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Memory and Performance.
Classical Reception in Early Modern Festivals

Edited by Francesca Bortoletti, Giovanna Di Martino,
and Eugenio Refini

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Abstract

For the 59th season of classical drama put on by the Syracuse National Institute of Ancient Theatre two fifth-century Attic tragedies were staged: Sophocles' *Ajax* directed by Luca Micheletti and *Hippolytos Stephanophoros* (*Hippolytus the Wreath Bearer*) directed by Paul Curran, to which was given the title of *Phaedra*. Ajax and Phaedra are two heroes of ancient myth with similar destinies. As they have (for very different reasons, however) both lost their honour, they decide to take their own lives in order to avoid public shame. In both cases the staging gives rise to singular consequences. Micheletti's interpretation of *Ajax* is a strikingly emotive one, played entirely on the character's physicality. On the other hand Curran's *Phaedra* gives precedence to the psychological dimension, not only by bringing out a personal tragedy in which she is overcome, in spite of herself, by passionate love and suicide from shame, but also the drama of Hippolytus with his inflexible moralistic and sexophobic dogma, not to mention that of Theseus who is too quick to draw conclusions and to reach irrevocable conclusions so causing his punishment, the death of his son.

Keywords: Sophocles; Euripides; *Ajax*; *Hippolytus*; National Institute of Ancient Drama; Luca Micheletti; Paul Curran

Dating from the forties of the fifth century BCE, Sophocles' *Ajax* is the source of quite a few staging problems. One example of this is met with immediately in the prologue: how can the tent of the hero of Salamis be opened so that Odysseus may see what is happening inside? Is there a change of scene, from the Achaean camp to the beach, when Ajax kills himself? These and other staging problems have been topics of discussion for ages and Luca Micheletti, the director of the latest production of the tragedy put on at the Syracuse Greek Theatre for the 59th season of classical drama of the National Institute of Ancient Theatre certainly had to face such problems. It is so generally recognised that the staging of *Ajax* is extremely problematic that in recent history the play was only put on in Syracuse three times: in 1939 directed by Franco Liberati, in a translation by Ettore Bignone, with Gino Cervi, Paolo Stoppa, Aroldo Tieri, in 1988 directed by Antonio Calenda, with Massimo Popolizio) and in 2010 directed

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by Daniele Salvo, translated by Guido Paduano, with Maurizio Donadoni and Elisabetta Pozzi).

Luca Micheletti is well-known as an actor, opera singer (baritone) and theatre director. In 2011 he won the Ubu Award for best supporting actor in Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (*Der aufhaltsame Aufstieg des Arturo Ui*) performed at the Teatro di Roma. This year's *Ajax* represents his debut at the Syracuse Greek Theatre and is also his first experience as a director of Greek tragedy.[1] As he explained in an interview for the newspaper *La Repubblica* his interpretation targets a reading of the tragedy of *Ajax* as a drama "that reveals itself little by little, almost like a thriller, in which the protagonist, as he passes through the state of madness that the goddess Athena has forced on him, makes a journey towards a new kind of awareness. "When Ajax comes to himself again he has not gone round in a circle, he does not get back to where he started. The director's question must be 'Where does Ajax come ashore when he recovers from his madness?' And the answer is 'In a land where heroes of his kind have no longer any kind of legitimacy' and in fact he is obliged to kill himself and to bring down his civilisation. The mad Ajax lives in his own world: when he returns he can only inhabit a new imaginary one – the hereafter", the director explained (Di Caro 2024).

