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*Founded by Guido Avezzù, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri*

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## 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



MARTINA TREU\*

# Erase and Rewrite. Ancient Texts, Modern Palimpsests<sup>1</sup>

Abstract

Aeschylus spent his last days in Sicily, upon invitation by the tyrant of Syracuse: the same town, since 1914, has been hosting a world famous festival of classical productions, in the ancient Greek theatre, which re-opened with the performance of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (1914). My paper aims at showing the peculiar connection between ancient Greece and modern Sicily and particularly how Aeschylus' legacy is received and transformed by Sicilian playwrights. First of all, his trilogy *Oresteia* was (and is) frequently chosen in order to celebrate the foundation (or rebirth) of a community, all over the island. My main case study is located in Gibellina, a town in Western Sicily destroyed by an earthquake in 1968. Many artists were involved in the process of its reconstruction. One of them, the Sicilian artist Emilio Isgrò, wrote and staged his first plays in Gibellina, including a poetic adaptation from Aeschylus' trilogy: the monumental *Oresteia di Gibellina* 1983-1985 (recently republished with other plays, such as *Medea*, 2002 and *Odissea Cancellata*, 2003, and with a selection of critical essays: Isgrò 2011). The key concept of this paper is borrowed by a fundamental technique created by Isgrò, which inspired his creations both as an artist and a playwright: to erase and rewrite a text, so that its profound essence may emerge – not on the surface, but in the backlight.

KEYWORDS: palimpsest; to erase and rewrite; Aeschylus' *Oresteia*; Emilio Isgrò; Gibellina, Sicily

La Sicilia è diventata un palcoscenico perenne e senza scampo

Emilio Isgrò<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Foreword

During the second Persian War, the Acropolis of Athens burned down. Such a symbolic, collective wound left deep traces and memories in sur-

<sup>1</sup> I thank Guido Avezzi, Elena Servito (INDA Archive), Gaspare Urso and the staff of INDA Foundation, and Wendy Lloyd for revising my translation.

<sup>2</sup> "Sicily has become a perennial stage, with no escape" (Isgrò 1986 and 2011: 36).

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vived texts, from Aeschylus' *Persians* (472 BCE) to Herodotus' *Stories* (ca 450 BCE). New monuments were built on site, but older ones were not forgotten, nor thrown away, nor destroyed. They were buried under the new Acropolis, which 'covered' the old one and rose on the same ground, like an ancient palimpsest. This is the key concept of this paper, but its focus is not Athens. It is Sicily, an island which has been playing a role in the Mediterranean since ancient times. Sicily and the *Magna Graecia* were a 'Promised Land' for the Greeks of that time, as America appeared to modern immigrants, and still is today beyond the Mexican Wall. Sicily welcomed also the same tragic poet who had fought Persians and had written a tragedy on the Persian Wars. Aeschylus was first invited in the 470s by Hiero I of Syracuse, and after the staging of his trilogy *Oresteia* (458 BCE) left his *polis* which suffered a political crisis and risked a civil war. He chose "to go west", looking for a brand new start. He migrated to Sicily, invited again by the tyrant of Syracuse; there, Aeschylus spent his last days, until he died in Gela.<sup>3</sup>

Following his traces, my research will focus on modern Sicily, in order to show how the island keeps erasing and re-writing its history, and how its theatre tradition remains faithful to the memory of Aeschylus who was there twice: his path seems to be continued by most Sicilian festival and classical productions which flourish in many places. Sicily holds tight to its Greek roots, and yet moves further, thanks to authors, directors, and actors, who bring back to life ancient texts for a modern audience, over the decades. First, it is worth looking back at the past century: among Sicilian cities, Syracuse, in particular, has a splendid Greek theatre, which has been hosting a famous festival of classical productions since 1914. As mentioned before, Aeschylus was a glorious host of Syracuse's tyrant, he celebrated the city and its colonies, and he left therefore a strong, symbolic legacy. His dramas, and particularly his trilogy *Oresteia* was (and is) frequently chosen to celebrate a new start: the Greek theatre re-opened after a centuries-long

<sup>3</sup> See *Aeschyli Vita* 8, 9, 10, 11e 18; *Sch. ad Aristoph. Ran.* 1028; Paus. 1.2.3, Basta Donzelli 2008: 1-17; 39-47; Beltrametti 2011: 149-68. See also the unpublished paper by Ioanna Papadopoulou, "Nothing to do with the extant *Persians*? . . . νῦν ὑπὲρ πάντων ἀγών, (Aesch. *Pers.* 405), the riddle of the (second) staging of *The Persians* in Syracuse and the lost *Aitnaiai*", delivered at the Fonte Aretusa Symposium (12-15 June 2019): abstract online at <https://fontearetusa.wordpress.com/confirmed-abstracts-as-of-12-26-18/> The study center which hosted the symposium, based in Syracuse, is focused on Sicily as the 'Western Greece'. Also, Luciano Canfora in a recent conference organized by IN-DA Foundation in Syracuse (25 June 2019) stressed how the political climate following *Oresteia*'s performance in Athens may have influenced the choice of Aeschylus to move to Sicily. For a recent overview on Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, and its modern performances, see also S. Bigliuzzi (ed.) (2018).



silence with the performance of *Agamemnon* (1914), and after WW1 the trilogy continued with *Libation Bearers* (1921). Also after WW2, in 1948, a modern *Oresteia* (translated by Manara Valgimigli) marked the renovated festival and a new era which culminated in 1960 with another key-performance of the entire trilogy: formally a translation, but actually the first 'poetic adaptation' ever performed in Syracuse (*Orestia*), was written by Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975), and commissioned by Luciano Lucignani and Vittorio Gassman. It was a turning point towards a new age of classical reception, and started a trend which is vital and influential still nowadays.<sup>4</sup>

These are just some of the productions which took place at the Greek theatre, over a century, and in our vision we propose here to consider them altogether as a part of the 'genetic makeup' of this Theatre. Every drama, every theatre, every evening of performance adds itself to the list. To us, they evoke the key image of the palimpsest; the theatre, like an ancient manuscript, hosts a new performance every evening. Each time the live experience of the audience is old-and-new, as it adds itself to the previous ones. Therefore, the most perceptive among modern spectators may detect the traces of all previous performances which are still visible somehow beneath the ancient stones.

