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Nutrix

Edited by Rosy Colombo

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GHERARDO UGOLINI*

The Ghost of Iphigenia and Oedipus on the Stairs: Ancient Theatre Festival - Syracuse 2022

Abstract

The programme of the 57th edition of the Ancient Theatre Festival at Syracuse (17 May – 12 July 2022) consisted of three Greek tragedies. The staging of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (the first part of the *Oresteia*) was directed by Davide Livermore in Walter Lapini's translation and was envisaged as taking place in the 1930s. The show was structured around a number of highly successful stage effects of great emotive impact, not least of which were the huge mirrors forming the backdrop in which the public could see themselves reflected throughout the course of the action. Besides this, the director introduces the ghost of Iphigenia into the action, a character who is absent in Aeschylus apart from the repeated re-evoking of her sacrifice before the war of the Greeks against the Trojans. The staging of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, directed by Robert Carsen in Francesco Morosi's translation, is in a style which is completely different from Livermore's *Agamemnon*, employing no special effects and instead totally focussing on the words and gestures of the actors. On the stage there towers an enormous staircase where the characters, and in particular King Oedipus, move up and down, their ascents and descents symbolically representing the rise and fall of the sovereign in a starkly 'existential' reading of Sophocles' play which sees in the figure of Oedipus the paradigm of the *condicio humana*. Finally Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*, directed by Jacopo Gassman in Giorgio Ieranò's translation, locates the story in an abstract and atemporal space thus emphasizing the 'traumatized' personalities of the two protagonists (Iphigenia and Orestes), who only through a reciprocal recognition seem to be able to discover their own specific identity.

KEYWORDS: Aeschylus; Sophocles; Euripides; Syracuse; Greek tragedy; Davide Livermore; Robert Carsen; Jacopo Gassmann

With this production of *Agamemnon* the Turinese director Davide Livermore has concluded his staging of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* at the Greek Theatre of Syracuse, adding the final missing piece to the trilogy (which in reality is the first play in the sequence).¹ During the last season of the National Institute of Ancient

¹ *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus, director Davide Livermore, Italian translation Walter Lapini, scenic project Davide Livermore, Lorenzo Russo Rainaldi; costumes Gianluca Falaschi, music Mario Conte, lighting Antonio Castro, assistant director Giancarlo Judica Cordiglia, stage

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Drama, Livermore, who is particularly distinguished for his staging of opera, had already presented *The Libation Bearers* and *Eumenides* respectively the second and third parts of the work.

It should be immediately underlined that this production of *Agamemnon* is, as could not have been otherwise, in perfect accord with the other two plays of the preceding season. The same 'decadent' setting, that is the Thirties of the last century, the identical scenographic configuration with a black revolving platform at the centre, divan and armchairs in black leather, occasional tables with champagne bottles and glasses, a vintage gramophone, two pianos, a small mobile bar of the same period. The style of the costumes also reproduces the upper middle-class fashion of the times: Clytemnestra (Laura Marinoni) first in a lowcut black dress, and then, to welcome her husband returning from the war, in an elegant, flamboyant long dress of red chiffon with gold panels as a symbol of passionate decisiveness, Agamemnon (Sax Nicosia) in a grey double-breasted suit, tie and waistcoat, as indeed is his rival Aegisthus (Stefano Santospago).

An interesting novelty, in Livermore's expected style, is the presence of an outsize mirror at the back of the orchestra, where we might expect the palace of the Atrides. It consists of a mirror, 27m long and 8m high, in which the spectators, crowded onto the steps of the *cavea* (packed at last after the two years of reduced capacity owing to the pandemic) can see themselves reflected causing an effect of defamiliarization and producing the sensation of being simultaneously part of the public and part of the action on stage. The director's idea here for the huge mirror was "to integrate the public with what is happening on stage at a time in history when we are no longer used to being part of a community" so that everyone is forced to think that "what is happening on stage is our affair too, it is talking about us".² Next to the mirror the ledwall makes its appearance once again, the rotating sphere we had already seen in the *Libation Bearers* and *Eumenides* on which a continuous alternation of symbolic and archetypal images are projected, marking out the passing of time and the progress of humanity (a butterfly beating its wings, the foaming of waves on the sea, atmospheric events, Classical statues) and offstage happenings in the play (fire announcing the fall of Troy, the return of Agamemnon from the war, with a plane landing and the king coming down the gangway with Cassandra, while the crowd greets

director Alberto Giolitti, Video design D-Wok, Head of tailoring Marcella Salvo, Head of make-up and hair Aldo Caldarella. Cast: Diego Mingolla and Stefania Visalli (musicians), Maria Grazia Solano (Watchman), Gaia Aprea (choir leader), Maria Laila Fernandez, Alice Giroladini, Marcello Gravina, Turi Moricca, Valentina Virando (chorus), Laura Marinoni (Clytemnestra), Olivia Manescalchi (Herald), Sax Nicosia (Agamemnon), Linda Gennari (Cassandra), Stefano Santospago (Aegisthus), Carlotta Maria Messina and Mariachiara Signorello (ghost of Iphigenia), Tonino Bellomo, Edoardo Lombardo, Massimo Marchese (old men of Argos), Giuseppe Fuscicello (Orestes child), Margherita Vatti (Electra child). First performance: Syracuse, Greek Theatre, 17 Mai 2022. On stage at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse from 17 May to 9 July 2022.

