# Hellenic Drama 'down-and-under' : a Tradition for a DIS-placed World in Search of its Myth

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#### RÉSUMÉ

La contemporanéité du drame hellénique dans le monde trouve ses racines dans la perception que 'la tradition' dans l'art du théâtre est une tradition d'évolution. En effet, le drame hellénique re-crée les icônes de notre lutte idéologique perpépetuelle contre des malheurs auto affligés en réformant sciemment les dramatis personae quintessenciellement helléniques et les font réfléchir profondément à la subjectivité diachronique de nos perceptions de notre humanité. Ce besoin, toujours contemporain de scruter notre tradition théâtrale, est devenu le point de concentration de nombreux praticiens d'art dramatique qui ré-évaluent nos perceptions de notre monde par les représentations théâtrales, soulevant de cette manière la question de responsabilité dans la pratique du théâtre en re-examinant ce qu'est une 'expérience théâtrale' pour nos spectateurs contemporains transmodernes traversant les modalités. Depuis 1994 la section d' Etudes helléniques de l'université de Flinders à Adelaïde, Australie, a nourri la recherche et l'étude de la culture du théâtre hellénique et de son evolution avec l'aide du collectif théâtral Fragments, dont le but est l'exploration des dimensions dramatiques du théâtre hellénique (tragédies ainsi que comédies) par la cinesiologie et le rituel en-corporé. Le collectif fournit un 'espace' d'échanges d'idées où les performants peuvent puiser dans les énergies de leurs expériences biculturelles et bilingues, aussi bien personnelles que collectives, qui sont (dé) placées et diasporiques en nature.

Le projet en cours de ce collectif -- An evening with hellenic theatre: Elektras/Klytemnestras; Marching Lysistratas - explore les notions d'[in]justice dans le contexte de la lutte matriarcale - patriarcale pour la dominance et le pouvoir en se basant sur des fragments de textes de Aischylos, Sophoeles, Euripides, Marguerite Yourcenar, Heiner Müller, Aristophanes et Ionesco.

#### ABSTRACT

The 'contemporariness' of Hellenic drama internationally stems from the perception that 'tradition' in theatre-arts is a tradition of evolution. Hellenic drama recreates the icons of our own constant ideological struggle with self-afflicted woes by consciously re-casting the quintessential Hellenic dramatic personae on the world stage of human existence, and has them ponder critically the diachronic subjectivity of our perceptions regarding our humanity. This ever-contemporary need to keep

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examining our theatre tradition has become the focus of many drama practitioners who re-evaluate our perceptions of our world through the performing arts, thus, giving rise to the issue of responsibility in theatre practice in re-assessing what is a 'theatrical experience' for our trans-modern and cross-modal contemporary audiences. Since 1994, the Hellenic Studies section of Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia, has been fostering and nurturing research and study of Hellenic theatre culture and its evolution with the assistance of the performing collective FRAG-MENTS, whose aim is the exploration of the dramatic dimensions of Hellenic theatre (both tragedy and comedy) through kinesiology and embodied ritual. The collective provides a cross-fertilising 'space' for performers to resource the energies of their personal and collective bicultural and bilingual experience, (dis)placed and diasporic in nature. The collective's current project An Evening with Hellenic Theatre: Elektras/Klytemnestras; Marching Lysistratas explores the notions of [in]-justice within the context of matriarchal-patriarchal struggle for dominance and control based on fragments of texts by Aischylos, Sophokles, Euripides, Marguerite Yourcenar, Heiner Müller, Aristophanes and Ionesco.

## Introduction

The Drama 'tradition' in a European-re-constructed theatrical grammar is primarily classical Hellenic drama and its evolution over time in a eurocentric, trans-atlantic/ trans-pacific cultural development. In essence, this diachronic view of theatrical 'tradition' involves re-assessment, since by its nature, Hellenic drama is a tradition of reevaluating the theatrical process and development, adherence to conventions of its grammar, on the one hand, and experimentation and avant-gardism beyond the confines of these same conventions, on the other.