The first interesting innovation here is the fact that Micheletti does not simply manage the staging. He also takes the part of the protagonist, a choice which – to the best of my knowledge – has no precedent in any other production by the Syracuse Greek Theatre, but which was a practice seen often in classical Athens, at least at the beginning of the greatest period of Attic tragedy. The other unusual decision is the choice of a colleague, Daniele Salvo, for the part of Odysseus. Salvo was the director of the *Ajax* of 2010

[1] *Ajax* by Sophocles, director Luca Micheletti, Italian translation Walter Lapini, scenic project Nicolas Bovey, costumes Danile Gelsi (in collaboration with Elisa Balbo), lighting Nicolas Bovey, music Giovanni Sollima, chorus master Davide Cavalli, assistant director Francesco Martucci, choreography Franrzio Angelini, Assistant stage designer Eleonora De Leo, Costume designer assistant Andrea Grisanti, Stage director Giovanni Ragusa, Assistant stage director Dario Castro, Dramaturg Francesco Morosi, cast: Luca Micheletti (Ajax), Roberto Latini (Athena and Messenger), Daniele Salvo (Odysseus), Diana Manea (Tecmessa), Tommaso Cardarelli (Teucer), Michele Nani (Menelaus), Edoardo Siravo (Agamemnon), Lidia Carew (Ate e Thanatos), Giorgio Bongiovanni, Lorenzo Grilli, Mino Manni, Francesco Martucci (coryphaei); Giovanni Accardi, Gaetano Aiello, Ottavio Cannizzaro, Pasquale Conticelli, Giovanni Dragano, Raffaele Ficiur, Gianni Giuga, Paolo Leonardi, Marcello Mancini, Marcello Zinzani (Chorus); Francesco Angelico, Christian Barraco, Cecilia Costanzo (violoncellos); Giovanni Caruso (percussion) e Giuseppina Vergine (harp). Sophocles' Ajax directed by Luca Micheletti and produced by INDA saw its first performance at the Greek Theatre of Syracuse on the 10th May 2024, with repeat performances until the 7th June 2024.

and is often present at Syracuse; in 2023 he directed Aristophanes' *Peace*. In Micheletti's staging the character of Odysseus takes on a fundamental significance in that he represents a more modern idea of heroism, unarmed and based on intelligence, shrewdness and pragmatism which is in all ways the contrary to that of Ajax. Even after the prologue Micheletti's Odysseus stays on stage, silent, for the whole time, right up until Ajax's suicide. Unseen by the others, he moves about the stage with a questioning air and observes Ajax's monologues and his catastrophic end with apparent acquiescence. None of this is in Sophocles' original play but is an excellent invention. It could be said that Micheletti and Salvo, two theatrical directors, are interpreting two characters each of whom are directors of their own worlds, Ajax of the archaic civilisation, often called in Eric Dodds' expression "the society of shame" (1951, 28-63) and Odysseus of the more modern civilisation, that of "guilt", a world in which the *logos*, the word, becomes the winning resource.

Other important aspects of the metatheatrical dimension are to be discerned at the centre of this staging. For example, in the scenography: even before the play begins the spectator can see a huge white tent stained all over with blood. This is Ajax's tent in the Achaean camp, bloodstained from the slaughter of livestock by the hand of the protagonist (Fig.1).

Fig. 1: Ajax's tent and the Chorus. Photo Centaro (AFI Siracusa)

At the beginning no animal carcasses are visible, except that of a calf with a sword stuck in its back. But during the course of the play the bloodstained tent becomes a sort of vast curtain that swells with the gusts of wind and thus little by little rises and reveals to everyone the horror it was hiding (the carcasses and entrails of cattle and sheep). It is the curtain of Ajax's conscience, the veil of his interior world. And it is also an effective way of lending scenic reality to the certainty of the incident that the Sophoclean text imagines will gradually build up as the puzzle of the various points of view (those of Odysseus, of the sailors and of Tecmessa) is put together.

Above the tent vultures are circling. They cannot be seen but their terrifying cries can be heard. From within the tent can be heard the movements of Ajax as he beats the captured animals. Athena, androgynous goddess *par excellence*, is interpreted by a male actor, Roberto Latini. She does not correspond to any traditional iconography; no helmet, shield nor spear. She is wearing poor clothes and her head is wrapped in a baggy hood until she bares it and displays to the stunned Odysseus the spectacle of the lunacy of his rival. The only thing visible of Ajax, still possessed by madness, is his head appearing from the tent face upwards.