² Interview with Davide Livermore in Di Caro 2022, 10.

them).

But Livermore's most successful novelty is without doubt the addition of a character who is not in Aeschylus' original play. This sort of retouching is often easily left open to objection and attack, but we are convinced that it falls completely within the rights of the director not only to modify the text but also the members of the *dramatis personae*. So much so that in Livermore's *Agamemnon*, right from the very beginning, we witness the appearance of the ghost of Iphigenia, daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, whom her father sacrificed before his departure for Troy, on the advice of the seer Calcante, in order to ensure propitious winds for the voyage of the Achaean army (Aesch. Ag. 228-47). Now, it is true that in the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, although Iphigenia does not appear as a character, her presence is frequently evoked.³ In the end it is precisely her daughter's assassination that is the motive force behind Clytemnestra's revenge. We are certain that Aeschylus – notorious for the use of εἰδῶλα (ghosts) in his plays (that of Darius in the *Persians*, that of Clytemnestra in the *Eumenides*) – would not have turned his nose up at this ingenious notion of a modern director.

It must be said however that in this case Iphigenia's ghost does not make an occasional appearance now and then but is the real *Leitmotiv* of the show. In the end, it could be said that this spectre, presented according to the canons of 'horror' as a young girl dressed in white with a long plait and terrible black circles round her eyes, is the true protagonist of the play. Besides which, Livermore doubles Iphigenia using two actors (Carlotta Maria Messina and Mariachiara Signorello, both pupils at the Accademia dell'INDA) so as to be able to make the uneasy ghost appear in more than one place at a time, or instead to make it disappear in one place and reappear immediately in another.

Iphigenia appears right from the beginning, even before the sentry (Maria Grazia Solano) begins the prologue from the palace roof. She runs here and there, terrified and panting, to the accompaniment of Bach's *Das musikalische Opfer* played by the pianists Diego Mingolla and Stefania Visalli; she picks up a paper boat and plays with it before disappearing and reappearing over and over again, especially at moments of particular tension, although she is neither seen nor heard by the other characters. She is the one who takes Agamemnon by the hand as he walks along the red tapestries (here transformed into carpets of rose-petals). It is she who vindictively proffers her mother the murder weapon to kill the king (Fig. 1).

³ See for example Ag. 1415-18, 1525-6, 1555-9.



Fig. 1: Clytemnestra (Laura Marinoni) kills Agamemnon (Sax Nicosia). Photo Pantano/AFI Siracusa

If it is indeed the case that the *Oresteia* was known in antiquity as a sort of “classic of *phobos*”,⁴ Iphigenia’s ghost is the very best way to give the public the sort of shivers caused by the uncanny. This is especially evident when she gets close to Cassandra (the excellent Linda Gennari), the only one of the characters “sensitive” enough to perceive her presence and to be shocked by it. During Cassandra’s long scene Livermore is canny enough to avoid portraying the moments of prophetic possession through the usual stereotypical approach, indulging in hysteria and fanatical ecstasy, and rather leaves Gennari to transmit, with great success, all her character’s frustration, crushed as she is by the tragedy of understanding the truth before it comes to pass but never being believed that she knows it (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Cassandra (Linda Gennari). Photo Centaro/AFI Siracusa

⁴ See the testimony of the Anonymous *Vita Aeschylī*: “Some say that during the performance of the *Eumenides*, when the chorus was made to enter haphazardly, it struck the public so greatly that children fainted and pregnant women miscarried” (τινὲς δὲ φασιν ἐν τῇ ἐπιδείξει τῶν Εὐμενίδων σποράδην εἰσαγάγοντα τὸν χορὸν τοσοῦτον ἐκπληῆσαι τὸν δῆμον ὡς τὰ μὲν νήπια ἐκψύξαι, τὰ δὲ ἔμβρυα ἐξαμβλωθῆναι, *TrGF*, vol. 3, 34). On the theme of fear in Aeschylus see Golden 1976, Schnyder 1995, Bierl 2018, Giannotti 2018.