Take, for example, the 'Unity of Time' principle, as suggested in Aristotle's *Poetics* and debated by scholars ever since (cf. Arnott 1989:132-161). Multiple perspectives of action, in and out of their localised time frames, are prevalent in Hellenic drama, tragedy and comedy, indicating, on the one hand, a sensitivity to the relative concepts of 'time' and 'space' which we associate with the theory of relativity, 'timespace' and its role in defining the 'modernity' of our present twentieth century; and, on the other, the concern with interpretations of the Myth, the multi-related narrative for the sake of pursuing truth while questioning justice in the socio-political context of classical Hellas still a human pre-occupation at the end of our millennium. Moreover, the objective in Hellenic theatre and its practitioners has always been the manifold expression of the human myth, and its multi-expressed narrative of continuous interpretation of what constitutes truth, a relevant social concern of any age, classical or contemporary in conflict with the law concerning *oikos* and that of *polis*.

Peter Arnott provides an insight into how 'tradition' and 'modernity' in theatre can co-exist because the most human of all conditions is the necessity to keep re-discovering our own past, which is always relevant to the human pursuit of self-knowledge:

Time in Greek tragedy is manipulable...time bends to dramatic necessity. It is doubtful whether the Greeks would have thought it necessary to justify the time compression. Such concerns belong to a theatre more realistically conceived. In a theatre where the setting is controlled by the imagination, time, like place, can be what you want it to be.... By the manipulation of time he [Sophokles in Antigone] achieves, let us say, what a cubist painter achieves by the analytic depiction of space: *he allows us to study something from several points of view at the same time.* [emphasis added]

(Arnott 1989:149-151)

# Con-texts, Sub-texts, Sur-texts, Inter-texts Trans-texts in Contemporary Performance

## a. (Dis) Placed Threshing Floors: a Hellenic Drama Project in a Diasporic Australian Community

Multiple-perspective in expression over time, was one of the basic questions that motivated our study through performance of the Hellenic human concerns and the quandary of justice in classical theatre. Since 1994, the Hellenic Studies section of Flinders University of South Australia, has been trying to foster and nurture diachronic research and study of Hellenic theatre culture and its evolution. With the help of former, bilingual students who also had theatre experience, the performing collective *FRAGMENTS*, was created; its central project-objective is to explore the dramatic multiple-dimensions of Hellenic drama in performance through contemporary Hellenic-diasporic perspectives, which are, in turn, informed by bilingual and bicultural sensibilities.

The collective's primary concern is to map out the capabilities of the human mind by working creatively with the expressiveness of the human body in order to provide a cross-fertilizing 'space' for bilingual performers to delve meaningfully into their inner world (dis)placed, diasporic and bi-cultural in nature and resource the emotional energies of their personal and collective cross-cultural memory and experience. The connective resource of its members is a collective desire to share the profound sense of self-discovery achieved when journeying among the vestiges of the Hellenic/Universal Myth of existence, among the fragments of the tragic and comic narrative of *la condition humaine*.

The collective's current project-An Evening with Hellenic Theatre: Elektras/Klytemnestras; Marching Lysistratas is an exploration of two interconnected themes:

(i) in tragedy: the universal notions of [in]-justice within the context of a matriarchal-patriarchal struggle for dominance and control as presented via the myth of Klytemnestra/Elektra and its associated complex of oppressed desires and displaced memories. Fragments of the myth, as found in classical texts by Aischylos, Sophokles and Euripides, as well as in its modern interpretations by Marguerite Yourcenar { **Fires**: *Clytemnestra, or Crime* } and Heiner Müller {**Hamletmaschine**: 5, *fiercely enduring millenniums* "This is Electra speaking.."}, have been dramaturgically combined, rehearsed and then experimentally performed for a period of two years' before its presentation at the International Theatre Conference Millennium Responses: (DIS)*placing Classical Greek Theatre* at Thessaloniki University, September 18-22, 1997 ( in the context of *Thessaloniki-Cultural Capital of Europe '97*).