The sailors from Salamis, who make up the Chorus, also emerge from under the bloodstained tent, as if camouflaged among the dead animals. They too are covered in animal skins. Micheletti commissioned the composer Giuseppe Sollima to prepare new original music for the stasima performed on stage by an ensemble of musicians (a trio of cellos, percussion, harp, clarinet, flute and trombone). The pieces sung by the Chorus with the scores by Sollima are definitely the most successful and convincing aspect of the production. The choreographic movements of Ajax's sailors are illuminated by a streak of light that accentuates the contrast with the otherwise shadowed stage. The themes and rhythms of the melodies underline the emotions that are linked to the story itself, alternating horror and compassion for human fragility, but also joy as the faithful sailors are convinced that their commander has given up the intention to kill himself. From this point of view Micheletti has succeeded in his aim to recreate the unity between music and poetry that is at the origin of ancient Greek tragedy.

While Ajax is talking to the sailors, to his wife Tecmessa (Diana Manea) and to the little Eurisace (interpreted by Arianna Micheletti Balbo, the director's actual eighteen-month-old daughter), a spectral figure is dancing silently and sinuously around him, clothed in a red tunic and a metal helmet. This perturbing figure is Thanatos (interpreted by the Black actor Lidia Carew) and represents the imminence of death. This case too is an interesting example of the director's inventiveness and originality, although it is not an easy one for the spectator to decipher.

After pronouncing the celebrated *Trugrede* ("Deception Speech", lines 646-92), Ajax disappears, sucked through a trapdoor. At this point the climactic suicide scene is prepared for: the bloodstained tent is hauled down completely (it is a tent but it could also suggest the idea of a sail) and suddenly in the area of the upper stage a gigantic human skeleton appears with a skull and bones. Seen from a distance it looks more like the skeleton of a dinosaur than that of a man.[2] Ajax, with Thanatos beside him, kissing and embracing him, utters his final *rhesis*, while thunderclaps rend the theatre and the monstrous black Erinyes of vengeance, invoked to fall upon his enemies (the Atreides and Odysseus) by Ajax himself, actually appear on the stage. The suicide as contemplated by Sophocles does not follow his script, that is Ajax does not fall sideways upon the sword that he has fixed in the ground, but it is Thanatos who follows him as he disappears behind the skeleton.[3]

It is common knowledge that *Ajax* falls into two clearly distinguishable parts and that it is the hero's death that constitutes the dividing line. The element that bestows unity to the tragedy as a whole and that various scholars have classified under the apposite label "diptych structure" (see Waldock 1951, 50-67 and Webster 1936, 102-3) is Ajax's body which looms over everything from its position centre-stage for the whole of the second part of the play. It is around the hero's corpse that the dispute between Teucer and the Atreides for the burial takes place. It should be said, then, that in the case of the Syracuse staging, while the first part, with Micheletti as star-performer in the role of Ajax and in addition Sollima's music, was in our opinion a complete success, the second part did not seem nearly as convincing. The dispute over Ajax's body is the crucial moment in the action of Sophocles' play. It is the most innovative and most prolific in references to the current historical and political issues (the prohibition of burial for example directly recalls *Antigone*, performed a very few years after *Ajax*). Sophocles makes the Atreides speak the language of Athenian democracy, while Teucer defends the logic of divine law that imposed the burial of family members even if they had been accused of treachery (see Ugolini 1995).

In Micheletti's version, this bitter confrontation, full of tensions and insinuations, almost disappears, its protagonists reduced to mere caricatures.

[2] In a lyric composition written between 1994 and 1995, entitled *Ajax zum Beispiel* (*Ajax, for instance*), the German poet and playwright Heiner Müller employs the image of a dinosaur in order to emphasise the archaic nature of Ajax when compared with modern times, an archaicity that is a counterpart to that of the author when contrasted to the new Germany of the era following reunification - all consumerism and profit. Perhaps Micheletti and the scenographer Nicolas Bovey had this literary reference in mind.

