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MEDEA'S SACRIFICE AND THE UNSATISFIED DIRECTOR: EURIPIDES' *MEDEA* BY ANATOLI VASSILIEV

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This paper aims to discuss Euripides' *Medea* directed by Anatoli Vassiliev and performed in Greece in August 2008. His stage direction dealt with Greek tragedy through the perspective of modernity. The director challenged established ways of representing Ancient Greek Drama and the production was considered controversial.

Modernity through Globality

The performance toured several Greek cities (Athens, Epidavros, Sparta, Olympia, Kavala, Patras, Thessaloniki, etc). The première was on the 15th of August at the ancient theatre of Epidavros as part of the Hellenic Festival. Anatoli Vassiliev, Russian director who lives in France, had been invited by the Regional and Municipal Theatre of Patras and the Hellenic Festival to direct Euripides' *Medea*.

Euripides' *Medea* was Vassiliev's first attempt to engage with Ancient Greek Drama, after his successful production of *Medea's Material* by H. Müller. He chose Euripides' play to convey the universal message of Tragedy through the combination of myths and ideas, the clash of current cultures and the metaphysics in the era of globalization. *Polis* now is the whole world. *Medea*

for Vassiliev is a Mediterranean epic¹, the meeting of two worlds (East and West) that clash², and the new model of relationships (Jason-Medea)³. In the director's staging the destructive meeting of new and old modes of being takes place.

Vassiliev focuses on the notions, the ideas of things, not just their representations. The play is a field where philosophy and metaphysics coexist with human figures⁴. The director is very interested in the philosophical, psychological and metaphysical aspect of Tragedy without ignoring its implementation in the present. His intention seems to be to deal with archetypal figures in the modern world. He quotes the Russian actor Igor Yatsko "psychological theatre deals with human relationships whereas Theatre of the Ideas deals with the relation among ideas"⁵. Vassiliev tries to create the field of metaphysics that could host myths, ideas and gods⁶.

¹ Loverdou, M. 2008b.

² Vidalis, G. 2008b. To clarify his point Lydia Koniordou gave this example. "Today terrorist attacks by terrorists from Arabic countries are acts of self sacrifice whereas Western countries characterize them as terrorism". That means there are two cultures not being able to communicate.

³ Vassiliev maintains the idea that Jason wanted to help Medea. His concern was their children's interest. He tries to adapt to a new form of relationship, more flexible, a new kind of marriage (quote of Lydia Koniordou in Marinou, E. 2008b).

⁴ Performance program, 48.

⁵ Performance program, 48. After having focused his work for a long time on energies and metaphysics, Vassiliev is still not able to define what the "energy of the invisible world" is. But he is convinced that he has to stick to ideas/notions of things, in order to reveal Tragedy's philosophical aspects. That is why Platonic work is crucial to his research and actor training.

⁶ Vassiliev declares himself to be a Christian Orthodox. He goes

He also embraces the ludicrous element in Tragedy because of its connection to Dionysian festivities. He quotes Plato's *Symposium* "The true poet has to be tragic and comic poet altogether. He has to embrace tragedy and comedy as it happens in life" (Plato, *Symposium* 223d). He is aware, though, that his work will not always be well received. So, he will accept any audience response.

Modernity staged

According to L. Hardwick "identity issues are 'marked' in the language(s) used, the idiom (vernacular), the costumes and properties, the set design and the music and soundscape"⁷. From this point of view let us now see how Vassiliev transcribed Euripides' *Medea* on stage.

He chose a Spanish arena to set the play. Everything was painted red, the color of the feast⁸, such as the wooden walls around the orchestra, the wooden poles, and the background wooden wall. There was also reddish cork on the floor. A metallic cart with a bull's head (archetypical male symbol) at the wheel was driven by a technician before and during the performance. Chairs (including an orange plastic one on the cart)

back to Russian theatrical tradition, which is almost attached to the religious.

⁷ Hardwick, L. 2009: 88.