(ii) in comedy : the universal notion(s) of utopian male-female *politics* as debated in some of the comedies by Aristophanes. Fragments from three comedies have been selected (Lysistrata,

**Ekklesiazousai, Ornithes )** and dramatically interweaved to create a narrative of perceptions of *ruling* as experienced and advocated by any aristophanic personae who engage passionately in this public debate about the pros and cons of state rule by men or women in turn. As a denouement, fragments from Ionesco's **Rhinoceros** have been added for an absurd reflection on contemporary mass conformism, public and legit in the name of 'globalisation'.<sup>2</sup>

The dramatic re-interpretations of universally recognisable personal and familial wars expressed by the selected writers, (dis)placed within their differentiated cultural contexts and historical time frames, became the modus operandi for our collective's exploration into the tragic myth of human (in)-justice. Consequently it provided us, (dis)placed diasporic European-Hellenes, with a connective link in the construction of our diachronic European-Hellenic cultural identity, the basic premise of which we perceive to be recursive: constant, multiple re-assessment of all human (dis)-placement in any contemporary technologically-driven social context, where humans by their universal nature belong simultaneously to multiple-group memberships and communicative networks (cf. Papademetre 1994).

By utilising the kinesiology of our bicultural bodies and the ritual practices embodied in our bilingual ethos while performing 'the other' on *(dis)placed threshing floors*, we attempt to engage in a di-scourse on the evolutionary tradition of European drama and its poiesis-in-praxis legacy, its dramatised Mythos, from the periphery of Hellenic culture, *en-diaspora* ad perpetuum.

However, our concern for the tragedy has not been "with a linear progression of the play", with one Klytemnestra and one Elektra; our interest in the Oresteia tragedy has been motivated by "the inner structure, in the pattern of character answering character, and case matching case...as three acts of an enormous debate" (Arnott 1989:124). We wanted to use as many bodies and as many voices as possible, because our personal experiences of the quintessential Hellenic in this narrative have been marked by our dynamic inside/outside (central/peripheral) perspective on the Hellenic cultural continuum which includes multi-cultural contexts that we felt were in need of expression, if not of debate.

Thus, our focus has become the dialectic between cultural identities, included and excluded by the metropolis of Hellenic culture vis-à-vis its diasporic periphery. This finds expression in the conflict between mothers (Klytemnestras) and daughters (Elektras) in view of their actions motivated by their beliefs, which they justify in turns, according to their perceived notions of 'true' justice, whether pertai-ning to *oikos* or *polis*, to the centre or the periphery of any given culture. For, as it has been pointed out, Aischylos' *Choephoroi* and its variations by Sophokles and Euripides in their respective *Elektra(s)*, functions as the "counterstatement" in the debate at the core of the Oresteia trilogy:

The structure of the trilogy is also the structure of dialectic: statement, counterstatement, and resolution. (Arnott 1989:123)

Our effort in providing yet another "counterstatement" on the human debate about *whose truth is the truth* centres on presenting multi-dimensionally the perceptions on the issue by these dramatic personae-who have been given different voices by each of the classical dramatists, each one with a differing perspective, and a different motive-and juxtaposing the 'classical' with some 'modern' voices: Marguerite Yourcenar's 1935 voice debating the female perspective from within a French-European cultural context, and Heiner Müller's voice contradicting the conflict of ideological boundaries that characterises the post-World War II German and European cultural dichotomy<sup>3</sup>.

Therefore, in our collective's performance, Yourcenar's one Klytemnestra facing "the gentlemen of the jury" has been broken into three, her dismembered body finding expression through three performing bodies with three inner voices; Müller's two-in-one Ophelia-Elektra has been separated, one bounded by her own fury to endless revolution, the other walking a somnambulist's short-lived freedom.

For the comedy part of the project, the focus of our exploration has become the juxtaposition of irreal vs. ir-real situations in the shared absurdity of Aristophanes and of Ionesco, through which levels and aspects of reality/irreality remain at odds with one another, as their characters always bypass the chances to reconcile each other's perceived differences and similarities. This is because each debating side (male or female, conformed or non-conformed), considers its view socially more beneficial for both sides, being blind to the fact that any side will advocate conformity for all citizens, men, women, rhinos or other monsters.

In *Elektras/Klytemnestras*, our performing collective found a way of narrative performance by focusing on the irreality of killing even your own kin in the name of the reality/necessity of tribal wars among humans. In *Marching Lysistratas*, our contemporary experiences are performed through censored, deflected lenses of multi-cultural absurdity (Greek *para-logo* = beyond words). This is as such because our lived bilingual otherness finds comparison and counterpoint in the biculturally-censored social context, with which our diasporic experiences remain in conflict due to the competing cultural values in place. In comic-absurdist terms, this unbroken chain of locked-in, unresolved human situations echoes the un-broken chain of the locked-in tragedy of human beings in conflict with their [in]-humanity ad perpetuum.