## 2. Gibellina, Sicily

If this is our thesis, in a wider sense the concept of palimpsest may assume to us a further meaning in special circumstances; especially after a tragic event or a trauma, it may happen that the best choice seems to recur, symbolically, to a new version of a classical play, and in particular of the *Oresteia*, in order to celebrate the re-foundation (or rebirth) of a community. This is what occurred in Gibellina, a town in the Belice Valley (on the western side of Sicily), which was totally erased by a terrible earthquake in just one night (between 14 and 15 January 1968). The few survivors had to live in barracks for years, before their town was built again. Moreover, Gibellina was never built as it was, and not even on the same spot: not on the mountain, but in the valley below, near the new E90 highway (Palermo-Mazara del Vallo). Ludovico Corrao, an influential political member of the leftist party and a senator and Mayor since 1970, made a public call to Italian and International artists. He invited them to encourage the rebirth of Gibellina live again, and to offer their personal contributions, either in the form of art pieces, workshops, or buildings on site. Among oth-

<sup>4</sup> On Pasolini see Treu 2005: 35, 149-199; Fusillo 2007; Berti, 2008: 105-15; Condello 2012; Franco and Piantanida 2018: 100-119.

ers, the Sicilian artist Emilio Isgrò accepted Corrao's invitation. He was not yet a playwright at that time – he was born in 1937 in Barcellona Pozzo di Gotto on the eastern coast of Sicily, near Messina. In 1956 he moved north, where he lived in Milan and in Venice; at first he worked as a journalist, later he became a well-known visual artist, particularly for his *Cancellatura* – a technique which he invented and practiced since the Sixties. The name comes from the verb 'cancellare' ('erase'), and in a way it reminds us of ancient palimpsests. Basically, he covers a great part of a text, usually with monochromatic stripes, leaving only some key words or details uncovered: therefore, well visible, they can emerge at best from all others.<sup>5</sup> At first, when he worked as a journalist for *Il Gazzettino* (Venice) Isgrò started by erasing parts of newspapers; later he turned to texts of more durable value, either poetic or symbolic (an iconic photo, an image, a map), with an official, political, social or religious status, and a special 'allure' or authority (a prayer, a constitution, a law, an encyclopedia, and so on). For instance, he 'cancelled' Melville's *Moby Dick* in his latest personal exhibition (*Emilio Isgrò*, Fondazione Cini, Venice, from 13 September to 24 November 2019).

In the Eighties, Isgrò was already famous as a visual artist, but not as a playwright. Yet, he was commissioned to write a drama by the Mayor Corrao. For the children and the people of Gibellina he wrote his first 'play', *Gibella del Martirio*: it is a sort of funeral song, a choral prayer for the dead (première on 10 January 1982: see Isgrò, 2011: 55-8, 93-114). In the following months, Isgrò also wrote and staged a processional drama for Gibellina's patron saint (*San Rocco legge la lista dei miracoli e degli orrori*) and in three years a trilogy based on Aeschylus' *Oresteia*: originally it was meant to be staged in the ancient Greek theatre of Segesta, not far from the new town. However, the permission to use the archaeological site was denied, by the INDA Foundation, with a significant objection: Isgrò's adaptation was not an original Greek drama, it was somehow perceived as a 'fake', and therefore not allowed to be played in a 'true' Greek theatre.<sup>6</sup> This denial some-

<sup>5</sup> This technique nowadays is so widespread that it might be misused in the public domain: in a 2017, a sort of 'cancellatura' appeared on the front cover of Roger Waters' album *Is this the life we really want?*, but Isgrò's work is not cited, nor credited anywhere. The artist first asked to be acknowledged as a source of inspiration. Then he sued the record label, and won. Finally, they made an agreement.

<sup>6</sup> The same author recalls the episode in his essay "Cancellazione di Eschilo" (Isgrò 2011: 586: see below, Appendix 2), where he explains his method of erasing and rewriting Aeschylus, and he adds: "Eppure io fui infinitamente grato al grande filologo e grecista Benedetto Marzullo il giorno che, parlando in pubblico della mia mancata traduzione, disse senza mezzi termini che si trattava di una restituzione perfetta di Eschilo e del suo spirito. E almeno di questo mi convinsi: che cancellare e scrivere sono esattamente la stessa cosa ("And yet, I was immensely grateful to the great philologist and scholar Benedetto Marzullo when he, in a public speaking about my failed trans-

how betrays an attitude still strong, nowadays, among audiences and scholars, politicians and institutions: what kind of event, or performance, could 'fit' an ancient theatre at best? Is it just a matter of genre, or content, or antiquity? In other words, should only Greek dramas enter an ancient Greek theatre, and Latin plays a Roman site? If we follow such a strict rule, a Roman Amphitheatre such as the Arena in Verona should be no more a set for a rock concert as for an opera. And what should be chosen for a reconstructed theatre, such as La Fenice in Venezia? Even today, this is a relevant matter of discussion. In the Eighties, however, the prohibition regarding Segesta (the "scacco di Segesta" as Isgrò ironically called it), fatally led to the best choice ever: the trilogy was staged on the most suitable place, where it belongs, among the memories of the earthquake. The ruins of Old Gibellina (a ghost town) resembled those very walls of Troy and provided a perfect scenery for the return of King Agamemnon: "è Troia o Gibellina tutta questa rovina? ("Are these ruins Troy, or Gibellina?").<sup>7</sup>

The trilogy was named *Oresteia di Gibellina* and was performed in three chapters, each following summer (1982-1984) in order to celebrate the birth of the new town. In those very years, we may remember, the *Oresteia* had a great revival worldwide: after Luca Ronconi (Belgrade, 1972), the trilogy was staged by Peter Stein (Berlin, 1980), Peter Hall (London, 1981), Karolos Koun (Epidauros, 1980-1982). Many others have followed up until now.<sup>8</sup> Among these authors, Isgrò can count on a profound education in literacy and culture of 'Western Greece': in his early years, he was acquainted with Rosanna Pirandello, a relative of the great writer, and a poet herself, but also with Vincenzo Consolo and other writers; moreover, he learnt ancient Greek in Messina (see Isgrò, 2011: 160), and he worked with Michele Stylo at the Greek theatre of Tindari.<sup>9</sup> While Pasolini confessed that he faced Aeschylus "as a dog does with a bone" ("Nota del traduttore", Pasolini 1960), Isgrò had the opposite approach: he 'erased' the original text in order to give birth to a new text, which has Aeschylus in the backlight (see below, Appendix 2 = Isgrò, 2011: 585-6). Like Aeschylus, he too goes West, from the eastern coast to Gibellina, and he changes his native dialect with the local ones, and creates his own, poetic language with a mixture of ex-

lation, said bluntly that it was a perfect rendering of Aeschylus and his spirit. And at least I persuaded myself of that: to erase and to write are exactly the same thing".)

<sup>7</sup> The memory of Euripides' *Trojan Women* serves as an introduction, and a final question, to the first drama of Isgrò's trilogy, *Agamènnuni*: see Isgrò 2011: 220-1

<sup>8</sup> See respectively lucaronconi.it, Bierl 2004, and 2012; Treu 2009: 77-84 and 2018: 100-19. Sidiropoulou 2018.