⁸ According to Vassiliev everything in Greek Tragedy originates from the festive mood of Dionysian mysteries. Everything happens in the context of a festive activity, even the most dramatic moments (Loverdou, M. 2008a). So, he places Medea's vengeful plans on a sunny day of feast.

were used by the Chorus and the protagonists during their dialogues, and a table was used as an altar where Medea sacrificed her children. The actors used several props, such as a canister, dolls-dummies/children, a metal crown, metal snakes etc. A metal sun was moving throughout the performance showing the unity of time.

The black and white costumes of the Chorus were influenced by Balkan traditions. Medea was dressed in black and red. There were allusions of the past of the Mediterranean cultures and of Medea's passionate and deadly figure. The Chorus' costumes were designed to serve the intensive movement of the choreography. The actors impersonating Medea's children used masks, until the moment of the filicide.

Music was especially composed for the production in an attempt to combine the present with the past, East and West. The director wanted it to be based on *rebetiko* music, that was born by the meeting of musicians-refugees who came to Greece from Asia Minor in 1922 and the Greek *bouzouki* players. *Rebetiko* is live music tradition in Greece today⁹. Traditional eastern and Greek instruments, e.g. *bouzouki*, *laouto*, etc. were used by a large *rebetiko* orchestra (15 musicians and actors). A very intense moment was Medea entering the stage singing an *amané*¹⁰.

⁹ Vidalis, G. 2008a: performance program, 43.

¹⁰ *Amané* is a song of eastern origin related to pain. It is mostly based on musical improvisation and it is used to narrate the story or the misfortunes of the person who sings it. The music of the performance was a fine piece of work in itself. Some of the joyful

The play's choreography was influenced by Japanese martial arts and Eastern techniques, based on the energy zones of the human body. There were references to mythic themes, such as the battle of the Titans and the Gods¹¹. There was excessive, almost continuous dance by the Chorus and movement by the actors. The stripped costumes of the Chorus and the draped ones of the male actors put stress on the movement giving the impression of a fierce flow and of anxiety.

One directorial innovation by Vassiliev was, amongst others, the implementation of a male Chorus consisting of musicians and actors, who was on Medea's side singing about her past and present and cheering about her triumphant plans over the King and Jason. The director invented this Chorus to grant autonomy to Medea's stories from the past and to connect both sides of the story: grief for the filicide and joy for the triumph. On the contrary, the female Chorus mostly recited, implying the epic character of Vassiliev's *mise-en-scène*.

Some other innovations were:

- The extended duration of the performance (3, 5 hours)¹².

rhythms of *rebetiko* though clashed with the dramatic tension of some scenes. Moreover, *rebetiko* is closely connected to everyday life entertainment in Greece.

¹¹ Payatakis, S. 2008.

¹² The performance the following night in Sparta lasted less than 3 hours. The actors did not use fragmented speech, technicians' presence on stage was more discrete, the cart-chariot was not dragging the children's corpses, there was no decomposition of Argo

- The use of space: Vassiliev chose to close an open theatre by adding walls restricting at times the audience's view of the orchestra. He also "dislocated" the play from the *oikos* in Korinthos to an arena in Spain altering basic interpretation indexes. Medea can be anywhere, in the arena of the world, in any *polis*, in constant fight with hostile surroundings. She triumphs not only over *oikos* or the city but over the globe.

- The use of fragmented speech was an attempt to decompose words, re-invent the language and express emotions in a physical, non-verbal way¹³.

- The Messenger's trilingual speech, which attempted to increase dramatic tension through confusion (in Greek, English and French by the Messenger and two actors of the Chorus) pointed out that the news spread around the world, that Tragedy has a global message¹⁴. The spotlight that was brought on stage just for this scene symbolized the omnipresence of the Media in the modern world.

- Medea's (bull) fight with Jason, a symbol of their relationship, of the battle between the two sexes, between two cultures, two equal worlds.

- The scene with Aegaeus offered the audience

and the Messenger's speech was delivered only in Greek (Farazi, C. 2008: 38). All these changes indicate that Vassiliev perceived what the audience thought was extreme and annoying.

