greek Theatre thus appears as a ‘dead wood’ a spectral forest of denuded, devastated trees, with no branches and with no leaves, a clear symbol of destruction and calamity. This will be the background to the staging of the drama which recounts the desolation of the women of Troy, the suffering of the vanquished, of the mothers deprived of their children, of women in flight from war and poverty.

This is the fourth time that *The Trojan Women* has been staged in Syracuse (the preceding performances were in 1952, 1974 and 2004). It is indeed one of the most harrowing and one of the most choral in ancient theatre: Euripides stigmatizes the unjust violence of the victorious compared with the composed dignity of the vanquished, here focussing on the fate of the women of Troy who after the end of the hostilities are waiting hopelessly for the arrival of their doom as future slaves. On the apocalyptic scene, a sort of “day after”, referred to above, to which a desertification of feeling corresponds on the moral plane, the echo of cannonades and thunderous explosions – the typical sounds of war – signal the opening of the play with the prologue spoken by Poseidon (Massimo Cimaglia) and Athena (Francesca Ciocchetti): the first laments the fall of Troy, whose unyielding walls he himself had built, the second, though siding with the Greeks, feels hurt by the fact that Cassandra, one of her priestesses, had been snatched roughly from her temple. For this Athena vows she will cause the Achaean army to suffer a difficult and dangerous journey home. The two divine figures are represented according to a traditional iconographic scheme, Poseidon garbed in a chiton and Athena in a peplum, with lance and helmet, but the characterization of the 45 women who make up the Chorus is a completely different matter. They are wearing shapeless grey tunics, and are covered in white dust, hands and hair included: an appearance reminiscent of the catastrophe of 9/11.¹⁷

¹⁶ *The Trojan Women* by Euripides, director Muriel Mayette-Holtz, Italian translation Alessandro Grilli, scenic project Stefano Boeri, costumes Marcella Salvo, music Cyril Giroux, lighting Angelo Linzalata, cast: Massimo Cimaglia (Poseidon), Francesca Ciocchetti (Athena), Maddalena Crippa (Hecuba), Elena Polic Greco (Chorus leader), Clara Galante (Coryphaeus), Paolo Rossi (Talthybius), Marial Bajama Riva (Cassandra), Elena Arvigo (Andromache), Riccardo Scalia (Astyanax), Graziano Piazza (Menelaus), Viola Graziosi (Helen), Fiammetta Poidomani (Guitarist), students of the Accademia d'arte del dramma antico della Fondazione Inda (Chorus). First performance: Syracuse, Greek Theatre, May 10th 2019.

¹⁷ See the interview with Muriel Mayette-Holtz where she says “In my imagination I started with the pictures of 11 September when the victims and the people who were trying to help them looked just the same. Covered in dust that eradicated any difference. The colour of the ground had disappeared and the only thing left was a dirty remainder of the original colour immersed in

At the centre of the tragedy is the queen, Hecuba, played by Maddalena Crippa, the widow of Priam who, with her sombre eloquence expresses all her unspeakable suffering and with courage and dignity tries to hearten the other Trojan women who have been enslaved by the Greeks. Crippa, who has appeared several times at Syracuse as protagonist, manages to give this character, who ultimately represents the doom of all the women of her city, the fitting degree of *pathos*, especially in



Fig. 3: Hecuba (Maddalena Crippa), Andromache (Elena Arvigo), Astyanax (Riccardo Scalia), and the Chorus of the Trojan Women. Photo Franca Centaro/AFI Siracusa

the soliloquies in which the Trojan queen gives voice to her despair but counsels hope (Fig. 3). Particularly in the soliloquy uttered before the body of little Astyanax, placed upon his father Hector's shield, Hecuba best expresses her awareness of the necessity to cling to dignity even at the moments at which misfortune is strongest.

a uniform grey, almost like a memory of life in death, a memory of colour" ("Nel mio immaginario sono partita dalle immagini dell'11 settembre quando le vittime e quelli che provavano ad aiutare le vittime erano uguali fra loro. Sotto la polvere che annullava le differenze. Il colore della terra era sparito e rimaneva solo lo sporcarsi delle tinte originarie immerse nel grigio uniforme, quasi ricordo di vita nella morte, un ricordo di colore") (Giliberti-Faraci 2019: 36-7).