<sup>9</sup> See Isgrò 2017: 24-6. In 1956, he cooperates with the director Michele Stylo in the re-opening of the Greek theatre in Tindari (Sophocles' *Ajax*): see also Isgrò, 2017: 33-4 and 2011:13; Treu 2017a.

otic terms, including Spanish and French (whose domination marked his hometown, for instance), American English (the Allies disembarked here in WW2), and many other visitors and foreign people who crossed the Mediterranean sea over centuries of navigation and foreign domination; he invents musical verses with rhymes, sounds and rhythmic effects.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Isgrò's Palimpsest

The key concept of Isgrò's artworks, well visible in the whole trilogy as in his visual poetry, is the 'cancellatura' as a dialectic confrontation of past and present, myth and reality. He transfers the original setting of the Trojan war into Gibellina's ruins: the performance takes place "sulle macerie



Emilio Isgrò, *Agamènnuni* 1983. Photo: Federico Allotta.

di Gibellina". Right there another artist, Alberto Burri, would create his artwork years later. He would cover the whole hill with his Cretto, a

<sup>10</sup> Isgrò constantly worked, during rehearsals, with the crew on stage. He kept adjusting the text, in order to fit different needs or requests, regarding the chorus and the musicians, the people of Gibellina and the professional actors who came from different parts of Italy: Francesca Benedetti (the main actress in *Gibella del Martirio* and in *Oresteia*, as Tinestra) from Marche (on the Northeastern coast), Mariano Rigillo (Orestes) from Naples, Anna Nogara (Electra) from Milan: see below, Appendix 1.

white, concrete, funeral sheet over the dead town.<sup>11</sup> On the same hill, between the ruins, Isgrò imagined and developed his own trilogy, in verses, whose plot he literally built on the ruins of the *Oresteia*. He called in as many people as he could: his title *Oresteia di Gibellina* in Italian has a double meaning. It meant not only that it took place there, in that place, but also that the trilogy was made, created and owned by the people of Gibellina. The collective performance involved the entire community. Many citizens took part in each production, working as carpenters or musicians, making costumes and scenes, playing minor roles and the chorus as in ancient Athens (see Isgrò, 2011: 20-1 and 546-8, and 2017: 161-2). They invited another artist, the sculptor Arnaldo Pomodoro: he



Emilio Isgrò, *Agamènnuni* 1983. Photo: Federico Allotta.

created geometrical, metallic shells, similar to space ships, and carried them on stage by extras; once opened, they revealed the main actors inside. The director Filippo Crivelli is an expert in opera and mu-

<sup>11</sup> Some of Burri's projects for Gibellina were shown at MAG - Riva del Garda (22 June 2019 – 3 November 2019: [museoaltogarda.it](http://museoaltogarda.it)). Other works are on permanent exhibition at Burri Foundation in his hometown, Città di Castello ([fondazioneburri.org](http://fondazioneburri.org): Accessed 6 September 2019).

sic theatre, dealing perfectly well with choral songs and mass movements,<sup>12</sup> but the real engine which generated all action was Isgrò's script.



Emilio Isgrò, *Coefuri* 1984. Photo: Federico Allotta.

If we take a closer look on text, first of all, we may find a meta-theatrical prologue which introduces the ancient trilogy and connects it to modern times. Here, Aeschylus and the Greek heritage of Sicily are evoked with an ironical, tragicomic touch, typical of Isgrò's poetics. Also, some new, symbolic characters are added: a Cantastorie/storyteller (defined by Isgrò as “multiplicabile in più figure”, i.e. a “multiple character”, as he actually changes his role in the performance);<sup>13</sup> the archpriest Ingòglia, a religious head and influential member of Gibellina's community in the past, here reinvented by Isgrò as a chorus leader and narrator. Aeschylus' char-

<sup>12</sup> Filippo Crivelli (born in 1929, and still active today) started his career with Luchino Visconti and has been directing hundreds of works – especially operas, musical dramas and similar genres – among others, at La Scala, Gerolamo, and Piccolo Theatres of Milan).

<sup>13</sup> A similar role was played by the Aoidos ('Singer'), a new character which the director Marco Baliani added to the original text in INDA production of Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* (Greek Theatre, Syracuse, 2017): see Ugolini, 2017: 168: “In the prologue and epilogue, he introduced himself as the theatre's ‘caretaker’, as a sort of *genius loci* who informed the audience about the antecedents of the Labdacides' myth and exhorted them to preserve the memory of the events sculpted in the site's ancient stones”.

acters too are changed: the Watchman of *Agamemnon* is substituted by an anonymous Carrettiere ('Carter'). As soon as he enters, we are told that he fell from his cart, he fainted and he woke up 'mysteriously' speaking ancient Greek. So the time-lapse is overcome and the audience is suddenly transported to Aeschylus' times. In the course of action, he will reveal himself as Orestes. It is worth translating the crucial words of the prologue:

- CARRETTIERE Zotta in Sicilia significa frusta.  
 Ed è con questa frusta che si chiama zotta  
 che pungo la cavalla quando annotta  
 su Madonie, Peloritani e Nèbrodi.
- CANTASTORIE La storia è presto detta.  
 Un caso da manuale,  
 studiato anche  
 dall'eccellente e grande  
 filologo e grecista Milio,  
 eccezional docente  
 all'Università di Messina:  
 il carrettiere cade in una frana  
 per colpa di una cavalla strana  
 e quando si risveglia all'ospedale  
 – il meschino analfabeta –  
 ti parla greco ch'è un piacere udirlo.
- CARRETTIERE *En archè!... en archè!... en archè!*<sup>14</sup>  
 Mischinazzu!... analfabeta!... policlinicu!...  
 Grecanico o sicano?  
 ...
- CANTASTORIE Troia combatte ancora...  
*En archè c'era un bambino che si chiama Dio...  
 Theòs Theoù Theò Theòn Theòs...*<sup>15</sup>
- CARRETTIERE (*si prende la testa tra le mani*)  
 Sono duemila e rotti – duemila e rotti, dico –,  
 duemila quattrocento quarant'anni  
 che veglio tutte le notti  
 sulla casa d'Atreo e dei nipoti...<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The Greek term *archè* clearly echoes ancient cosmologies, but also the Bible, more familiar to modern audiences (see the *Gospel of John*, 1:1). With this formula, Isgrò introduces the mixture of classical and Christian themes which is typical of his art and poetics.

<sup>15</sup> The declension of the Greek term *theòs* ('God') evokes school memories, but it is ironically ascribed to an illiterate who suddenly and 'mysteriously' speaks ancient Greek, without knowing it, so that his words sound like a litany, or mantra.