¹³ "Vassiliev's viewpoint of Medea", review, *Kathimerini* (2008), 12 August. When used in *Medea's Material* fragmented speech was a very eloquent example of a non-verbal expression, which didn't work in a three and a half hour production.

¹⁴ In one of his interviews Vassiliev stated that since we all experience globalization, we should understand that theatre does not constitute a national case any longer (Loverdou, M. 2008a).

the other aspect of human life, that of lightness and comedy. A somehow naïve Aegeas needed advice from the wise Medea being at the same time entirely out of the gloomy atmosphere of her misfortunes.

- Medea poisoned on stage the robe for Creusa using snakes that were hanging around her waist and hammered on stage a metal crown for the princess. The sound accompanied by music and movement created a very strong effect.

- Medea killed her children on stage using the dolls/dummies. She sacrificed them in the altar-table at the centre of the stage “sacrificing” herself at the same time¹⁵. And then she dragged their corpses around the orchestra.

- Medea's triumphant exit: she left the real world, the stage-arena, moving to another dimension taking her children alive with her. She did so by using the metal cart with the omnipresent Mediterranean plastic chair and a balloon full of hellion gas reminiscent of Helios/Sun¹⁶. Vassiliev stresses on the metaphysical aspect of the play, of the two dimensions of life: human life on earth and the “ascent” to the higher dimension, that

¹⁵ Vidalis, G. 2008c.

¹⁶ This was probably meant to stress the comic side of life or it was presumably a remark on how ideas when embodied in the real world lose their significance and become useful but cheap objects. The ludicrous and joyful background at times subverted, or even undermined the dramatic tension of some scenes. The circus atmosphere was not always consistent with the text. Vassilis Nikolaidis, director, in his review opposes to that view. He claims that Vassiliev was right in placing the play in a light circus atmosphere, thus denying the gloomy side of the play (Nikolaidis, V. 2008).

of gods and myths, where Medea triumphs and dead children play happily with their mother.

- The Chorus “buried” Jason at the orchestra and decomposed Argo over his body signifying the bitter end of Jason’s adventures.

To sum up, Vassiliev did not seem to abide by the rules of Tragedy, rules he claimed to respect. He said: “When one breaks the rules (of Tragedy), then the substance of Tragedy itself is destroyed”¹⁷.

Actors’ training and method

Vassiliev’s performative code is based on Socratic ignorance¹⁸. Through experimentation and research he decomposes and recomposes Stanislavski’s method of actor training. In his études, he fully supports actors’ improvisations, which are mostly based on personal experience. Then, together with his actors, he uses these personal moments for the production. According to the director, “An actor is wrapped by mystery. Can the actor pretend to be a natural figure in a mythical universe? Acting is the art of authenticity. In a play, which is a myth in itself, actors must be authentic”¹⁹.

By avoiding articulated speech, Vassiliev insists on physical theatre techniques and the way they underpin non - verbal expression of either ideas or emotions. By creating a spectacle-étude based on personal experience and authenticity, he gives the actors the chance to

¹⁷ Loverdou, M. 2008a. That means that there is communication between actors and spectators, even a clashing one.

¹⁸ Marinou, E. 2008a.

¹⁹Samara, Z. 2000 and performance program, 37.

communicate with the audience²⁰.

One reads in the performance program:

“In general, it can be admitted that Anatoli Vassiliev is working basically on two key components as regards his stage direction and education activities: a sensitivity infused with a small dose of surrealism (psychological structures/elements which to a great extent are found in his research on Chekhov) and a metaphysical element (i.e. elements of a game which are set off through the performances based on Plato's dialogues). Recently though he introduced the element of vital energy and the strength of pure speech. The result is a psychological and metaphysical drama, which is the same at the mystery theatre”²¹.

He and his actors try to transform parts of Platonic dialogues into acting through improvisations²².