Thus, the two perspectives of narrative in Hellenic drama meet in our project: the un-resolved nature of humanity's weakness in repeating mistakes without a respite, with no exit in-sight from the circle of our own destruction (the tragic mode of expression) and the dog-chasing-its-tail ('ouroboros') absurdity of existence (the comic mode of expression). In performance, the difference lies in form than in content. In tragedy, the absurdity of living is reflected through the blindness of characters, and their inability to see that their actions produce words which justify these same actions (Elektra says as much to Klytemnestra in Sophokles' version). In comedy, absurdity feeds on the characters' actions that are first set in words: the oath-of-chastity which *Lysistrata's* women take is simply the new text, the 'statutes' in the constitution they endeavour to act upon; the *ekklesiazousai*, when in control of the state, write these 'statutes' down, and everyone must conform to the conditions of the new constitution. And such is the absurd nucleus of utopian political engagement: write your own constitution in order to act upon it by demanding all others to comply with it because it is now the Law of the Land. According to Aristophanic absurdity, echoed in Ionesco, that Law requires equality/conformity for all, in ownership and pleasure, business and leisure. These were the pivotal forces behind all state rhetoric for equal opportunity and social justice 2400 years ago (during the era of human struggle with the complex issues of 'democracy') and now, 2400 years later, in our era of globalised globalisation which 'multi-cultural', industrial societies enthusiastically espouse with aplomb and abundance, assuring all citizens of the economic benefits across all creeds, genders, races and 'cultures'. Apropos: Ionesco's inflatable absurdity: (a) of a city ( a real/irreal state, an a-topia, an everywhere-place) in the grips of conformity, where all citizens are seized by *rhinoceritis*; and (b) of the physical transformation of all the city's conformed citizens: look-alikes

Hence, our trans-national-based project has utilised 'texts' engaged with dramatic re-interpretations of Hellenic trans-temporal themes and universal social concerns. Such a project attempts to provide performers and audience alike with a connective link to cross-cultural fertilisation in theatrical expression, based on discursive discourse: endless re-viewing of the human place in contemporary society via the means provided by the evolutionary nature of the Hellenic drama.

With this project, FRAGMENTS, has been aiming at didaskaliavia-performance of versions of *(dis)placed* perspectives on the human condition expressed through individual bodies voicing collectively on stage in the lingua franca of our nuclear consciousness, international English the tragedy of every Klytemnestra and Elektra, the absurdity of every Lysistrata and every non-conformist in every human society. This performing collective resources itself from the multiple dimensions of the cross-cultural dialectics inherent in comparative theatre and the intercultural semiotics existing symbiotically in contemporary multicultural societies in conflict with their own cultural boundaries and the political agendas they set for themselves and others.

#### b. Illusionary Boundaries

Experimentation with the corpus of Hellenic drama has greatly contributed to creating and nurturing an international ethos of multiple perspective in interpretation. Such a development has provided the present generation of theatre practitioners in Greece with the diachronic perspective necessary for expressing their contemporary Hellenic sensibility vis-a-vis multiple-readings based on contemporary translations of the classical repertoire into what is commonly (though linguistically in-accurately) called "modern Greek." Of this development, Patsalidis writes:

As far as Greece is concerned, it is worth noting that in recent years there has been a more intense inclination for experimentation... The experiments by Voutsinas, Charalambous, Volanakis, Doufeksis, Evangelatos, Papavasileiou, Diamantis and Tsianos, et al., though successful at times in provoking arguments and addressing problems, they are not always convincing in terms of a more holistic statement of purpose. The only exception, in our estimation, is the case of Theodoros Terzopoulos. All four tragedies presented so far - *Bacchai* (1986), *Persians* (1990), *Antigone* (1994), and *Prometheus Bound* (1995)- with his theatre company "Attis", carry clearly the stamp of his personal vision and anguish...They have an aesthetic and ideolo-gical "position" which they support with consistency and continuity. (Patsalidis 1997: 416-417)