[3] The theme of Ajax's suicide and of its realisation on stage is amply debated. See the contributions in the miscellaneous volume edited by Most and Ozbelk 2015.

Teucer (Tommaso Cardarelli) acts in a way that seems artificial and hysterical and he never takes on the semblance of a hero. Menelaus (Michele Nani) alternates between the authoritarian and the ridiculous – a figure whose awkwardness seems caused by the fact that he is under Agamemnon's thumb as he mechanically repeats his older brother's words as if they were slogans. Agamemnon himself (Edoardo Siravo) is a *miles gloriosus* an arrogant braggart, but fundamentally grotesque rather than inspiring fear (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Agamemnon (Edoardo Siravo) and Menelaus (Michele Nani).
Photo Centaro (AFI Siracusa)

In the end it is the flexible and pragmatic logic of Odysseus that has the best of it. He comes on stage bearing the shining gilded arms of Achilles that had been assigned to him after the death of the great Pelides and that had triggered Ajax's overwhelming wrath. This last is a well-thought-out masterstroke that causes the audience to applaud. After the exit of the two Atreides the celebration of the funeral rites could have been expected as Teucer's last speeches suggested or at least a sign that something similar would happen, but the director preferred to avoid this issue.

It only remains to say that besides its debt to Sollima's music the success of this *Ajax* owes a great deal to Walter Lapini's excellent translation with its balance between precise lexical choices and understanding of what is helpful both for ease of acting and for public comprehension. But it is above all Micheletti's physicality both as director and as interpreter of the hero of

Salamis that guarantees the quality of the performance. "At the centre of the discourse stands the *body* of the hero", writes Micheletti,

> and its exploration, dehumanisation, destruction and reinvention are prefigured by the butchering of the cattle, the dismembering of the animals mistaken for his enemies by Ajax when he is raving mad and he will end up by identifying with his very victims when he butchers himself with Hector's sword. His body is the metaphorical place around which the tragic fact spends itself. First there is his suicide, symbolising the definitive farewell to the epoch of archaic heroism. Then the diatribe about his burial . . . Ajax's huge body, by now become the ancient vestige of a world without lifeblood, a skeleton of time past, not made an object of veneration but desecrated by the lack of ritual, exists as a zone for dialectic conflict, a place for debate, the scenography for the theatre of a new regime, an enormous touchstone to confront and from which to distance oneself. (2024, 15-16)

The second tragedy of the 2024 season at the Syracuse festival was *Hippolytos Stephanophoros* (*Hippolytus the Wreath Bearer*), directed by Paul Curran and presented with the title of *Phaedra*.[4] This is not a new choice for the National Institute of Ancient Drama (the same thing happened in 2010). The more than legitimate justification for this decision is that ancient sources were already using the title *Phaedra* for Euripides' play, just as a lost tragedy by Sophocles had the same title as did a successive one

