

The 43rd Edition of Classical Plays at Syracuse's Greek Theatre: Sophocles's *Trachiniae* and Euripides's *Hercules*.

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The 43rd edition of classical plays staged at Syracuse's Greek theatre in the spring of 2007 was dominated by a sole character: Hercules, the most famous of Greek mythological heroes.

The works chosen were Sophocles's *Trachiniae* and Euripides's *Hercules*. Both tragedies are seldom staged: the former had not been performed in Syracuse since 1964, the latter since 1980 (see endnote). These works have more than the main character in common: they share the way in which this character is rendered, not as the invincible demigod of the famous twelve labours, but as a man smitten by fate. *Trachiniae* stages in fact the hero's death by the hands of his wife, who, in an attempt to win back Hercules's love, unknowingly causes his demise by means of a cloak drenched in a potent venom. *Hercules* recounts of his return from the Underworld and of the slaughter of his family, an act he performs while rendered mad by the gods. In both works, the hero's arrival does not mark his triumph, nor does it bring an end to the worries of his family: it only causes further and more grievous suffering.

Trachiniae

The set designed by Duilio Cambellotti for *Trachiniae* in 1933 was chosen as a common basis for the staging of both plays in Syracuse: a monumental background, towers on both sides, and two skids converging in the middle as a steep flight of steps.

Walter Pagliaro maintains these elements nearly unchanged in their sombre greyness and simply modifies the orchestra platform by adding a scenery of planks precariously balanced over quagmires and disjointed stones: a visual cue to the unstable and perturbed condition of the house of Hercules. Upon appearing on the stage Deianira wanders about in this allusive scenic space with unsteady faltering steps: doubled up and wailing at the mercy of great agitation and dark omens, the queen couples her physical descent with an interior descent of sorts in the pits of her own soul. A red elastic band stretched across the scene – the very same which will later bind with an inextricable knot the prisoners of war – hinders and slackens her pace towards the front of the stage; a symbol of her domestic dimension and of her closedness to the outside world. She is in fact deeply rooted in her home, where she has spent most of her existence, alone, waiting for Hercules to return from his exploits. Deianira keeps the potent venom given to her by Nessus in the depths of the palace, and her plan to win back her husband will unfold in the secrecy of her home.

The tragedy's background is that of a family thrown in disorder, as stressed by the couple's bed, which towers and slants across the orchestra as a symbol of Deianira's loneliness and of the privacy of her feelings. The bed purposely receives a central placement, as central is the feeling of sorrow associated with it, for it is there that the deepest moments of suffering take place: Deianira's despair upon comprehending the tragic consequences of her actions, her son's repudiation, and the pains of Hercules himself.

On both sides of the bed stands a symbol of struggle and battle, of the hero's prolonged absence, a bristling wood of spears, twisted and black, inauspicious omens, a representation of Deianira's fears regarding her husband's exploits. In this sober array of signs Nessus's skeleton appears as a redundant and gothic element: Deianira holds the bones to her chest when, upon seeing the prodigious flock of wool melt in sunlight, she is assailed by doubts regarding the outcome of her actions. This overtly and easily alludes to Deianira's tormented psyche; it is the expression of a sexuality thrown out of balance, by traumatic experiences as a girl – being the object of desire for monsters like Achelous and Nessus – and later as a wife being repeatedly left alone by her husband.

In contrast with the rendering of Deianira, which borders on bourgeois drama, the chorus of the women of Trachis, their heads covered in black shawls, is almost evocative of late 1800 Sicily, as suggested also by the usage of Sicilian dialect in the verse translation by Salvatore Nicosia, a work of literary beauty which however at times results hard to perform.

As a rule, dramatic tension needs, from time to time, to be loosened, and even in tragedies there can and there must be comic or grotesque moments (this is, for instance, the case for the nurse's speech in Aeschylus's *Choephoroe*, or for the watchman's tale in Sophocles's *Antigone*), Pagliaro's choice to comically characterise the messenger who reveals to Deianira Iole's identity and

Hercules' love for the girl, appears wrong, not for its dissonance with the textual drama, but because of the excessive modification of the character, turned into a fool of sorts and depicted as a beggar trailing a small cart loaded with cardboard. The messenger's loyalty to the queen, shown by revealing the truth about Iole, is moreover turned by the director into an action driven by self interest, as the messenger stretches out his hand to receive compensation for his services. The rendition of Lichas, Hercules's lieutenant, who precedes his master entering the stage dragging a host of young captive women like a Levantine slave handler, with a fez on his head and a grim face, is also not convincing.