The Trojan noblewomen are not the only ones, however, whose faces are smeared with dust and muddied with clay as a sign of misery and ostracism: the cruel Achaeans, the victors of the war, are also covered with the same dirty, whitish dust. This because the director did not want to distinguish between victors and vanquished, in the sense that, in the last analysis, at the end of a war both sides come out of it defeated in some way. Talthybius, the cynical Greek herald who intervenes to announce the fate of the Trojan women prisoners, is portrayed, it must be admitted, in a manner which is unnecessarily alienating. Paolo Rossi, the actor who plays him, a specialist in decidedly comic parts, has from the beginning a puckish air, wild-eyed and crafty. His intention seems that of interpreting the common soldier, hardened by the many years of war that have numbed his sensibilities to the point that he has no pity for the victims. But his way of expressing this provokes humour more than it induces participation.

The fundamental shortcoming of this production is caused by the significant extraneity between the stage project and Euripides' text,¹⁸ even though the version used is Alessandro Grilli's excellent Italian translation. As a result, the performance is hardly ever able to fully express the play's intrinsic *pathos*. A glaring example of this tendency is the *agon* between Hecuba and Helen (895-1059), the key moment of the play and a sort of judicial contest to establish who really caused the war: the debate between the two sides is entrusted simply to the words of the script without any support on the part of the staging. Cassandra's scene is also not very convincing: here the physical fragility of the actor Marial Bama Riva lends the character the exaggerated appearance of ill-health (Fig. 4). More than a prophetess, Cassandra



Fig. 4: Cassandra (Marial Bajma Riva). Photo Bianca Burgo/AFI Siracusa

¹⁸ See on this subject the opinion of Sotera Fornaro, who justly remarks on the gap between the symbolic value of the set and the content of the acting, and comments that the scenery "could serve as a background to absolutely any contemporary catastrophe play" (Fornaro 2019).

seems hysterical, incapable of self-control. She performs a wild, convulsive dance on the stage to celebrate her imminent marriage to Agamemnon, by whom she will be violated. Perhaps the director wanted to emphasize the Dionysian component to which Euripides' text refers (Eur. *Tro.* 341, 359), that is, the moment of prophetic delirium. But the way in which the scene is performed eliminates every trace of sacrality from the character who, moreover, from a certain point of the action, after her delirium, fully regains her reason and speaks in a rational manner.¹⁹

Mayette-Holtz's staging is extremely understated, which in itself would not be a bad thing, but a greater creative vitality is needed to retain the attention of the audience. The moments where the director dares to be more inventive are certainly to be preferred. This happens for example towards the end of the play, when the Trojan women divest themselves of their heavy grey coats to decorate the tomb of Astyanax, and all reveal that beneath these they are dressed in red shifts, while at the same time behind the scenes can be made out the torches that are lighting the last fires of Troy, which at this point has finally fallen into the hands of the Achaeans. The symbolism of the colour red, blood and fire, is evident.

The aim of the scene project is that of celebrating women who are the victims of war because – as Muriel Mayette-Holtz has explained – “Women are the real heroines of war. They are left alone and try to build everything up again beneath the dust of destruction. War lets no-one win: no-one is the victor. But, fortunately, we have women so we can begin again. They are the strongest on earth.”²⁰ It is improbable that this was what Euripides was thinking of when he put on *The Trojan Women* at the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens: only a few months after the defeat and suppression of Melos (416 BC), this play seems more to be the tragedian's statement against the violent excesses of Athenian imperialism. But it does not really matter what Euripides' real intentions were, even if it were possible to discover them. A contemporary director has every right to opt for a feminist interpretation of the play, may certainly compare the dignity of the enslaved women to the indolence of men like Menelaus, incapable of putting an end to the tragedy of the war. S/he may also suggest a similarity between the lot of the Trojan women and that of countless women today who, in wars taking place now or that have happened in the recent past (in Bosnia, Syria and many other places), are being imprisoned, killed, wounded or raped. But to lend reality to these ideas it would have been necessary to attempt a much more pioneering and compelling production, in which the different degrees and forms of grief experienced by Hecuba, Cassandra, Andromache and Helen were taken into account. The sensation is that the interpretative perspective in which predominates the fact that women are the main victims and at the same time the first ones to react and get on with things loses sight of the complex play of nuances which Euripides' dramaturgy creates.