The part of the sentry is taken by the actor Maria Grazia Solano, following the by now almost inevitable and certainly unsurprising logic of gender-crossing. The messenger is also a woman (Olivia Manescalchi), wearing a deliberately detectable false beard, who announces Agamemnon's imminent return to Argos. The solution adopted for the presentation of the chorus is also both interesting and persuasive: the elders of Argos are three aged army officers (Tonino Bellomo, Edoardo Lombardo, and Massimo Marchese) arrayed in military uniform with a profusion of medals and stars, confined in wheelchairs and accompanied by nurses and medical attendants. They are quite obviously veterans of past wars, mutilated, tremulous and stuttering. The chaperone of this chorus is the excellent Gaia Aprea, severely clad in a grey suit, a "guardian of palace secrets and of the dynamics of power" (Barone 2022) who also appears in a short scene where she accompanies Orestes and Electra out of Argos to wait for better times for their family.

Marinoni gives us an extremely good Clytemnestra, simultaneously imperious, seductive, and Mephistophelian. A true "male-hearted woman" (γυναικὸς ἀνδρόβουλον . . . κέαρ, 10), her performance of the part is aggressive, apart from the scene where she welcomes her husband returning from the war when she finally adopts a much more honeyed tone of voice. The climax of all this hypocrisy is reached when she kneels down to take her husband's shoes off and then kisses him passionately. But the neurosis caused by her devouring anxiety for vengeance manifests itself in the constant ingestion of glass after glass of champagne which are then thrown on the floor with little regard for the servants.

Agamemnon assumes the pose of a Thirties dictator, self-confident and satisfied with his success. The speech with which he greets his citizens after his return is made in a metallic voice in front of radio microphones. Aegisthus, departing from the Aeschylean model, remains silent on stage from the moment of Agamemnon's return home. He watches the double assassination carried out by Clytemnestra motionless and timorous save when he neurotically wreaks havoc on Agamemnon's corpse, by pointlessly discharging a hail of bullets towards it.

Staging *Agamemnon* is no easy task. Inevitably, Livermore has done so by following the dictates of his own aesthetic canon. The alternation of musical themes, from Bach to the electronic rock of the finale, successfully accompanies the show right to the end. To tell the truth the production errs on the side of a little too much elaboration, which could perhaps have been better contained. But the scenographic inventiveness is in general successful and of value to the show which achieves its aim of involving the public and maintaining their attention from beginning to end. This is also to the credit of Walter Lapini's excellent translation, the worthy successor of those before him – from Romagnoli and Manara Valgimigli to Pasolini – who have grappled with the translation of the play for the theatre of Syracuse, managing to capture and transform Aeschylus' lines into a fluent and comprehensible Italian without sacrificing an iota of their

consistency and depth of meaning.⁵

The only thing that is missing in this *Agamemnon* is the absence of a definite interpretative key. Livermore, in a discerning introductory note to the production, observes:

Giustizia è l'idea fondamentale della trilogia e attorno alla quale gira tutta la storia dell'uomo, una giustizia i cui labili confini vengono costantemente messi in discussione in un dramma che racconta il dibattersi dell'uomo e delle sue umane fragilità in una rete senza scampo. (2022, 18)

[Justice is the main idea of the trilogy and around this revolves all the history of humanity. The fragile borders of this justice are constantly being questioned and challenged in a play which tells of the struggle of human beings and their weaknesses caught in an indestructible net]

This observation is indeed pertinent and well-attested, but the *mise-en-scène* with its abundance of objects, situations and details causes us to lose sight of the central theme of justice and of the different forms this may take depending on the point of view of each of the characters and also of the historical context. In other words, the extremely spectacular nature of the staging with the continual whirl of visions, music and colours tends to obscure the dimension of civic and political engagement that a play such as *Agamemnon* had in Aeschylus' day and should still have now.

It was immediately evident that the Canadian director Robert Carsen had adopted a completely different style from Livermore's *Agamemnon* for his version of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*.⁶ The king of Thebes, who had been called by

⁵ The translator's intentions are explained in Lapini 2022.