[4] *Phaedra (Hippolytus Stephanophoros*) by Euripides, Director Paul Curran, Italian translation Nicola Crocetti, Dramaturg Francesco Morosi, scenic project Gary McCann, costumes Gary McCann, Opening chorus music: Matthew Barnes, Music from the performance: Ernani Maletta, Lights Nicolas Bovey, Video design: Leandro Summo, assistant director Michele Dell'Utri, Chorus director: Francesca Della Monica, Chorus leader: Elena Polic Greco. Cast: Ilaria Genatiempo (Aphrodite), Riccardo Livermore (Hippolytus), Sergio Mancinelli (Servant), Gaia Aprea (Nurse), Alessandra Salamida (Phaedra), Alessandro Albertin (Theseus), Marcello Gravina (Messenger), Giovanna Di Rauso (Artemis), Simonetta Cartia, Giada Lorusso, Elena Polic Greco, Maria Grazia Solano (corypheas), Valentina Corrao, Aurora Miriam Scala, Maddalena Serratore, Giulia Valentin, Alba Sofia Vella (Trezene women's chorus), Caterina Alinari, Allegra Azzurro, Andrea Bassoli, Claudia Bellia, Carla Bongiovanni, Clara Borghesi, Davide Carella, Carlotta Ceci, Federica Clementi, Alessandra Cosentino, Sara De Lauretis, Ludovica Garofani, Enrica Graziano, Gemma Lapi, Zoe Laudani, Salvatore Mancuso, Carlo Marrubini Bouland, Arianna Martinelli, Riccardo Massone, Linda Morando, Giuseppe Oricchio, Davide Pandalone, Carloandrea Pecori Donizetti, Alice Pennino, Francesco Ruggiero, Daniele Sardelli, Flavio Tomasello, Elisa Zucchetti (chorus). Euripides' *Phaedra* directed by Paul Curran and produced by INDA, saw its first performance at the Greek Theatre of Syracuse on the 11 May 2024, with repeat performances until 28 June 2024. There were further performances at the Teatro Grande of Pompeii (11, 12, and 13 July 2024) and at the Roman Theatre in Verona (11 and 12 September 2024).

by Seneca.[5] The previous staging at Syracuse in 2010 directed by Carmelo Rifici was based on the translation by Edoardo Sanguineti and included in its cast Maurizio Donadoni as Theseus, Massimo Nicolini as Hippolytus and Elisabetta Pozzi as Phaedra.[6] This year, for the 59th season of INDA the play was directed by the Scottish lyric opera specialist Paul Curran, former artistic director of the Norwegian National Opera and Ballet and creative consultant of the Central City Opera of Denver in Colorado. The fluent and accurate translation is by the distinguished philologist and translator Nicola Crocetti, also recognised as promotor of the journal *Poesia* and of the eponymous publisher (Crocetti editore), well-known for its interest in modern and contemporary Greek literary texts. The director was joined in tandem as dramaturg by Francesco Morosi, a young scholar of ancient theatre and translator of dramatic texts and by Gary McCann as scenographer and costume designer.

The result of this has been a compelling and impressive performance, which underscores with music and scenographical expedients not only Phaedra's personal drama, overwhelmed by as she is by erotic passion and shameful suicide, but also that of Hippolytus, inflexible in his moralistic and sexophobic dogma, cursed and rejected from his father's house, and ultimately that of Theseus himself, too hasty in reaching conclusions and in making irrevocable decisions and thus punished for this by his son's death.

The vast scenic space of the Syracuse Greek Theatre displays in the background a construction of metal scaffolding with wooden ladders and walkways. An authentic-looking building site complete with tube frames: this must be the royal palace of Troezen. the place where Euripides sets his tragedy, stately residence which seems either a bit dilapidated, still under construction or perhaps already in decline. At the centre looms the outline of a human figure, a huge white female head, six metres high, enveloped in a wrapping. There could be an invitation here to read this as an allusion to *Hippolytus Veiled*, which Euripides presented at the Great Dionysia a few years before the *Hippolytus the Wreath Bearer* but it was soundly defeated for its indecorous contents. When the veil is dropped the faces of Aphrodite and Phaedra are alternately projected upon the head. Later on in the play it will be discovered that this cumbersome head, hanging over the actors and the spectators for the whole course of the action and upon which will be projected images of fire and water to represent figuratively

[5] Not to mention the fact that all the modern rewrites and adaptations from Racine to D'Annunzio and even to Sarah Kane resort to the name Phaedra in their titles.

[6] This year's representation is the fifth staging at the Greek Theatre at Syracuse of *Hippolytos Stephanophoros* after those of 1936, 1956, 1970 and 2010.

the emotions of the moment, is the head of Artemis, the goddess of the hunt to whom the young Hippolytus and his followers are devoted.