¹⁹ See Di Benedetto 1971: 24ff.

²⁰ See Mallamo 2019.

3. *Lysistrata*

The comedy *Lysistrata*, which Aristophanes put on in 411 BC is a classic example of the theme ‘women against war’; in fact it is perhaps the play of all others in ancient theatre where the opposition of women to military conflict is best thematised.²¹ Nine years after the last performance at the Greek Theatre at Syracuse (with Emiliani Bronzini as director), the new *Lysistrata* was entrusted to Tullio Solenghi who decided to use Giulio Guidorizzi’s Italian translation so that the production would be lively and vigorous, maintaining all the comic vitality of the original and adopting the same devices as Aristophanes used to realize his art: innuendo, bawdy jokes, obscene gags, that are not only carried out but are also, more often than not, improved upon. The resulting performance is on the whole quite satisfactory, even if there are occasional moments of crass trivialization, such as the long – and inventive – list of expressions to describe both male and female genitals not to mention the verbs which indicate sexual intercourse.²²

At centre stage is Lysistrata, the Athenian woman who decides to muster the women of other Greek cities and convince them to activate a sex strike whose aim is that of forcing their men to sign a peace treaty and put an end to war (the name Lysistrata literally means “she who disbands armies”). The lead character is played by the actor Elisabetta Pozzi, whose main area of expertise is tragedy, but is also convincing in the role of Lysistrata (Fig. 5). She brings into being a Lysistrata who is uneasy and discerning, who is apt to lose her temper, who knows how to reason and how to persuade. She is the one who leads the Greek women to capture the Acropolis: the women go up to the High City and seize the place which represents the summit of power and where the money for financing war and the wood for ship-building are kept. She it is, with her reasoning and her exhortations, who assigns to the younger women the difficult task of turning the aggressive instinct into an erotic instinct by denying the men the pleasure of sex so as to force them to make peace. The dramatic expedients utilized to make this *Lysistrata* enjoyable are many and various: the most noteworthy being the idea to make the characters speak in different Italian dialects (Sicilian, Neapolitan, Venetian, Apulian, Genoese, Tuscan) so as

²¹ *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes, director Tullio Solenghi, Italian translation Giulio Guidorizzi, scenic project and costumes Andrea Viotti, music Marcello Cotugno, choreography Paola Maffioletti, lighting Pietro Sperduti, cast: Elisabetta Pozzi (Lysistrata), Federica Carruba Toscano (Calonice), Giovanna Di Rauso (Myrrhine), Viola Marietti (Lampito), Federico Vanni (Magistrate), Tullio Solenghi (Cinesias), Roberto Alinghieri (Didascalio), Massimo Lopez (Pedasta), Simonetta Carria (Oracle), students of the Accademia d’arte del dramma antico della Fondazione Inda (Chorus). First performance: Syracuse, Greek Theatre, Juny, 28th 2019.

²² Margherita Rubino rightly remarks that “the vocabulary referring to sex was something the Greeks in general found amusing, it tickled the public’s sense of humour and raised the odd burst of laughter, but it absolutely did not pack the subversive punch that certain periods of history, notably the English nineteenth-century, conceded it” (“Il lessico che fa riferimento al sesso otteneva tra i Greci un assenso divertito, solleticava il pubblico, suscitava qualche risata, ma non aveva assolutamente la carica eversiva che certe epoche della storia, come l’Ottocento inglese per fare un esempio, gli riservano”) (Rubino 2019: 54).



Fig 5: Lysistrata (Elisabetta Pozzi), and the other Greek women.
Photo Franca Centaro/AFI Siracusa

to replicate the different idioms of the Greek cities. The costumes are also differentiated according to where the characters come from: the Spartan women, for example, athletes and soldiers, enter dressed in red bikinis, like the classic iconography of the mosaics of the Villa Romana del Casale at Piazza Armerina (Fig. 6). The beginning of the dramatic action on stage is preceded by a parade of war-orphans – just as took place in classical Athens at the beginning of the festival of the Great Dionysia – and at once this constitutes a tangible introduction to the theme of the disasters caused by war. Another addition that does not appear in the original text is that of the character Didascalio (Roberto Arlinghieri), a sort of elderly bearded professor who stays on the edge of the orchestra and every so often takes the floor to explain to the audience the meaning of various difficult terms or unclear references: a metatheatrical gag which is intelligently handled and adds to the comic drive of the action.