⁶ *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, director Robert Carsen, Italian translation Francesco Morosi, dramaturgy Ian Burton, scenes Radu Boruzescu, costumes Luis F. Carvalho, stage music Cosmin Nicolae, lighting Robert Carsen e Giuseppe Di Iorio, choreography Marco Berriel, assistant director Stefano Simone Pintor, stage director Carlotta Toninelli e Angelo Gullotta, choir direction Elena Polic Greco, Sound project Vincenzo Quadarella, Head of make-up and hair Aldo Caldarella. Cast: Giuseppe Sartori (Oedipus), Maddalena Crippa (Jocasta), Paolo Mazzarelli (Creon), Graziano Piazza (Tiresias), Massimo Cimaglia (first messenger), Dario Battaglia (second messenger), Antonello Cossia (servant of Laius), Rosario Tedesco (choir leader), Elena Polic Greco (choir leader), Giulia Acquasana, Caterina Alinari, Livia Allegri, Salvatore Amenta, Davide Arena, Maria Baio, Antonio Bandiera, Andrea Bassoli, Guido Bison, Victoria Blondeau, Cettina Bongiovanni, Flavia Bordone, Giuseppe Bordone, Vanda Bovo, Valentina Brancale, Alberto Carbone, Irasema Carpinteri, William Caruso, Michele Carvello, Giacomo Casali, Valentina Corrao, Gaia Cozzolino, Gabriele Crisafulli, Simone D'Acuti, Rosario D'Aniello, Sara De Lauretis, Carlo Alberto Denoyè, Matteo Di Girolamo, Irene Di Maria di Alleri, Corrado Drago, Carolina Eusebietti, Lorenzo Ficara, Manuel Fichera, Caterina Fontana, Enrico Gabriele, Fabio Gambina, Enrica Graziano, Giorgia Greco, Carlo Guglielminetti, Marco Guidotti, Lorenzo Iacuzio, Ferdinando Iebba, Lucia Imprescia, Vincenzo Invernale, Althea Maria Luana Iorio, Elvio La Pira, Domenico Lamparelli, Federica Giovanna Leuci, Rosamaria Liistro, Giusi Lisi, Edoardo Lombardo, Emilio Lumastro, Matteo Magatti, Roberto Marra, Carlotta Maria Messina, Moreno Pio Mondì, Matteo Nigi, Giuseppe Orto, Salvatore Pappalardo, Marta Parpinel, Alice Pennino, Edoardo Pipitone, Gianvincenzo Piro, Bruno Prestigio, Maria Putignano, Riccardo Rizzo, Fran-

his citizens as the only possible saviour of the plague-ridden city (OT 31-4, 40-3, 46), appears on stage at the head of a huge white staircase – 8 metres high, 27 metres wide and with 31 steep steps – that reaches the highest point of the *cavea* so as to represent its mirror image. This is the most innovative and shocking of the version of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* staged at the Greek Theatre of Syracuse for the 57th season of the Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico. Carsen, a specialist in staging opera (last spring he directed the Hofmannsthal-Strauss *Elektra* in Paris), called for the first time to direct a Greek tragedy, decided to replace the traditional backdrop, the Labdacid palace, with this imposing scenic machine, in order to emphasize the distance between the powerful elite and the Theban masses. The members of the royal Labdacid *ghenos* Oedipus, Creon and Jocasta) are seen upon the stairway from which they do not move, simply going up and down upon it; on the other hand, the chorus of 80 actors, an unusually numerous one, stays mostly in the orchestra and only occasionally trespasses on to the stairs, the area of power. Not only this: the enormous vertical staircase leading from the public square of the city of Thebes to the Labdacid palace also takes on a symbolic significance as far as the career of the protagonist is concerned, mapping as it does his ascent and his dizzying fall.⁷

The scene is completely stylized and a-historic. Oedipus, interpreted by Giuseppe Sartori in a state of grace, enters wearing a white shirt and black jacket and tie, appearing as a an elegant, virile and charismatic leader (Fig.3).



Fig. 3: Oedipus (Giuseppe Sartori) and Jocasta (Maddalena Crippa). Photo Le Pera/AFI Siracusa

Creon (Paolo Mazzarelli) has just returned from Delphi, carrying an overnight case, accompanied by a retinue of servants in livery and white gloves. The other characters, too, are wearing modern-day dress with a clear emphasis on black and

cesco Ruggiero, Rosaria Salvatico, Jacopo Sarotti, Mariachiara Signorello, Flavia Testa, Sebastiano Tinè, Francesco Torre, Francesca Trianni, Gloria Trinci, Damiano Venuto, Maria Verdi, Federico Zini, Elisa Zucchetti (choir of Thebans). First performance: Syracuse, Greek Theatre, 18 May 2022. On stage at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse from 18 May to 3 July 2022.

⁷ On the scale of this scenic installation, which in the intention of the scenographer Radu Boruzescu alludes to a monolith and is inspired by the stylistic features of brutalist architecture, and also on the other scenographic aspects of the show, see the detailed analysis in Viccei 2022.

white. Indeed, this production of Sophocles' tragedy tends to avoid particularly strong colours and is notable for its simplicity and sobriety. It is a version which consciously shuns any concession to spectacle, preferring to point up the emotional dynamics released by the words of the protagonists. The representation is animated both by Sophocles' text, in Francesco Morosi's skillful translation, and also by the acting ability of the cast, who succeed admirably throughout the play in expressing themselves with a surprising artlessness, and with none of that annoyingly artificial declamatory emphasis so often met-with in productions of Greek tragedy. From the stylistic point of view of the direction Carsen's studied austerity appears as the exact opposite of Livermore's approach. This is the style of a director who repudiates any possible temptation towards self-gratification, who places himself completely at the service of the text and the theatre necessary to it, never thinking of himself.