After all, the tragedy is played out along the opposition of two divinities in competition with one another. And this confrontation, between Artemis and Aphrodite, this struggle for power will involve the destinies of the human beings who are at the mercy of their caprice. Aphrodite (interpreted by Ilaria Genatiempo) opens the play by arriving on the scene by way of the steps, instead of speaking from a raised podium (*theologeion*) as was habitual in an ancient theatre. The goddess of love is decked out in a gown with a glittering golden bodice and an ivory coloured skirt with a long train. She has a gold crown on her head and is wearing stiletto heels. Clearly the sensuality and elegance of the costume and of the actor who is wearing it help to emphasise the power of this vengeful goddess who right from her opening lines describes to the audience the prequel and the ending of the story. This is a provocative, shameless Aphrodite. Her composed and well-timed interpretation is commendable. This is exactly how an offended deity would plan her revenge: with ruthless disdain ("I give precedence to those who revere my power. I throw down those who think themselves too high for me," she threatens at the beginning of her speech in the Prologue).[7]

The up-and coming young actor Riccardo Livermore, seen last summer at Syracuse playing the role of Pedagogue in Federico Tiezzi's *Medea*, gives life and lightness to a high-spirited, bold and flamboyant Hippolytus. He comes on stage dressed in white trousers and a silver shirt shining with sequins and open to show off his hairy chest. This masculinity, emphasised by his costume, aims at being completely asexual, dedicated solely to the ritual and cult of the goddess Artemis, to the practices of the hunt and the contests of horse-racing. His retinue is made up of frenzied young men wearing wreaths of ivy on their heads and brandishing branches of the same plant who give themselves over to wild, unrestrained dancing. Rather in the style of hippies of the 'Sixties of the last century, or devotees of *Hara Krishna*, or perhaps initiates of Bacchic rituals, they writhe and flail about as they listen to impetuous, chaotic melodies (composed for the occasion by Matthew Barnes). The paradigms of reference to modern times are more than permissible as they usefully make the text topically relevant. In the context of what is happening onstage the fact that a member of the chorus clicks a smartphone to put on the music is simply by the way. The only thing that could be said is that perhaps these particular kinds of allusions are a little inappropriate when referred to someone like Hippolytus who, in the name of Artemis, preaches the values of chastity and moralism.

[7] Euripides, *Hippolytus*, 5-6, in Hilary J. Deighton's 2019 translation. All English quotations from the play refer to this translation.

Alessandra Salamida plays a subdued and tormented Phaedra, psychologically destroyed by shame for a love that she herself knows is socially and morally unacceptable, and by the fear of its discovery. The idea behind this is to make of her a modern woman, suffering from depression and devoured by guilt towards her husband and children. Any attempt to suffocate her passion in silence and in secrecy is completely useless. Phaedra does not know that it is Aphrodite who has struck her down, that Eros is an overwhelmingly invincible force. When erotic passion manifests itself for her it reveals itself as traumatic, as something that causes her unbearable pain. Love becomes a self-destructive journey that will of course lead her to suicide. Beside her the Nurse (Fig. 3) tries to console her, clutching her hands, pulling her into her arms, supplicating her, calling her "child", "my baby" (an excellent solution for the Greek vocative παῖ).

Gaia Aprea is very good as the elderly nurse, devoted and malicious, whose voice is at one moment aggressive and at the next dripping with honey, and who, in the end, manages to wrest her mistress' secret from her. And when Hippolytus, scandalised when he is told of Phaedra's immoral passion for him, bursts out with his famous monologue against women ("Oh Zeus, why did you set down women, a deceitful evil to mankind, in the light of the sun?", 617-18), the inevitable applause breaks out, at first hesitant and then more and

Fig. 3: Phaedra (Alessandra Salamida) and the Nurse (Gaia Aprea).
Photo Ballarino (AFI Siracusa)

more decided. The Syracuse public is sufficiently *à la page* to understand that these misogynistic lines do not constitute the play's message but the venting of Hippolytus' devastation.