The way in which Solenghi approaches Aristophanes' text is totally free and almost irreverent. Another character who is a complete invention is Pedasta, a moustached woman played by Massimo Lopez, who comes on stage in sequined robes and feathers, reminding one of Wanda Osiris, and sings Frank Sinatra's *My Way*. This cabaret number, which is utterly defamiliarizing, inserted abruptly into the action, must have caused the director not a little remorse, and in fact he invents a live phone call from Aristophanes in person who complains from the other world about this unwarranted abuse of his work.

The scene and the costumes by Andrea Viotti are for the most part brightly coloured (with a prevalence of red and yellow) and seem to refer to a version of African dress. The Acropolis is dominated by an evocative statue of the Great Mother (instead of the one of the goddess Athena), and on the left, by a shiny oracular totem. The sense



Fig. 6: Lampito (Viola Marietti) and Lysistrata (Elisabetta-Pozzi).
Photo Franca-Centaro/AFI Siracusa

of these objects is not really clear: perhaps they refer to the contemporary emergency of the African migrants, in the first place victims of war, who are seeking desperately to land on the coasts of Europe. At a certain point the remark can be heard from the stage of one of the characters invoking the need for peace “how loud those poor devils are screaming to us for help from the sea”: this is not in Aristophanes’ text, but similar references to contemporary events were perfectly in line with the spirit of his dramatic technique.

Generally speaking, Solenghi’s staging comes out as rather too overworked. Fewer gags would have given it greater intensity and elegance. The scene of the oracle represented as an electric totem in the form of an eastern divinity that lights up and speaks in an incomprehensible code is inappropriate and could have been left out. Among the most unconvincing things of the performance is the over-rhetorical epilogue at the end (a sort of interpolated *parabasis*) where Lysistrata, in a soliloquy, takes on the role of spokeswoman of the thoughts of a small boy, Leandro (Riccardo Scalia), the soldier of tomorrow. Now he is living in peace, but he will be trained for war, he will be a warrior, he too will abandon his woman and his children, he will be educated within the totally masculine logic of power. In other words, peace is a momentary conquest which must be nourished and guarded, otherwise it will only be a stage preceding another war.²³ This sudden fervent upsurge of pacifist and feminist

²³ The soliloquy is drawn from a text by Simone Savogin in the book *Scriverò finché avrò voce*

pathos contradicts the entire spirit of Aristophanes' comedy; it gives the impression of a contrived 'moral of the story' of which there was absolutely no need. The didactic intention and aspiration towards civic duty in a way almost suffocates the comic urge of *Lysistrata*, which in itself is not at all a proto-feminist work,²⁴ neither is it that hymn to peace at any price that many people think it is.²⁵ In any case Aristophanes certainly did not advocate the equality of the sexes, an inconceivable idea in Ancient Greece, but he amused himself in constructing, for purely satirical reasons, a reversed, topsy-turvy world in which the women take the political initiative to the point of plotting a fully-fledged coup d'état. The Greek scholar Giulio Guidorizzi is absolutely right when he says, in a note accompanying his translation:

A female rebellion? Of course. But not a violent rebellion: none of the women in *Lysistrata* resemble an angry feminist of the Seventies, none of them hate men because they are males . . . *Lysistrata* describes a coup d'état: the women take over the Acropolis and force the men to bring about peace. All's well that ends well: now everything will go back to normal: the war will end, the women will return home to their men and go back to seducing them and dominating them with their wiles. But nothing, beyond this, will have changed. Certainly this is a feminist comedy, but it only goes halfway: the means which *Lysistrata* and the other women adopt to act upon the men are the traditional ones of seduction and sexuality. Power, apart from that of the marriage bed, stays in masculine hands: and the last words of the comedy are given to the men who are celebrating. (Guidorizzi 2019: 106)²⁶

Translation by Susan Payne

(Milan: Tre60).

²⁴ Solenghi in the Syracuse theatre programme notes calls *Lysistrata* "the first real heroine of female emancipation" and of the occupation of the Acropolis staged in the comedy as "the first intrepid example of female government" (Solenghi 2019: 30). But this representation of a world overturned and absurd does not correspond in any way to a desire or hope of the Athenian comic dramatist; the women are in point of fact the first objects of satirical derision on his part.