What is striking from the outset is the voluntary and almost total renunciation of music, which for a long time has become a fundamental feature of the Syracuse productions by INDA. "Here the composer is Sophocles, the text is the music", Carsen has affirmed; in a director's note published in the programme of the show he underlines his agreement with a non-fatalistic reading of the story. Instead of humanity's necessity to accept an unjust fate he opts for a "celebration of the independence of the human spirit, that induces it to resist such a destiny and to fight it, however senseless or useless this may seem".⁸

One of the most successful features of the show is definitely the staging of the chorus. Not only, as has been mentioned, is it a very big one (it seems that it is the largest chorus to have played in any tragedy produced at the Greek Theatre of Syracuse), but the members, all in dark-coloured costumes, recite the songs as they move according to precisely stylized measures and in this way are seen to mime rituals of great visual and emotional impact, following the suggestive geometrically inspired movements – now circular, now triangular – of the choreographer Marco Berriel. For example, when the play opens, even before Oedipus speaks, a hauntingly powerful funeral ritual takes place, accompanied by relentless drum beats and the gradual diffusion of the smell of incense as we assist at a procession of all the citizens/chorus members, veiled in black, their noses and mouths covered by FFP2 face-masks (the sole reference to the Covid-19 pandemic) who deposit the bodies of their dead, symbolized by rags, upon the funeral pyres.

Graziano Piazza is an excellent Tiresias who performs with his eyes covered by special contact lenses which actually render him blind and which force him to move about touching the walls and to find his way by means of the beams of the spotlights. For once the old seer is represented in a traditional manner, an

⁸ Carsen 2022, 17. See, too, Carsen's reply to a journalist who asked him who were today's Oedipuses: "We are all Oedipus. He thinks he knows who he is, who his mother and father are. But, just like him, none of us know who we truly are. And we spend our whole life trying to find out" (Zangarini 2022, 49).

ancient with white hair and beard carrying a stick (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4: Tiresias (Graziano Piazza). Photo Ballarino/AFI Siracusa

The only thing missing is the boy-companion who guides him, but this is of little importance. Tiresias manages to grope his way along among the burning corpses. His quarrel with the king follows the Sophoclean text according to a perfect employment of mimicry and proxemics. When the *mantis* accuses him, “You are the impious being who contaminates this land” (*OT*353), Oedipus bursts into a fit of neurotic sobs which manifests the dawning of his uneasiness and fear.

Maddalena Crippa interprets Jocasta with an engagement which is both emotionally convincing and yet maintains a certain equilibrium. Clad in a long belted white tunic, the queen of Thebes presents herself as a authoritative and protective woman, but also shows her visceral love for Oedipus when they exchange passionate embraces. Her gestures and her tone of voice make us realize that the queen is trying to prompt the king’s actions without coercing him, in order to avoid the ultimate catastrophe.

The conclusion is the point at which the interpretative key guiding Carsen’s direction is completely revealed: Sophocles’ Oedipus as the image of the human condition, as a symbol of individuals who do not know who they are and who spend their lives in a desperate search for their own identity. After Jocasta’s suicide and his self-blinding, the king of Thebes displays himself on the stage at the very top of the staircase, completely naked, with his face and hands covered in blood. He then dons his mother/wife’s white garment and slowly descends the stairs in a movement symbolizing the loss of the power that was his, completely alone, staggering and falling several times on the way down. It is a touching image, a sort of ‘*ecce homo*’, full of *pathos*. Oedipus has reached the truth, has understood who he really is, has – literally – bared himself, descending into the hell of his own conscience. At this point he scales the stairway once more, desolate, to take up his life as an exile and a pariah. So that he can manage his new painful journey he leans on the staff that the seer Tiresias had left onstage and this the Theban ex-king picks up in a sort of ideal relay.⁹ The tapping of the

⁹ A similar idea can be seen in the film *Edipo re* (1967) by Pier Paolo Pasolini, where Oedi-

stick is the only sound to be heard in the theatre, as the astonished spectators watch King Oedipus walk away, finally deprived of all political power and of any intellectual credibility.