The action takes off with Theseus' entrance on stage. He is wearing a blue tunic that confers regal authority upon him. Alessandro Albertin, already greatly admired for his interpretation of the title role in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* performed in Syracuse in 2023, reveals himself to be the star performer of the second part of the tragedy. His interpretation gives maximum definition to the chain of disasters that have befallen him: his wife Phaedra's suicide, the curse hurled against his son, Hippolytus, unjustly accused of having abused his stepmother, and finally the death of this son, whose innocence he recognises too late. The end of *Hippolytus the Wreath Bearer* is a tragedy within the tragedy, an aspect of the play that Paul Curran has realised perfectly. That Theseus' retinue is made up of men dressed in yellow uniforms, reflectors and helmets with head torches, as if they were civil protection agents or firemen, made some among the audience turn up their noses but in point of fact the anachronism does no harm. The most pathetic moment of the production is the display of Phaedra's body, carried on a stretcher from the Emergency Room: as the music and singing of funeral laments arise Theseus' desperate "Nooooo!" freezes the blood (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4: Theseus (Alessandro Abertin) in front of the body of the dead Phaedra. Photo Ballarino (AFI Siracusa)

The dying Hippolytus, wounded in an accident with his chariot, is also brought on stage on a stretcher. Theseus overcomes his harshness and is able to say fare well to his son with rediscovered affection. The father-son relationship takes on Freudian characteristics without having to alter a single word of Euripides' dialogue but using the character's gestures and style of delivery. There is absolutely no communication between the two of them: it is a love/hate relationship. The last sequence of the action shows the old king of Attica holding in his arms the body of his son, victim of his father's curse. The underlying model of Michelangelo's Pietà, however much it has been overused, seems, in this context, to be the only one possible and charges the finale with emotion. But there is still space for the apparition of Artemis (Giovanna Di Rauso), in a long classic peplum, with a helmet, collar and bracelets all in dark red. The goddess comes out of the huge totemic head that has been on stage the for the whole play and that suddenly opens. It is her task to explain, in a steady voice, the truth of all that has happened, that is, Aphrodite's punishment of Hippolytus, and the punishment of Theseus for having made a serious mistake: that of condemning his son, who had been wrongly accused by Phaedra of sexually abusing her, basing his condemnation simply on emotion without making sure of the truth of what had happened.

In a key passage of the play, when Phaedra, between embarrassment and reticence, finally reveals her feelings for Hippolytus to her Nurse, she asks the old woman "What is it when people say they love?" (347) as she seeks help to try to define the turmoil she feels in her heart. The director, Paul Curran, starts right from this question and makes it the crucial point of the tragedy. His answer can be read in the programme and has throws light on the design of the action:

> In *Hippolytus*, love is not the radiant, clear, limpid sentiment, deliberately purified of every physical element, that a sexophobic culture has imposed on us through the ages. In Euripides' tragedy, Eros is carnal desire, obsession, ruin. Aphrodite, the goddess who sets off the action and whose triumph is celebrated at the end, is the life-force from which every earthly thing is born. It is not transgression but the very foundation of the cosmos of human society. And Eros is its terrible, omnipotent agent. (2024, 13)

From this premise, Curran's staging becomes a perturbing investigation into the uncontrollable ambiguities and consequences of erotic love, between desire and negation, freedom and constraint. The two contradictory erotic impulses, passion and repression, are embodied in the two warring goddesses, Aphrodite and Artemis.

Among the most successful features of the production should be mentioned the intriguing play with the colours of the costumes carried out

by Gary McCann, the scenographer and costume designer. The colour palette alternates the grey of the background (the crumbling palace), the gleaming white and gold of Aphrodite, as a symbol of her anxiety for implacable and voluptuous revenge, the yellow of Phaedra's tunic, the colour of passionate frenzy accompanied by a sense of shame and remorse, the black gown of the Nurse, elderly confidante who instead of acting as protection ends up by determining deathly ruin, the dark blue of Theseus, sign of regal authority and also of preannounced catastrophe, the red of Artemis, to signal the triumph of the goddess who *ex machina* explains to the mourning Theseus her reasons and the sins he has committed.

Translated by Susan Payne

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