Vassiliev in his book *Sept ou huit leçons de théâtre* wrote that he is never satisfied in his everyday work with his actors. There is a hard road which starts from the cause and ends up to the effect, where the actors should head to with the help of the director. So, a director has to experiment constantly and to change his method. He compares his work to a small ladder next to a big one, that of the Truth. Whenever he makes an achievement, he is not happy because what he achieved was cheap compared to the Truth. He says “When I compare my small ladder with the Truth, I feel I'm nothing, I am not

²⁰ Samara, Z. 2000; Georgousopoulos, K. 2008.

²¹ Vassiliev, A. (1999), *Sept ou huit leçons de théâtre*. Paris: Editions P.O.L.; performance program, 69.

²² Kirikou, T. 2000.

talented, I am into deep sin. I have to do something to climb high. So, I change my method again. The idea of theatre remains, but the method is changing. The road seems straight but there is always evolution”²³.

Audience reception

Vassiliev’s directorial choices made the production rather unclear about its *mise-en-scène*. The director’s major points didn’t seem to be clear enough and the audience was puzzled by a plethora of images. Most of the audience was confused about the spectacle they had just watched²⁴. Some felt shocked and shouted at the actors during the performance; others left the theatre in the middle of the performance stating their annoyance loudly.

For many years now there has been a general discussion about the audience’s right to express its disagreement in a more or less fierce way²⁵. The critic Eleni Varopoulou has mentioned that hooting “happens when the audience’s political and ethical taboos, the aesthetic beliefs are attacked or when their consensus on theatrical morality is hurt at specific time and place”. And she continues “Sometimes a theatre scandal is due to ethical, religious and political reasons, although an aesthetic conflict might be found underneath”. She also mentions

²³ Performance program, 51.

²⁴ There are many newspaper reviews which describe and interpret audiences’ responses. One can consult the following texts: Varopoulou, E. 1997, Loverdou, M. 1997, Georgousopoulos, K. 1999, Sarigiannis, G. 2008a, “Epidaurus”, Georgakopoulou, V., Karouzakis, G., Barka, F., Papaioannou, C., Chatziantoniou, N. 2008, Chatziantoniou, N. 2008, Angelikopoulos, V. 2008a.

²⁵ Barka, F. 2008.

ideological confrontations and deeper motives as possible reasons; or even organized groups of spectators who intend to attack the director and/or the performance²⁶.

In my view she encapsulates the reasons accurately²⁷. People usually welcome modern performances as long as the stage direction is not excessively innovative²⁸, or provocative or narcissistic²⁹. Some Greek directors have pointed out in the past that disapproval might be an act of despair or a reaction to innovation or an act of political, social or religious confrontation or just the fear in the face of a new order of things in theatre and in society, which is unfamiliar to the audience so far³⁰.

In our case I think it was a matter of lack of criteria, and a matter of identity and of blurred directorial intentions. The Greek audience is not accustomed to interpretation of Ancient Drama through modernity, although the last two decades there have been some innovative productions³¹. Lorna Hardwick mentions the

²⁶ Varopoulou, E. 1997.

²⁷ A part of the Greek audience and some Greek artists still believe that Ancient Greek Drama must be staged strictly traditionally in order for the text to be respected and its messages to be conveyed. Some consider any modern representations of Greek Drama insulting. They take it as a matter of national pride. Ancient Greek Drama is thought to be a genre familiar only to the Greeks. So, foreign artists lack the cultural familiarity to stage it effectively. Performance history though shows that Greek audiences have welcomed the work of a number of non-Greek directors. Georgousopoulos, K. 1997, he sums up many productions that brought modernity to Greek stagings.

²⁸ Chatziantoniou, N. 2008.

²⁹ Varopoulou, E. 1997.

³⁰ Loverdou, M. 1997.

³¹ Sarigiannis, G, Thedorakopoulos, P. 2008b, Loverdou, M.

“knowledgeable” or “informed” vs the “uninformed” audience”³² especially when it comes to plays closely related to national identity. The Greek audience is not “trained” to watch modern productions of Greek Tragedy, and to evaluate them accordingly.