²⁵ For an idea of the significance of *Lysistrata* seen against the historical events of 411 BC in Athens, in particular the Oligarchic Coup of that year and a political interpretation of the comedy in a pro-Spartan key see Canfora 2017: 85-138.

²⁶ "Ribellione delle donne? Certo. Ma non è una ribellione feroce: nessuna donna nella *Lysistrata* assomiglia a una femminista arrabbiata degli anni Settanta, nessuna di loro odia i maschi per il fatto che sono maschi . . . La *Lysistrata* descrive un colpo di stato: le donne occupano l'Acropoli e obbligano i maschi a concludere la pace. Tutto è bene ciò che finisce bene: ora ogni cosa rientrerà nell'ordine consueto, la guerra finirà, le donne torneranno a casa dai loro uomini e riprenderanno a sedurli e a dominarli col loro fascino. Ma nulla, oltre a questo, sarà cambiato. Certamente è una commedia femminista, ma a metà: i mezzi con cui *Lysistrata* e le altre agiscono sui maschi sono quelli, tradizionali, della seduzione e della sessualità. Il potere, a parte quello dei talami, resterà ai maschi: le ultime parole della commedia sono affidate ai maschi che festeggiano".

Works Cited

- Bettini, Maurizio and Carlo Brillante (2014), *Il mito di Elena*, Turin: Einaudi.
- Brillante, Carlo (2001/02), "Elena: da Stesicoro a Euripide", *Fontes. Rivista di Filologia, Iconografia e Storia della Tradizione Classica* 4-5: 15-58.
- Canfora, Luciano (2017), *Cleofonte deve morire. Teatro e politica in Aristofane*, Rome and Bari: Laterza.
- Chambers, Marjorie (1992), "Yánnis Rítsos and Greek Mythology", *Hermathena* 153: 37-56.
- Di Benedetto, Vincenzo (1971), *Euripide. Teatro e società*, Turin: Einaudi.
- Euripides (1938), *Euripides. The Complete Greek Drama*, ed. by Whitney J. Oates and Eugene O'Neill, Jr. in two volumes. 2. *Helen*, translated by E.P. Coleridge, New York: Random House.
- (1902), *Euripidis fabulae*, ed. by Gilbert Murray, vol. 3, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Fornaro, Sotera (2019), "Siracusa 2019", *Visioni del tragico. La tragedia greca sulla scena italiana dal 2001 ad oggi*, 4.6.2019 (<https://www.visionideltragico.it/schede-critiche/siracusa-2019> – last access 26 October 2019).
- Fusillo, Massimo (1997), "La seduzione del doppio", in *Euripide. Elena*, ed. by Massimo Fusillo, Milan, Rizzoli, 5-27.
- Giliberti, Manuel and Faraci, Loredana (2019), "Conversazione con Muriel Mayette-Holtz", in *Euripide, Le Troiane*, Syracuse: Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico, 33-8.
- Guidorizzi, Giulio (2019), "Nota del traduttore", in *Aristofane, Lisistrata*, Syracuse: Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico, 105-7.
- Livermore, Davide (2019), "Ci credete ai fantasmi?", *Euripide, Elena*, Syracuse: Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico, 30-1.
- Mallamo, Anna (2019), "Le donne che salveranno il mondo", *Gazzetta del Sud*, 5.5.2019. (<https://sicilia.gazzettadelsud.it/foto/cultura/2019/05/05/le-donne-che-salveranno-il-mondo-in-scena-a-siracusa-ne-le-troiane-di-euripide-le-foto-ba5cd7b8-3db5-439e-bd81-3059c304f217/> – last access 26 October 2019).
- Mureddu, Patrizia (2005), "Il riconoscimento di Elena come percorso di «episteme»: Euripide e le teorie sofistiche sulla conoscenza", *Prometheus* 31: 216-24.
- Ritsos, Ghiannis (1993), *The Fourth Dimension*, transl. by Peter Green and Beverly Bardsley, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rubino, Margherita (2019), "In *Lisistrata* il sesso è il soggetto stesso della storia", in *Aristofane, Lisistrata*, Syracuse: Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico, 54-5.
- Solenghi, Tullio (2019), "Lisistrata, un'eroina dell'emancipazione femminile", in *Aristofane, Lisistrata*, Syracuse: Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico, 30-1.