In its statement of purpose for performing the *Bacchai*, the arti-stic director of Attis Theatre Company emphasises the essence in teaching-performing Euripides for today's modern insensibility - moulded in and by the decline of spirituality in western civilisation - by re-examining the tradition of spirituality and transience of humanity, embodied in the poetic world of a 'classical' Hellas at the edge of its existence, torn between the gradual decline in the worship of the spirits of nature and creation and the newly-arriving era of rationalism:

We search for the deeper, inner voice of one's self. We are loo-king for the primordial desire to relive ancestral memories, to commune with others, to lose our self-imposed boundaries and thus give corporeal expression to the deep conflict between logic and instinct. (Terzopoulos 1988)

Such a statement of 'purpose' emphasises the need to teach tragedy in performance as today's society finds itself instinctively and collectively in search of a balance between the adoption of rationalism in the name of techno-logical advancement, social stability, and economic prosperity and the symbiotic relationship of the creating with the created (cf. Papademetre 1987).

There could not be a more appropriate statement of purpose for any theatre tradition with a corollary avant-garde mission, that is, the constant search for understanding and resolution of, the most human of conflicts: the struggle for dominance over self by human rationality and irrationality in turn.

As a statement of purpose, this contemporary Hellenic perspective on the function of theatre, vis-à-vis the classical perspective has not changed qualitatively. Its organic connection with its classical progenitor remains qualitatively transparent: its focus is still the human being and its world, this world's search for knowledge of self, that can assist in knowledge of the other-in-self. Any notion of 'modernity' has only added to the piling-up of quantitative dimensions of the basic la *condition humaine*. Terzopoulos expresses plainly the 'modern' conflict:

The more man becomes civilized, the more he forgets what he has experienced in life...He learns from the outside world, in a society which keeps developing, which progresses, which is dominated by technology, in a technocratic era which automatically is selfdestroyed.....Perhaps in the twenty-first century men will laugh at the mistakes which men of the twentieth century commit, the last humanists. (in McDonald 1992:159,169)

The modernity of the Hellenic dramatic dialogue with oneself and one self's place in the scheme of schemes of human existence is as traditional thus dynamic not static as the whole ethos of any one person's individual belief in espousing Universal truths; for the essential spirit of the avant-garde is to espouse Universal truths, whatever their individual source, since our Myth, the Myth of our creation and being, is a Universal Myth concerning our origins,... the foundation of humanity. The deeper a dramatic performance delves into the underlying structure of our being, the more revealing the icons, the signs, the collective tensions become. (Terzopoulos, in Papademetre 1989) Any seemingly 'avant-garde' dramatic performance is traditional insofar as it places its faith in what Heiner Müller calls "the thrusting of bodies and their conflict with ideas on stage" and when it maintains its faith in "theatre as the revolution on the march" (Müller, 1982). Especially, when it offers any contemporary theatre audience an experience as varied in dramatic form and content as any other multipleperspective expression in the context of social intercourse and human communication for the purpose of posing questions, visualising quandaries, past, present and future, or, to quote Arnott again, when allowing theatre audiences "to study something from several points of view at the same time."

## Epimetron

Just as Hellenic drama, in all its facets, from text writing, to production, didaskalia, rehearsal and performance, was never static 2400 years ago, so it has never been static through its multiple re-stagings ever since, in many languages and in many cultural contexts around the world. The currency, or the continuous 'contemporariness', of Hellenic drama in the international theatre-culture context stems precisely from the diachronic perception that tradition in theatre-arts is a tradition of evolution and it is regularly evident in its re-evaluation internationally, especially in the last 50 years by drama & cinemaresearchers-practitioners4. For, Hellenic drama has had a history of diachronic 'uses' and multiple readings; since the Roman times, without exceptions, all Hellenic tragic myths & narratives have variously become the concern of writers, directors, publishers, theoreticians and practitioners. But, most interesting remains the fact that only in the last hundred years there has been such a systematic, multi-perspective, though at times extreme, re-approach and re-assessment of the language of tragedy in its diachronic journey. (Patsalidis 1997:26)

Thus, internationally speaking, Hellenic drama strives to re-create the icons of our own demise, our constant ideological struggle with self-afflicted woes by consciously re-casting any one (and all) quintessential Hellenic dramatic personae on the world stage and pondering, on behalf of all humanity, the purpose of human existence. This ever-contemporary need to keep examining our human identity vis-avis our collective cultural tradition(s) has become the focus of many theatre practitioners who re-evaluate our worldly perceptions through the performing arts, thus, giving rise to the issue of responsibility in theatre practice in re-assessing what is a theatrical experience for our trans-modern and cross-modal, international, contemporary audiences.