<sup>16</sup> The initial 'mantra' counts the number of years between the first staging of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in Athens (458 BCE) and the actual date of performance of Isgrò's *Agamènnuni* (1983): first in Italian, then in Sicilian. Later in the *parodos* (see the follow-

Scàmpami, Dìu, pietà di stu castigu!  
 Havi dumila e rutti  
 – dumila quattrucèntu quarànt'anni –  
 chi stàju vigghiànti  
 supr' a casa d'Atrèu, mpujàtu  
 supra i gùvita, comu un dog,  
 ch'all'Austràlia veni a diri cani  
 e in doichlandisi si pronùnzia Hund,  
 riciatànnu supra all'acca.  
 E sàcciu i spustamenti di' stiddi nuttatori,  
 lu nvernu chi pòrtanu e la stati,  
 e quànnu spùntanu  
 e quànnu còddanu, sti magnìfichi regini,  
 ciammiantu celu celu.  
 Vardu si vidu di luntanu lampiàri un focu  
 e siddu chiàmanu di Tròja  
 'n signu di vittòria: cà chistu spera, e voli,  
 'u cori masculinu di 'na fimmina.  
 'U sonnu è lèggiu e sònaira non fazzu  
 ntrà stu pagghiunèddu 'spostu ô sirinu.  
 Scantu mi teni, cchiù chi la sunnura,  
 scantu di calari i pàppibri ntò sonnu.  
 Cantu, friscu pi non dòrmiri,  
 ma non c'è ninna chi prima o doppu  
 non si fa chiàntu supra sta famigghia  
 chi pirdivu ogni sensu di giustizia.  
 Miràculu saria e gràzia  
 si scuru scuru bampiassi 'u focu  
 chi mi libira di sta cruci.

...

INGÒGLIA Havi dumila quattrucèntu quarànt'anni  
 chi tutti i nostri navi, cchiù di milli,  
 curreu a vinnicàrisi di Priamu  
 Èranu vuturri orbi di duluri  
 chi ci ròbanu i quagghiarèddi  
 e firrianu supra i nidi  
 rimijànnu cu' l'ali:  
 chì non valia la pena  
 d'addivàrili pi nenti a ddi figghitti.  
 E Dòminu Onniputenti che l'òspiti cunsola  
 i figghi d'Atrèu nfùrgica contr'a Pàridi:  
 e pi 'na svirgugnata  
 chi s' a passaru tutti  
 si spèzzanu i catini 'u coddu e i vrazza

ing verses) it is repeated by the Archpriest Ingòglia (i.e. the chorus leader).



e masticanu purvirazzu  
 greci e trojàni nsèmmula  
 tra lanzi rutti e spati e scuti e lutti.  
 Troppu anziàni èramu  
 quànnu scuppiàvu ‘a guèrra, bummi e tirmotu.  
 E nni lassaru a’ casa, supra ‘na putruna,  
 minni mpassuluti, nutrichi mpujàti ê vastuna:  
 chì su’ muddacchi carusitti e vecchi  
 e senza nerbu.  
 Chistu, chistu è un vicchiarèddu  
 quànnu mòrunu i foggghi:  
 picciriddu ch’arranca cu’ tri pedi,  
 trimuliànti, jàncu,  
 sonnu nsunnatu a menzujòrnu.  
 Chi succidiu, regina Clitennestra?  
 Chi su’ sti lumi e tutti sti gran ciùri?  
 Chi è stu ciàuru ‘i carni supra d’‘a tarigghia?  
 Sta mùsica divina chi nesci di lu bàgghiu<sup>17</sup>  
 e trasi ntò curtigghiu?  
 Sogno sognato a menzujòrnu.

[CARTER *Zotta* in Sicily means ‘whip’/ And with this whip that is called *zotta*/ I sting the mare when night comes/ On Madonie, Peloritani and Nébroidi mountains.

STORYTELLER The story is soon told, a textbook case, studied also by / the excellent and great/ philologist and Greek scholar Milio/ exceptional professor /at the University of Messina / the carter falls into a landslide / for a strange mare / and when he wakes up/ he speaks Greek / a poor illiterate as he is / so that it’s a pleasure to hear.

CARTER ‘In the beginning’!... ‘In the beginning’!... ‘In the beginning’! Poor me!... illiterate!... Polyclinic!...Grecanic? Or Sican?

...

STORYTELLER Troy is still fighting / In the beginning there was a child called God /“God, of God, to God, God...

CARTER (*taking his head within his hands*) Two thousand years and change/ I say, two thousand and change / two thousand four hundred and forty years / have I been watching every night /over the house of Atreus and his grandsons/<sup>18</sup> (*in Sicilian*) Save me, God, from this torment, God, have mercy! Two thousand years and change/ I say, two thousand and change / two thousand four hundred and forty years / have I been watching every night / over the house of Atreus / on my elbows, like a dog<sup>19</sup> which is the term for

<sup>17</sup> The ‘baglio’ is the typical courtyard of Sicilian houses.

<sup>18</sup> The first sentences are uttered in Italian, the following ones in Sicilian.

<sup>19</sup> Isgrò uses the English term ‘Dog’ then the German ‘Hund’, in order to recall the influence of foreign languages in mass migrations of yesterday (from Sicily and South-

dog in Australia / and in Germany is pronounced Hund / with aspirated 'h' / I know the movements of night stars / when they bring winter and summer / when they rise and set / these magnificent queens / flaming in the sky / I watch to see far away a fire flashes / and whether they call from Troy / in order to announce victory: because this is what is hoping, and wanting / the male heart of a woman. The sleep is light and I dream nothing more / on this straw bed exposed to dew / Fear prevents me, more than sleep / fear of falling asleep / I sing, I whistle to avoid sleeping / but there is no song which sooner or later / will not turn into weep for this family / who lost every sense of justice. / it would be a miracle and a grace / if in this darkness a fire could blaze / able to free me from this cross.

CHORUS Two thousands four hundred and forty years / have passed since all our ships, more than a thousand/ run to seek revenge on Priamus / they were vultures, blind in pain / deprived of their offspring/ and they turn over the nests / flapping their wings / because it was not worth at all / raising their children / and God Almighty who relieves hosts / instigates the sons of Atreus against Paris / and for a shameless woman / who gave herself to everybody / chains of neck and arms are broken / and they eat dirt / Greeks and Trojans together / among broken spears, swords, and shields and losses. / Too old were we / when the war exploded, bombs and earthquake. / And we were left home, on an armchair, / whitered breasts, toddlers leaning on sticks / because they are mushy, little children and elders/ and spineless / This, this is an old man / when leaves die: / a little one trudging through on three feet / flickering, white / dream dreamt at midnight / What happened, Queen Clytemnestra? / What are these lights and these magnificent flowers? / What is this smell of meat over the grill? / This divine music coming from the *baglio* and entering the courtyard? Dream dreamt at midday.]

The prologue and *parodos* of *Agamemnon* offer a significant example of Isgrò's work: the Carter substitutes the Watchman, but he is also a prefiguration of Orestes, and of the author too. Not by chance, he enters the scene by translating a Sicilian term ("zotta / frusta", i.e. "whip") and he speaks ancient Greek, by accident (so we are told by the storyteller, either "single or multiplied", as Isgrò specifically adds to his name: Isgrò 2011: 40, 160). The Carter, actually, speaks all languages, including words of his own creation and post-colonial slangs, typical of immigrants, mostly derived from English and German. A similar technique, all over the text, aims at rendering Aeschylus' linguistic and stylistic variations, in dialogues and in choral parts, and at reflecting the complex personalities of many different characters, partly derived from Aeschylus, partly recreated by Isgrò.