As an adjunct to this admirable production of *Oedipus the King* an exhibition was held in the Syracuse Regional Gallery in Palazzo Bellomo. *Edipo – lo sguardo in sé (Oedipus – the vision in/of the self)* is a show of works by twenty or so modern and contemporary artists, including Pomodoro, Paladino, Isgrò, and Nitsch, where the ‘totemic’ figure of Oedipus is confronted in works produced especially for this occasion. It is fascinating to realise how many different cues for inspiration the subject of Oedipus provides for the artistic imagination: the search within one’s self, the discovery of truth, lack of awareness, being at the same time victim and protagonist of one’s fate, doubling, the enigma, divine will and individual will, plague and disease, desire and passion, incest, murder, fatherhood, power, tenacity, gaze and vision, self-punishment through blinding and more besides. To quote the words of Antonio Calbi, director of the INDA Foundation and curator of the exhibition:

Oedipus is the tragedy of vision, of the search for truth and of introspection. The act of seeing underlies every aesthetic and creative experience and to reflect upon the figure of Oedipus, on his inauspicious destiny, is, for the artists, a way of reflecting upon themselves and their own research. (2022)

The third tragedy on the programme for the 2022 season was *Iphigenia in Tauris* by Euripides,¹⁰ a work which is not often staged in the modern theatre, but which has had a series of fortunate versions and rewrites, both in the theatri-

pus (played by Sergio Citti), once he has blinded himself is given by the messenger (Ninetto Davoli) a flute identical to the one the audience saw being played by Tiresias (Julian Beck). This contrivance – absent in Sophocles – is adopted to underline a sort of continuity between the two characters: the blind Oedipus turns into a similar figure to Tiresias, a solitary artist, an outsider, able in this way to understand the sufferings of humanity.

¹⁰ *Iphigenia in Tauris* by Euripides, director Jacopo Gassmann, Italian translation Giorgio Ieranò, scenes Gregorio Zurla, costumes Gianluca Sbicca, visual designer Luca Brinchi, Daniele Spanò, sound design G.U.P. Alcaro, assistant director Mario Scandale, lighting Gianni Staropoli, light designer assistant Omar Scala, choir direction Bruno De Franceschi, choreography Marco Angelilli, Head of make-up and hair Aldo Caldarella. Cast: Anna Della Rosa (Iphigenia), Ivan Alovisio (Orestes), Massimo Nicolini (Pilades), Alessio Esposito (herdsman), Stefano Santospago (King Toas), Rosario Tedesco (servant), Anna Charlotte Barbera, Luisa Borini, Gloria Carovana, Brigida Cesareo, Caterina Filograno, Leda Kreider, Marta Cortellazzo Wiel, Roberta Crivelli, Giulia Mazzarino, Daniela Vitale (choir of Greek Slave Women), Guido Bison, Gabriele Crisafulli, Domenico Lamparelli, Matteo Magatti, Jacopo Sarotti, Damiano Venuto (choir of Taurians). First performance: Syracuse, Greek Theatre, 17 June 2022. On stage at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse from 17 June to 4 July 2022. The show was then put on in the Teatro Grande of Pompeii for “Pompeii Theatrum mundi” on the 15 and 16 July, and at the Roman Theatre in Verona for “Verona Summer Theatre” on the 14 and 15 September.

cal context (we only have to think of Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, and also of Racine, Pindemonte, Martello, Hauptmann etc.), and in the musical world (for example, Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride*, and then Scarlatti, Cherubini, Jommelli, Traetta etc.), not to mention its history in the world of painting (Tiepolo's fresco *Il Sacrificio d'Ifigenia* comes to mind). The director of this new staging of *Iphigenia Taurica* is Jacopo Gassmann, son of the famous actor and director Vittorio Gassmann (1922-2000), in his first experience with a Greek tragedy after having directed several productions of modern theatre.¹¹

Gassmann's staging focusses on a rather neutral setting which is completely decontextualized, with no apparent historical or geographical reference. His Tauris – a region corresponding to the present Crimea, which in the Greek imagination was a 'barbarous' land, that is to say totally uncivilized, characterized by violence and oppression and where human sacrifice was still the practice – is presented as a metaphysical moonscape, the predominant colour of which is white. In the background the Temple of Artemis is represented by three rectangular glass blocks placed so as to form a huge totemic monolith, apparently inaccessible. The barbaric nature of the place is suggested by the presence of stuffed animals (some left whole, others cut into pieces) which are enclosed within glass cases so as to seem part of a sort of zoological museum which is safeguarding archaeological relics of the past. The very deer that was sacrificed in Aulis instead of Iphigenia dominates the foreground of the stage for the whole duration of the play. But more than simply a terrifyingly savage place, the Tauris reconstructed by Gassmann and his scenographer Gregorio Zurla seems to be an environment full of ambiguity, where reality and appearance are confused and where nothing is what it seems to be. Gradually, to the animals in the glass cases everyday objects are added (microphones, gramophones, electric torches) which suggest they are 'fragments of life' elements in an enormous anthropological archive. Iphigenia, Orestes, Pilades, but also King Toas and in the end all the spectators as well are simply epigones of an endless tradition, crushed by the weight of heredity and unable to free themselves from it.