There is also the issue of identity. Over the past decades we have all been experiencing a shift of circumstances in various aspects of our lives³³. In times of transition and uncertainty we all look for what is unchangeable and universal. Tragedy fulfills these requirements. It deals with changing and clashing identities. The ruler becomes a follower, the winner becomes defeated, the bearer of life gives death, gods become humans etc. This is the point where modernization emerges to fill the gap between universality and everyday life.

In the case of *Medea* discussed here, the director tried to raise identity issues in a globalized world. He sacrificed the text and many of its issues in an attempt to relate the performance to contemporary reality³⁴. Vassiliev did not seem to realize that although most of the different elements he used were recognizable (elements from different Mediterranean cultures, symbols, costumes, and music) the final image still remained a puzzle to the spectators, especially as far as the different elements’

2008c, Ioannidis, G. 2008.

³² Hardwick, L. 2009: 91

³³ Fischer-Lichte, E. 2008: 29 describes our time “We know where we come from; we know who we were. But we are not sure where we are heading [...] It is a time that destabilizes all our identities, whether individual, gender-related, regional, ethnic, national, religious, or cultural. We are permanently in search of new identities”.

³⁴ Fischer-Lichte, E. 2008: 31.

combination is concerned. His way of thinking and his constant experimentation were clearly depicted in his *mise-en-scène*. He added new elements and attempted to combine themes sometimes irrelevant to each other or to the *mise-en-scène* altogether. However, it looked as if he was never satisfied with the result of his research.

Moreover, he made his point in a very explicit and sometimes harsh way (even brutally naturalistic at times)³⁵. When a play, which deals among others with violence and cruelty, is staged on realistic terms, it may not be easy to be tolerated. The outcome was very confusing for the audience unless someone was very familiar with the director's work and method. The audience's aesthetic and sometimes ideological standards were repeatedly challenged³⁶. The hooting came as a "revenge to the performance"³⁷.

So, numerous directorial devices, fragmented views of the present and the past and various elements of tradition unconnected to each other forced to the Greek audience identities, which they did not seem to have been able to recognize as their own. Greek spectators could not decode

³⁵ Lydia Koniordou points out that the audience's response was a healthy reaction and that *Medea's* staging was not arbitrary. "Some scenes were harsh, because the play itself is harsh" (quote in Zaligas, K. 2008:34).

³⁶ Lydia Koniordou felt that the audience was so violent in its response that she felt as if she was in an arena full of lions (Loverdou, M. 2008b). Aglaia Pappa mentioned that she felt she was in the middle of a fight and therefore she felt alive (Marinou, E. 2008c) and Nick Psarras was shocked because of that violence (quote in Zaligas, K. 2008).

³⁷ Loverdou, M. 2008c. The critic Vassilis Angelikopoulos points out that Vassiliev did not respect the audience's endurance and tolerance, that this production was "a howling sin of the most acute provocation", in Angelikopoulos, V. 2008b.

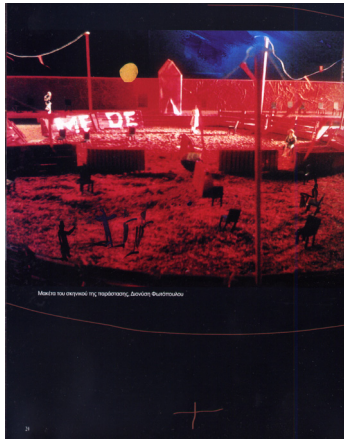
Vassiliev's modern interpretation; they could not recognise themselves in the production. Many things that took place in the orchestra did not manage to reach the audience³⁸. The director's intentions backfired.

Official programme pictures - The use of the official programme pictures is authorized by the Municipal and Regional Theatre of Patras

Epidavros Ancient Theatre, 15th & 16th of August 2008



³⁸ Payatakis, S. 2008. Hardwick, L. 2008: 87 quotes Appiah, K. A. (1993), "Thick Translation", *Callaloo*, 16. 4: 808-819, "A translation aims to produce a new text that matters to one community the way another text matters to another". The same applies to the performance as a polymorphic text.





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