Pilades for instance, according to his role and foreign status, regular-

ern Italy to USA, Australia, Germany and Northern Europe), and of today (Sicily is often a stopover from Southern and Eastern Mediterranean towards Northern Europe). This technique will be reprised, and amplified, in the whole trilogy.

ly speaks Italian, and uses Sicilian just to make himself clear to other characters. The chorus members too have a special language, especially when they sing, as it happens in Aeschylus and in Greek tragedy. Moreover, Isgrò sometimes divides the choral parts among other characters, and has them repeated in Italian and in Sicilian, or vice versa (for instance in scene 4, the archpriest Ingòglia and the Carter). Also, many key concepts are repeated as *Leitmotiven*, and enlivened by music, often inspired by Sicilian folk songs. The performance, as said before, largely counted on community members, including musicians and singers. However, Isgrò is very far from the stereotypes of Sicily. His focus is the quest for the unique value of words: for instance in his *Oresteia* he replicates from Aeschylus the frequency of puns and jokes, alliterations, onomatopoeias, speaking names, compounds, epithets (the Greek ἀνδρολέτειρα, said of Helen, becomes “Elina stutamasculi”, ‘Helen, the woman who switches men off’). Some of these words are rare, uncommon, archaic, just as Aeschylus’ words should have appeared to many spectators in fifth-century Athens: we have a hint of it in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, performed in 405 BCE (about 50 years after the première of *Oresteia*). The same Aristophanic comedy offers a good term of comparison with its poetic *agon* between Aeschylus and Euripides, who challenge each other in a duel of verses.

Ancient playwrights, actually, were used to confront their predecessors, and to transform stories, plots, myths and plays in a collective process of adaptation and re-writing. For instance, both Euripides and Sophocles wrote a play entitled *Electra*, challenging Aeschylus’ *Libation Bearers*. Latin playwrights too, in turn, adapted the Greek plays in their own, infinite variations. In a way, Isgrò adopts a similar process by rewriting ancient dramas in his own personal style, updating them, in order to fit a modern audience, without simplifying them. On the contrary, he opens them to wider dimensions, which may include and summarize previous versions and interpretations. According to his complex artistic vision, he aims at bringing back to life ancient archetypes, at creating new, symbolic connections between words, themes, objects, and characters.

Therefore, for instance, the original chorus and characters may change their nature, or melt in a new one, as well as a single character may split into two or more. Men and women may borrow their expressions and movements from animals, and metaphorical sentences may gain a concrete shape, on stage. Also, mythological figures and motives which are less known to a modern public may take advantage of parallels with images of saints and Catholic rites. Besides erasing and rewriting, he focuses sometimes on small details of larger images, on punctuation marks (such as a comma, or a full stop) which are enlarged a thousand times, in order to cover the whole space. As a visual artist, too, he experimented a simi-

lar technique (the so-called “particolare ingrandito” i.e. “enlarged detail”) throughout his whole career.

Another distinctive aspect of Isgrò’s poetics and sense of humour is well visible in the characters’ descriptions, in the long and often ironical comments he adds after the dialogues, and in his forewords before some crucial scenes. His first aim is to enlighten the text, so he frequently anticipates, or explains, what the audience is about to witness (or is actually watching): he clarifies the location and setting, the actions and words of major and minor characters, he comments on their reactions, and sometimes confronts them with modern equivalents. Another peculiar feature he shares with his Greek model is his passion for proverbs, popular idioms, folk expressions and metaphors (especially regarding the areas of family, motherhood, feelings of love, and friendship), which in his words appear at the same time archaic and modern.

In this perspective, Isgrò’s artistic creations are a palimpsest in an archaeological, historical, and anthropological sense: he starts from an ancient text, he ‘erases’ or covers a part of it, and lets other parts emerge; above all, he undercovers striking analogies, similarities with modern context, religion, habits, and mentality – especially of Sicily and Southern Italy (in his poetic view, “Il Grande Meridione”), between WW2 and the Cold War. This is the chronological arch of the trilogy, and particularly the setting of the third drama, *Villa Eumènidì*: Orestes’ vision of Erinyes in the final scene of *Libation Bearers* inspires a change of setting. The drama is ideally transferred from Gibellina’s ruin to a real historical place, which is part of Isgrò’s memory: the mental hospital of Barcellona Pozzo di Gotto (Isgrò’s native town, in Sicily) is the perfect set and symbol of the post-war Italy and in Cold War Europe, divided by the Yalta conference: in the course of the play, in Isgrò’s words, the set will become “a universal Purgatory, a Parliament, a Church, a court of law”, scattered with benches which seem “coffins after a disaster” (with a direct reference with Gibellina’s earthquake). In this adaptation, Pilades is the director of the mental hospital and Orestes’ visions become a collective nightmare, which involves him, all other characters and the entire community of Gibellina. Among them, a multitude of symbolic figures, ancient and modern, real and mythical, functions as the Erynie, the demonic chorus of the original text: Fifty mothers, Italian Generals, Sovietic sailors, policemen, Rose the Nun (‘Rosa la Monaca’), Pilades, and Iphigenia (who evokes, in Isgrò, both Cassandra and Electra). The finale, according to Isgrò’s poetics, could not be an optimistic happy ending, but is an ironical, cyclic, eternal return to the original status quo, to the Royal Family and the *ménage à trois*. Ideally, Isgrò brings the audience back to the prologos of *Agamemnon*, where it all started: Pilades, now married to

Clytemnestra, becomes king with the name of Agamemnon I; the Queen puts to death everyone except Aegisthus (opportunist as always, he denies everything, in order to save his life). Orestes turns into the Carter and leaves again.

#### 4. Isgrò's Legacy

Since the Eighties, Aeschylus' *Oresteia* has been more and more played and adapted, on Italian and international scenes.<sup>20</sup> Isgrò's trilogy has been recognized among the first and most important adaptations, and finally republished in the first critical edition of Isgrò's complete theatre with a selection of essays (Isgrò 2011).