There can be no doubt that Jacopo Gassmann has worked seriously and in detail on the text of Euripides and has studied scholarly interpretations and all the implications that this text suggests. Perhaps it is this enormous task of critical study that has prevented the emergence of any original or insightful solutions. In a director's note entitled "Tragedy as perception" Gassmann writes:

Ifigenia in Tauride è infatti un testo intriso di domande e contraddizioni, a partire dalla sua natura stilisticamente ibrida. È una tragedia profondamente scura e inquieta che si trasforma improvvisamente in quella che la critica ha definito una "escape tragedy", una sorta di fuga rocambolesca da un posto dove apparentemente si compiono sacrifici umani ma che, a uno sguardo più

¹¹ In order to come across a former production of *Iphigenia in Tauris* at the Greek Theatre of Syracuse one has to go back thirty years to 1982 and the direction by Lamberto Puggelli, in the translation by Vincenzo Consolo and Dario del Corno.

approfondito, rivelerà una natura molto più ambigua. Ci troviamo infatti in un luogo dove niente è quel che sembra. Una terra fatta di doppi, di proiezioni fantasmatiche e improvvise apparizioni. I personaggi infatti sembrano appena usciti da un sogno, in quel preciso istante del dormiveglia in cui si tenta di ricomporlo, provando a rimetterne insieme i segni e le tracce. (2022, 17)

[*Iphigenia in Tauris* is indeed a text full of questions and contradictions, starting with its stylistically hybrid nature. It is a profoundly dark and disquieting tragedy that is suddenly transformed into what the critics have termed an “escape tragedy”, a sort of incredible getaway from a place where apparently human sacrifices are made but which, when examined more closely, reveals a much more ambiguous reality. We find ourselves in a place where nothing is what it seems. A land of doubling, of ghostly projection and of unexpected apparitions. The characters seem to have just emerged from a dream, at that very moment of drowsiness when one tries to capture the dream again and reconstruct its signals and its pathways.]

This interpretative key is without doubt the right one. To a ‘philosopher of the stage’ such as Euripides was considered to be, steeped in the teachings of Sophism, the theme of appearance and reality must have been totally congenial, especially during the last years of his Athenian output, before he left for Macedonia. It is indeed the identical premise that is to be found in the tragedy of *Helen*, 412 BCE, which is chronologically a close neighbour of *Iphigenia in Tauris*. However, in the present staging this problem does not seem to emerge in any clearly apprehensible or convincing manner. The attention is concentrated essentially on the figures of Iphigenia (Anna Della Rosa) and Orestes (Ivan Alovisio) the last descendants of a family that has eliminated itself in a series of acts of revenge and violence against one another. They are offspring without either father or mother, and in point of fact with a difficult relationship with the gods (Artemis and Apollo respectively) who direct their actions and protect them but at the same time condition their freedom of choice at every turn. On stage the brother and sister seem to be bewildered, lost, with no points of reference and unable to find the road to travel.

During the course of the action the two protagonists seem to be directed according to a psychoanalytic key of interpretation. This is most obvious in the case of Iphigenia, a fragile, indecisive girl, who has suffered a violent trauma (murdered by her father for “state reasons”), and who in the new reality in which she finds herself, in the role of a priestess in the temple of Artemis in Tauris, has not been able to find a way to get over her terrible childhood trauma. Her anguish is emblematically visualized by the mask of the deer that she wears at the beginning (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5: Iphigenia (Anna Della Rosa). Photo Centaro/AFI Siracusa

Her handmaidens, all dressed in black, are equally unable to help her in her suffering. She is, indeed, simultaneously dead and alive, a victim of sacrifice (as all the Greeks are convinced) and an escapee of sacrifice (as is the reality of Euripides' play). She feels terrible nostalgia for her homeland and her family, of which she knows practically nothing, but for which she nourishes sentiments of love and hatred ("The Greeks killed me", "My father killed me"). And she does not feel completely at ease in the role of a priestess who presides over bloody sacrifices ("I despise these rites"). Iphigenia's self is irremediably split and the division within her is the cause of neurosis and rage. Only when her brother Orestes recognizes her is the young woman able to initiate a self-liberating process.¹² As she gradually becomes aware of her past by retrieving information about her father, mother, brothers and sisters, Iphigenia succeeds in developing into a strong, cognisant woman, mistress of her fate. The change in her is aided in its articulation by the performance of Anna Della Rosa, which is at first weak and withdrawn and then increasingly more solid and confident. The plan of escape that Iphigenia elaborates to get away from the threats of King Toas (Stefano Santospago) and his soldiers represents the acme of her of her emancipation. Orestes, too, persecuted as he is by some of the Furies who have not submitted to the justice of Athena and the Areopagus, is represented as a psychotic figure, tormented by guilt for his mother's murder and prey to an agonizing inner conflict (Fig. 6).

¹² In chapter 14 of the *Poetics* Aristotle identified in the recognition scene of *Iphigenia in Tauris* the optimal solution to the problem of identifying the cusp between "to act" (πρᾶξιαι) and "to know" (ἀναγνωρίσαι) (*Poet.* 1454a 4-9).