It is precisely this need to keep questioning human assumptions about human endeavours that has been the diachronic thread in the evolution and development of Hellenic theatre. For, we can see the horrors of our age in the reflection of the past, and by reflecting ourselves, leave the theatre with more understanding.

Any dramatic re-interpretations of human concerns expressed though the tragic or comic modes of theatre provide the connective link in the construction of the diachronic, European-based, but internationally relevant, theatre-culture identity because its basic tenet is recursive and involves: endless re-viewing of the human place in contemporary society via the means of the evolutionary tradition of the Hellenic in dramatic arts.

#### Επίμετρο-2

Ελληνισμός Διασποράς, Θεατρική Παιδεία και Ευρωπαϊκή Πολιτισμική Κληρονομιά: Επιβίωση, Εξέλιξη, Ευθύνη.

Το ενεργό ενδιαφέρον για την θεατρική παιδεία και κατάρτιση, ελληνική και παγκόσμια δεν αφορά μόνο τον δάσκαλο και τον ειδικό θεάτρου αλλά όλο το κρατικό-κοινωνικο-πολιτισμικό σύνολο ενός σύγχρονου πολιτισμού με διαχρονικότητα παράδοσης και εξέλιξης. Οι πολιτισμικές και πολιτιστικές σχέσεις λαών δεν αποβλέπουν μόνο στην ορθολογική πολιτική και εμπορική ευστάθεια και ευημερία αλλά κυρίως στην όσο το δυνατόν αρτιώτερη ανάπτυξη κατανόησης σε ευρύτερη κλίμακα των διαφορών και ομοιοτήτων του πολιτισμικού πλαισίου της οποιασδήποτε συναλλαγής.

Πολυ-πολιτισμική και δια-πολιτισμική αμοιβαιότητα είναι παγκόσμιο ζητούμενο: παραμένει βασική ανθρώπινη ανάγκη. Το θέατρο στην

παιδεία προσφέρει αυτή τη δυνατότητα δια-πολιτισμικής ανάγκης για συνεχή κατανόηση μεταξύ πολιτισμών μέσω του αμεσότερου μέσου ανθρωπινής επικοινωνίας: τον αντι-κατοπτρισμό της ανθρωπότητας, της ανθρωπιάς και απανθρωπιάς του σε δημόσιο χώρο, στο αλώνι του θεάζειν εαυτούς και αλλήλουs.

#### NOTES

1. South Australian Greek Cultural Month, Adelaide (April 1995); Adelaide International Fringe Festival (March 1996); Third International Biennial Conference of the Modern Greek Studies Association of Australia and New Zealand at Melbourne Universityin conjunction with the Melbourne International Fringe Festival (September 1996); Annual Convention of the National Union of Greek Australian Students, Adelaide (January 1997).

2. Performed in Adelaide for the Global Citizenship: Languages & Literacies, Joint National Conference of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English, Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations, Australian Literacy Educators Association, 1999.

3. Heiner Müller in his interview with Sylvere Lotringer, in The German Issue-Semiotext(e), 1982 Vol.IV, No.2, declares: "I believe in conflict. I don't believe in anything else. What I try to do in my writings is to strengthen the sense of conflicts, to strengthen confrontations and contradictions. There is no other way."

4. From its filmed interpretations by Pasolini and Cacoyiannis, to its staged hermeneutics by Tadashi Suzuki and Bob Wilson, by Heiner Müller and Theodoros Terzopoulos, by Peter Sellars and Peter Stein, by Karolos Koun and Spyros Evangelatos, by Peter Hall and Tony Harrison, by Matthias Langhoff, A.Mnouchkine, Wole Soyinka, and by many more (cf. McDonald 1983, 1992).

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