In the past decades, Isgrò has been working as an artist and a writer, frequently intertwining modern and classical models, with poetic creativity and freedom. He wrote, among other plays, a Sicilian *Medea* based in Messina, a free adaptation on Euripides' play committed by the local public theatre (2002). Again, as in his *Oresteia*, the history of the city (which suffered a Spanish domination), inspired him to create a new version of the myth: Iason and the Argonauts are compared to the Spanish Conquistadores, while Medea, the foreign sorceress from Colchis, becomes "Principessa Maya, o Azteca, comunque barbara" ("A Maya or Aztecan, anyway barbarian, Princess"). Homer's *Odyssey*, too, is another archetype which recurs in Isgrò and in other Sicilian artists with significant frequency. Among Isgrò's works, we may cite the novel *Polifemo* (1989), his epos *Odissea cancellata* (2003), the most recent poem *La Pelle scorticata* (2016) inspired by the historical exile of Curzio Malaparte on the Sicilian island of Lipari.<sup>21</sup> In

<sup>20</sup> For a list of productions, see the online Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama at Oxford University (APGRD) and the bibliography on their website (APGRD.ox.uk). Among major editions, we may cite here the trilogy translated by Emanuele Severino and directed by Franco Parenti, at Pier Lombardo Theatre, Milano, 1985 (see Bierl, 2004: 123-7), *Les Atrides* directed by Ariane Mnouchkine (Cartoucherie de Vincennes, Paris, 1990), the reprise of Peter Stein's trilogy in Moscow (1994), *Oresteia. (una commedia organica?)* directed by Romeo Castellucci (Societas Raffaello Sanzio, 1995/1996), reprised in 2016 at Argentina Theatre, Rome see Bierl 2004; Treu, 2005; Ferraresi and Marino, 2016. At the Greek theatre of Syracuse there were several performances (for instance in 2001/2003, 2008, 2014: see indafondazione.org). In 2018, the free adaptation of the entire trilogy by Anagoor premiered at the Venice Biennale. In May 2019, another one by Milo Rau (*Orestes in Mosul*) premiered at the Royal Dutch Theatre in Gent (NL). See Giovannelli 2019.

<sup>21</sup> See Cammarosano, 2004 and 2009. About Isgrò's *Medea* see Condello and Rodighiero (eds) (2015): 263-76; about *Odissea cancellata* see Ieranò and Taravacci (eds) (2018): 279-305, and Matelli (ed.), (2017): 83-93. About *La pelle scorticata* (première at Metastasio Theatre, Prato, on 17 may 2014, reprise at M77 Gallery, Milan, 6 October - 3

all these texts, as in his *Oresteia*, Isgrò goes far beyond the typical paradox of translators: formally, he betrays the model, but ideally he is faithful in spirit. His adherence to ancient texts is in the overview, rather than in details. Other authors may seem more faithful to the text, at least in their intentions, but often do not engage deeply with it: in doing so, as Isgrò believes, they do not help the audience understand it completely, or they obscure it. On the contrary, the artist is committed to letting most spectators understand or at least grasp the fundamental aspects of ancient dramas, which are often not known now as they were before. Therefore the text may be integrated or modified with modern events, names, and places which may function as 'equivalent' to ancient ones.

The 'erase and re-write' technique is not only essential to Isgrò's work, both as a visual artist and a dramatist, but it is tightly connected to the peculiar combination of destruction and reconstruction, which is the most recurrent and distinctive feature of Sicilian history, and theatre. The island has always been, and still is, a crossroad and a melting pot of cultures and languages (Greeks, Phoenicians, Arabs, Normands, Spanish, French). Conquerors, travellers, and immigrants, in the past centuries and decades, have followed Aeschylus' path. To them, Sicily appeared as a promised land. Still today, the Greek heritage is strongly visible all over the island, particularly in those theatres, sites, and monuments where tragedies are staged, while the nearby coasts give shelter to thousands of people landing from the sea.

In this regard, Isgrò's example is followed by other artists who adapt and stage not only Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, but other tragedies (such as *Suppliant Women*) and texts (primarily adaptations of Homer's *Odyssey*) in order to reflect dramatic events, mostly connected to the mass movements which inseaundate and submerge Sicily. While more and more tragedies are staged, the nearby coasts give shelter to thousands of people landing from the sea. Among the best examples, an adaptation of Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women* by Vacis and Pirrotta in Southern Sicily (*Supplici a Portopalo*, 2009: see Rimini 2015: 146; Pedersoli 2010) and another one at the ancient theatre of Syracuse, based on an Italian translation, but with inserts in Sicilian, and modern Greek, directed by Moni Ovadia (2014). Nowadays, the 'Odyssey' of the refugees does not stop, unfortunately, but it keeps inspiring artists – all over Sicily – who ideally follow Isgrò's legacy by working on similar themes, and using their dialect as a new universal language. Among them, we may cite: Lina Prosa, with her *Trilogia di un Naufragio* ('Trilogy of a Shipwreck'), Emma Dante, Mimmo Cuticchio, who innovated the traditional Opera dei Pupi (the typical Sicilian Puppet theatre) and wrote new plays (some of them are inspired by Homer's *Iliad* and

*Odyssey*), and the choreographer Roberto Zappalà (Catania), with his work in progress *Re-mapping Sicily*.<sup>22</sup>

This common thread, the migration theme and the ‘Odyssey’ of the refugees, inspires many festivals and events and many recent performances and lectures all over Sicily: it is the main focus of two classical seasons which occurred at the same time, in summer 2017, in two ancient Greek theatres – Tindari and Syracuse (see respectively Treu, 2017a; Ugolini, 2017). Another example is the “itinerant Festival” named ‘Sabir’ which has no fixed place, but keeps travelling around the Mediterranean Sea (festivalsabir.it). Since 2014, it has been hosted, each year, in a different port or city: so far, it took place respectively in Lampedusa (2014), Pozzallo (2015), Syracuse (2017), Palermo (Cantieri La Zisa, 2018), Lecce (2019).

As for the Festival ‘Orestidi di Gibellina’, named after Isgrò’s trilogy, it is still hosting a museum, events, exhibitions, poetic and theatre performances. Among them, it is worth remembering, for the continuity with Isgrò’s trilogy, two productions: in 1988, a celebrated version in ancient Greek of Euripides’ *Trojan Women* directed by Thierry Salmon (1988) with splendid cabissosomal songs by the great composer Giovanna Marini;<sup>23</sup> in 1990, the Italian première of *La Sposa di Messina*, the original drama dedicated by Friedrich Schiller to the programmatic re-creation of ancient Greek tragedy (Teatro dei Ruderì, 1-9 September 1990: see [fondazioneorestiadi.it /archivi/1990](http://fondazioneorestiadi.it/archivi/1990)).<sup>24</sup> This production casted a huge chorus and outstanding actors (among them, Lucilla Morlacchi, and Massimo Popolizio) and was directed by Elio de Capitani, artistic director of Teatrìdithalia (Milan): he worked on the Italian translation, by Claudio Groff, and asked Franco Scaldati, a late Sicilian poet (1943-2013), to write new choral songs (in Sicilian verses), as a personal version of the original chorus, in a way comparable to Isgrò’s verses. Also, the music was written by Giovanna Marini, the

<sup>22</sup> It includes *Naufragio con spettatore* (2010), whose title echoes Hans Blumenberg’s *Shipwreck with Spectator*, and *Odisseo: il naufragio dell’accoglienza* (2011). See Zappalà 2011 and Auteri 2018. The latest choreography by Zappalà, *La Giara*, freely inspired by Luigi Pirandello, premiered on 12-22 June 2019 at Regio Theatre, Turin: <https://www.scenariopubblico.com/en/compagnia-zappala-danza/creazioni-czd/>. Accessed 6 September, 2019).