Fig. 6: Orestes (Ivan Alovisio). Photo Centaro/AFI Siracusa

The conclusion of the play offers the suggestion of various interesting solutions. Gassmann is quite obviously aware that the finale is not a happy ending, as one may imagine. Iphigenia and Orestes both yearn to go home, but in the end Athena, appearing as a *dea ex machina*, does not fulfil their wishes. Orestes must go to Athens, and more precisely to the demos of Halai, to found a ritual symbolically recalling human sacrifice (*IT* 1446-61), while Iphigenia will have to live near Athens, in the village of Brauron as a priestess of the cult of Artemis (*IT* 1462-7). As a consequence the girl is condemned to be shackled to her destiny as a virgin priestess, a fate that she had never chosen.¹³ In this way the brother and sister “are more or less embalmed within their duties as initiators of holy rites” (Ieranò 2022, 69).

Upon these interpretative bases, Gassmann invents an epilogue which goes beyond the the final scene of the *dea ex machina*. After Athena’s speech, the glass blocks of the temple of Artemis unexpectedly open to show inside the red-upholstered seats of a modern theatre. Iphigenia, Orestes and Pylades re-appear sitting here while they watch the stage as spectators of themselves, reflecting upon what has happened. This is the only really innovative idea added to a representation otherwise completely faithful to Euripides’ text, and it is the key – almost worthy of Pirandello – that unveils the metatheatrical dimension characterizing the conception of the whole production. While the actors stand up to receive the applause, the melancholy, fatalistic notes of *Rock Bottom Riser* can be heard, the song by the singer and song-writer Bill Callahan (Smog) which recalls his love for his mother, father and sisters (“I love my mother, I love my father, I love my sisters too . . . I started rising, rising, rising”).

In an interesting interview with Anna Lanzani Gassmann explained:

Man mano che il testo procede, i personaggi sembrano davvero uscire da una grande ‘biblioteca borgesiana’ sono personaggi in sé, ma sono anche osservati dall’esterno. Ifigenia e Oreste, i due fratelli protagonisti, giocano con il pubblico, parlano di sé in terza persona, sanno che per la comunità sono già diventati dei

¹³ On the question of the happy ending of *Iphigenia in Tauris* see the end of Ieranò 2022, 68-9. An assessment of the interpretations may be found in Masaracchia 1984.

miti. Parlando del suo esilio, Oreste, ad esempio, arriva a dire: ‘ad Atene sono diventato un rito’. Sono personaggi consapevoli di essere scritti. E il salto è proprio questo: una volta presa coscienza di essere scritta, Ifigenia fa un altro salto e inizia a scrivere sé stessa. Prende in mano il suo destino. Non solo i due protagonisti sono personaggi che hanno bisogno di raccontarsi storie per continuare a esistere. Entrambi credevano che l’altro fosse morto, entrambi hanno punti del loro passato che non conoscono, che non possiedono. Quando si incontrano, si raccontano le rispettive storie. Sono storie terribili, siamo nel bel mezzo della tragedia greca, ma dal punto di vista psicoanalitico il momento in cui si appropriano del loro passato, per quanto duro e feroce possa essere, è il momento di elaborare il dolore, di andare avanti. Grazie alla parola, anche nel dolore più profondo, dicendosi che possono sopravvivere, esistere. (Lanzani 2022)

[As the play continues, the characters really seem to emerge from an enormous ‘Borgesian library’: they are characters in themselves but they are also seen from the outside. Iphigenia and Orestes, the brother and sister who are the protagonists, play with the spectators, they speak of themselves in the third person, they know that for the community they have already become myths. When mentioning his exile, Orestes, for example, actually says, “in Athens I have become a rite”. They are characters who are aware that they are written. And the jump is precisely this: once she realizes that she is written, Iphigenia makes another leap and begins to write herself. She takes her destiny in her own hands. Not only this – the two protagonists are characters who must tell stories to themselves in order to go on existing. Each of them thought the other was dead, both have moments in their past that the other ignores, that s/he does not possess. When they meet they tell one another their stories. They are terrible stories, we are in the very middle of Greek tragedy, but from a psychoanalytic point of view the moment they take possession of their past, however harsh and cruel it may be, that is the moment to elaborate the pain and to go forward. Thanks to the word, to speech, even during the deepest pain, telling themselves that they can survive, that they can exist.]

The staging of *Iphigenia in Tauris* directed by Jacopo Gassmann is definitely a successful one, thanks too to Giorgio Ieranò’s fluent and efficacious translation. The style is constantly of an elegant sobriety, even though sometimes it could be said that there is an excess of intellectualism and cold abstruseness which tends to slow down the dynamics of the dramatic action and muffle emotional involvement on the part of the public.

Translation by Susan Payne

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