<sup>23</sup> Salmon’s legacy, and Marini’s music, are now reprised in an adaptation of *Trojan Women* by the choreographer Claudio Bernardo, as part of his work in progress *As Palavras / Frontiera* (première at Rovereto, 3 September 2019: [orienteoccidente.it](http://orienteoccidente.it). Accessed 27 September, 2019).

<sup>24</sup> On Schiller’s text see Zimmermann 2011; Halliwell and Avezzi 2015 (the original foreword translated from German into English, with notes and comments on the chorus, particularly the first choral song). On the 1990 production, see Schiller 1990 and De Capitani’s biography (<http://old.elfo.org/storia/bioelio.html>). On Scaldati, see Marino 2013; Valentini 1997 and 2019.

same composer who had worked with Salmon, and a monumental scene was committed to the artist Mimmo Paladino: his huge sculpture (“Montagna di sale”, a mountain of white salt, dotted with big black horses, halfway buried) is still visible in the courtyard of Baglio di Stefano, the actual site of the Orestidi di Gibellina festival and Museum. It is also worth mentioning a brand new trilogy, freely inspired by Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, produced and staged at Gibellina in 2004. Each drama was directed by a different artist: *Agamemnon* by the Argentinian director Rodrigo Garcia, *Libation Bearers* by Monica Conti, and *Eumenidi* (a Sicilian adaptation of Pasolini’s translation) by Vincenzo Pirrotta (see Treu, 2005: 199-201, 300-301, Treu 2008: 321).

In 2019, the ‘Orestidi Festival’ took place, in July and August, in Baglio di Stefano (Gibellina). As for Syracuse, since May 2019, the INDA Foundation hosted an exhibition on the ‘Orestidi Festival’ (in Palazzo Greco, Syracuse) with objects, *maquettes* and scenes from many productions, including Isgrò’s trilogy and those cited above (1988 /1990). This city is an ideal location for the exhibition, for its special connection to Gibellina and to our themes. First of all, as we noticed in the foreword, since 1914 Syracuse has been celebrating its special moments with *Oresteia*. Moreover, in the past years, the mass migrations across the Mediterranean Sea have deeply touched the city: while many thousands of people were landing on the shores, at a short distance, the Greek theatre hosted dramas, ancient and modern, mostly dealing with actual issues (civil rights, the status of citizens, foreigners, guests, and the impact of mass migrations on local communities), such as Aeschylus’ *Suppliant Women*, *Seven Against Thebes*, Euripides’ *Medea* or *Phoenician Women*. Also, on 17th June 2019, for the first time the ancient Greek theatre hosted a new play, *L’abisso*; it is written, played and directed by Davide Enia (another Sicilian writer, playwright, actor, and director who follows, ideally, Isgrò’s legacy). It is based on his novel *Appunti per un naufragio* (Enia 2017; Treu 2019): a sort of autobiographical diary, freely inspired by Homer’s *Odyssey* in content, but related to Greek tragedy as a genre in style and tone. Before and after Enia’s performance, the same Greek theatre hosted two tragedies by Euripides (*Helen* and *Trojan Women*) on alternate nights, and later Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*, as well as other events in the Greek theatre and in the surrounding area (Orecchio di Dioniso and Latomie caves): one of them was the International Refugee Day, which has been celebrated in Syracuse for the past 17 years, with performances and lectures of ancient and modern texts with a common focus on migration.

Regarding these themes, and the ‘erase-rewrite’ process, it is worth citing as a conclusion two recent episodes which occurred in the performances respectively of *Helen* and *Lysistrata*, at the Greek theatre of Syracuse, in



summer 2019. They are both connected to our focus, and to Isgrò's legacy: they are not mere 'interpolations' of ancient texts, and they may be read in the backlight of Isgrò's poetics, as an artistic choice. Not by chance, they are also related to ethical and political themes such as the current Italian laws and the government restrictions regarding rescues of shipwrecks and refugees. The former case is in the dialogue between Menelaus and the old doorkeeper who tries to ban him (*Helen*, 447-50). Walter Lapini, the Italian scholar who translated *Helen* for the stage, wrote some interesting notes about his work, and a *personal* feedback on the show.<sup>25</sup> Actually, the Italian translation by Lapini was: "Ma io sono un naufrago, un naufrago è sacro! – Rivolgeti a qualcun altro e lascia in pace noi." ("But I am a castaway, and a castaway is sacred" – Go and talk to someone else, leave us alone!": Euripide, *Elena*, *Numero Unico*, Syracuse, Fondazione INDA, 2019, p. 98). The final text brought on stage was: "The castaway is sacred", the doorkeeper answers "Our ports are closed" ("Un Naufrago è sacro. Qui da noi i porti sono chiusi"). According to Lapini, the theatre company changed the dialogue as a reaction to the restrictive politics on immigration in Italy: in the very days of performances, the ship Seawatch 3 was denied to enter the closed port of Lampedusa (notoriously, this island between Sicily and North Africa is a front-line destination in migration routes). The ship captain, Carola Rackete, forced the closure in order to disembark the refugees on board. She was arrested, prosecuted, and subjected to a media campaign, but finally released with no charges.

While these facts were dominating the newspapers, Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* opened at the Greek theatre of Syracuse (28 June 2019). Again, as in *Helen*, the original text was modified: the programmatic speech uttered by Lysistrata on 'mixing' in the city metics and foreigners (Aristofane, *Lysistrata*, *Numero Unico*, Syracuse: Fondazione Inda, 2019, p. 133) on stage includes an additional line: "those desperate ones too, who come from the sea". In both productions, *Helen* and *Lysistrata*, the directors and the theatre company made a choice, which ideally recalls Isgrò's legacy, and the audience reacted with a spontaneous applause.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See respectively the foreword by Lapini in the theatre program of the production (Euripide, *Elena*: Syracuse: Fondazione INDA 2019), Lapini 2019 (Accessed 10 September, 2019) and the study day on *Helen* in Verona University (September 12, 2019).

<sup>26</sup> I witnessed it respectively on 22 June 2019 and on 28 June 2019.

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## **Appendix 1: List of Performances**

### *L'Oresteia di Gibellina*

Gibellina, 1983, 1984, 1985.

#### I. 1983

##### *L'Oresteia di Gibellina – Agamènnuni*

Ruins of Gibellina, 3, 4, 5 June 1983.

Director: Filippo Crivelli.

Stage scenery: Arnaldo Pomodoro.

Incidental music: Francesco Pennisi, Orchestra Ente Autonomo Teatro Massimo, Palermo.

Cast: Rosa Balistreri, Francesca Benedetti, Roberto Bisacco, Cornelia Grindatto, Gioacchino Maniscalco, Leonardo Marino, Loredana Martinez, Mimmo Messina, Anna Nogara, Luigi Pistilli, Marcello Perracchio, Mariano Rigillo; the people of Gibellina.

#### II. 1984 (on alternate nights: *Agamènnuni* and *I Cuèfuri*).

##### *L'Oresteia di Gibellina – Agamènnuni*,

Ruins of Gibellina, 21, 23 June.

##### *L'Oresteia di Gibellina – I Cuèfuri*

Ruins of Gibellina, 20, 22, 24 June.

#### III. 1985 (on alternate nights: *Agamènnuni*, *I Cuèfuri*, *Villa Eumènidì*).

##### *L'Oresteia di Gibellina – Agamènnuni*

Ruins of Gibellina, 9, 12 July.

##### *L'Oresteia di Gibellina – I Cuèfuri*

Ruderi di Gibellina, 10, 13 July.

##### *L'Oresteia di Gibellina – Villa Eumènidì*

Ruins of Gibellina, 7, 11, 14 July.

## Appendix 2: *Cancellazione di Eschilo* (Isgrò 2011: 585-6.)

Spero di essere capito se dico subito, in questa sede, che con voi, egregi traduttori, mi sento leggermente fuori posto, se non proprio a disagio. E questo per la semplicissima ragione che questa è la testimonianza di un tale – il sottoscritto, per l'appunto – che ha fatto di tutto non per tradurre Eschilo, ma piuttosto per non tradurlo.

Quando infatti affrontai *L'Orestea di Gibellina* – che dal testo eschileo partiva – compresi immediatamente che una traduzione di sapore «siracusano», filologicamente impeccabile ma drammaturgicamente inerte, era la soluzione meno raccomandabile per una città di contadini e per una Sicilia terremotata che della filologia, in quel momento, non sapeva che farsene. Così, programmaticamente, decisi di affondare l'opera del tragediografo greco, anzi di cancellarla, se posso adottare un verbo che appartiene alla mia storia di artista e di scrittore.

La mia prima scelta, accingendomi a tale impresa, fu proprio quella di cambiare strumento linguistico e registro. Non l'italiano aurato e liberty di Ettore Romagnoli, né tanto meno i soliti, prevedibili aggiornamenti lessicali e altri accorgimenti di questo tipo.

Cercai di immaginarmi, piuttosto, una situazione drammaturgica completamente nuova, fingendo, ad esempio, che un Carrettiere – in viaggio nella notte siciliana – a un certo punto cade dal carretto per un balzo della giumenta e, al risveglio in ospedale, comincia a parlare greco. Ma è davvero greco? O non è piuttosto un greco che a poco a poco trascorre nel dialetto siciliano? Ma è davvero siciliano o non è semmai la lingua di Federico di Svevia al germinare della nostra letteratura e della nostra storia?

Così, di dubbio in dubbio (e si sa che noi siciliani siamo maestri di dubbi e di sospetti), la mia *Orestea* è diventata di fatto un'opera che traeva la maggior forza sì dal modello originale, ma ricavandosi in qualche modo uno spazio autonomo che la democratica Atene non poteva prevedere, ma del quale la Sicilia contemporanea, a volte troppo magniloquente e gonfia di retorica, aveva sicuramente bisogno.

Ricordo che la prima intenzione era quella di rappresentare il testo a Segesta, luogo greco per eccellenza come si sa. Senonché il presidente dell'INDA (il professor Giusto Monaco, Dio l'abbia in gloria) oppose da fine grecista che sarebbe stata una profanazione. E fu una vera fortuna: perché proprio allora, davanti a quel rifiuto così netto e motivato, pensai seduta stante di spostare l'operazione sulle macerie della città distrutta dal terremoto (terremotando il testo che avevo già scritto e porzionandolo al nuovo spazio che mi si apriva).

“È Troia o Gibellina tutta questa rovina?” diceva un verso della mia riscrittura. “È Eschilo o la sua irrimediabile cancellazione?” mi sarei domandato in seguito.

Certo, Eschilo si era sempre più assottigliato nella mia *Orestea*, fino a scomparire completamente in *Villa Eumènidì*, l'ultima parte della trilogia da me rifatta a misura della Sicilia e dei siciliani in un momento delicatissimo della loro storia.

Eppure io fui infinitamente grato al grande filologo e grecista Benedetto Marzullo il giorno che, parlando in pubblico della mia mancata traduzione, disse senza mezzi termini che si trattava di una restituzione perfetta di Eschilo e del suo spirito. E almeno di questo mi convinsi: che cancellare e scrivere sono esattamente la stessa cosa.

[I hope you understand me if I say immediately, here, that with you, egregious translators, I feel slightly out of place, if not uncomfortable. The reason is very simple: it is the testimony of someone – the undersigned, precisely – who did everything he could, not in order to translate Aeschylus, but rather not to translate it.

When I approached the *Oresteia di Gibellina* – whose origin was Aeschylus' text – I immediately understood that a translation with a 'Syracusan' taste, philologically impeccable, but dramaturgically inert, was the least recommended for a city of peasants and a Sicily devastated by an earthquake which in that moment did not know what to do with philology. So, programmatically, I decided to sink the work of the Greek playwright, or rather to erase it, if I can use a verb which belongs to my story of artist and writer.

My first choice, starting this venture, was to change the linguistic tool and register: not Ettore Romagnoli's golden and liberty Italian, not even the usual, predictable lexical updates and similar devices.

I rather tried to imagine a brand new dramaturgical situation, by pretending, for instance, that a Carter – travelling in the Sicilian night – at some point falls from his cart for a jump of his mare, and when he awakes in hospital he starts speaking Greek. But is it really Greek? Or rather a Greek which bit by bit becomes Sicilian dialect? But is it really Sicilian, or rather the language of Frederick of Sicily, at the beginning of our literature, and of our history?

So, from doubt to doubt (and we Sicilians, as it is well known, are Masters of doubts and suspects) my *Oresteia* became a work that took the majority of its strength from its original model, and yet gained an autonomous space which the democratic Athens could not foresee, but which contemporary Sicily, sometimes too grandiloquent and swollen with rhetoric, desperately needed.

I remember that the first intention was to perform the text in Segesta, a Greek place par excellence, as it is well known. But the President of Inda Foundation (professor Giusto Monaco, God bless him), as a fine Greek scholar, opposed: it would be a profanation. This was a real luck, because his flat and motivated refusal soon made me think to move the production towards the ruins of the city destroyed by the earthquake (by 'earthquaking' the text I had already written, and proportioning it to the new space which was opening to me).

"Are these ruins Troy, or Gibellina?", said a verse of my adaptation. "Is it Aeschylus, or his irremediable cancellation?" I would ask myself later.

Of course, Aeschylus thinned out more and more, in my *Oresteia*, until he disappeared in *Villa Eumènidì*, the last part of the trilogy which I custom re-made for Sicily, and for Sicilian people, in a very delicate moment of their history.

And yet, I was immensely grateful to the great philologist and scholar Benedetto Marzullo when he, in a public speaking about my failed translation, said bluntly that it was a perfect rendering of Aeschylus and his spirit. And at least I persuaded myself of that: to erase and to write are exactly the same thing.]