Things do not improve as Hercules enters the stage: Micaela Esdra's Deianira conveys the character's despair and the tangle of her sombre feelings, although at times indulging in declamatory tones, but Paolo Graziosi's *Hercules* shows a mostly exterior quality in his tormented laments: he plays a difficult role, due to verbosity and the plentitude of lamentations, and was moreover impaired by choices in the employment of scenic time and by the inadequacy of the actor playing young Hyllus.

Hercules

Luca De Fusco directed *Hercules* in a tighter rhythm, shunning high-flown rhetorical tones and following the features of a dramatic text rich in sudden twists and unforeseen developments. Although he has been accused of reviving elements of peplum movies (so-called sword and sandal motion pictures, popular in the 1950s), and of employing music as a soundtrack of sorts, the director managed to efficiently convey Euripides's words, which reach the audience with immediacy, thanks also to Giulio Guidorizzi's limpid translation. In designing the set, Fiorentino employed Cambellotti's guidelines "all must be smooth like a polyhedron, devoid of learned archaeological elements, with no denial of geometrical force by means of doors and arches; the dimensions of the palace are to be found within the equilibrium thus created." He however intervened by completely covering the palace in plates of shiny copper and brass, in contrast with the rough rocky space occupied by the orchestra and paved with basaltic stone, as if to mark the border between two dimensions: the seemingly shiny surface-reality, and the hidden subterranean dimension of Hades and of Hercules's soul.

From the very beginning, the bright splendour of the palace is juxtaposed with the sombre desperation of imploring family members, first, and after the carnage with the grief and excruciating pain of the hero and his father Amphitryon. This juxtaposition is visually enhanced by the costumes, dominated by black, the colour of mourning and madness: it is as if the characters emerged from the earth to stand out clearly against the bright background of the stage. Costumes are archaising, but not philologically realistic, to the point that Hercules's armour may distantly remind of those worn by samurais, as if to evoke a sense of heroism and impending death.

Technical solutions inspired by the stage machines of Greek theatre resulted effective and in tune with Euripides's taste for special effects. And so the *Charonian* stairway is employed for a non-conventional rendition of Hercules's arrival: he suddenly appears on stage crawling on his back out of the trapdoor in the orchestra, delivering the image of a hero contaminated and ridden by the malicious seed of Hades which will soon enough sprout into madness. An elevator, a modern-day *theologheion*, lifts on the roof Iris and Lyssa, Madness herself; the rotating *ekuklema*, a platform hinged on the palace door, shows the corpses of Hercules's children and wife, after the earthquake has manifested itself disheveling the rough and rocky floor, breaking and lifting the ground with a hollow crash.

The rendition of the stasima was indeed convincing, and the two very good Coryphaei echoed with limpid recitative clarity what the two choruses sung on Antonio Di Pofi's music; the gestural performance of the female members of the chorus, modelled after the decorations on attic vases, proved on the other hand slightly flimsy. Another unconvincing point is Madness's death-dance, performed by a young attractive actress dressed as a silvery odalisque to stress her perverse and ruinous allure: it all bordered on the captivatingly spectacular. The director, De Fusco, meant it as a materialisation of Hercules's death-wish and thus he alluded to literary antecedents such as the sweet and angelic devil in Cazotte's *Le diable amoureux* and the apparition of death in Tomasi di Lampedusa's *Il Gattopardo*.

Euripides's tragedy has as its core an essential and bitter criticism of the divine, featuring elements of compelling modernity: it questions the role of evil in the world and the relationship between man and God. This emerges strongly in the Syracuse production, also thanks to courageous and illuminating choices in textual translation, such as the audacious blasphemy 'God is an idiot'. This curse renders in a radically negative manner the *amathés* in v. 347, and Ugo Pagliari's intense and sensitive interpretation of Amphitryon charges it with interlocutory agony. Man's moral superiority to the gods of tradition is thus stressed and rendered explicit in the contrast between Amphitryon and Zeus in their role as fathers; at the same, the individual's own personal responsibility is not passed over in silence, since Hercules's madness appears as the human consequence of the violence which for years has led and qualified the hero's choices and actions.

Hercules's acceptance of his suffering and shame for his actions is also entirely human, and profoundly different from the kind of heroism which in Sophocles ultimately leads to suicide (as in the case of Ajax, who chooses death to escape from his enemies' contempt and derision): Hercules decides to live in order to avoid the dishonour which would derive from the cowardice of not being able to face the hard blows of fate, and he derives the strength needed for this difficult decision from the love of his father and the solidarity of another man, his friend Theseus.

Endnote

Sophocles's *Trachiniae*, Teatro Greco, Syrecuse, 2007

Directed by Walter Pagliaro. Translation into Italian: Salvatore Nicosia. Settings and costumes: Giovanni Carluccio. Music: Arturo Anecchino. Choreography: Silvana Lo Giudice. Cast and characters: Deianira Micaela Esdra. *Hercules* Paolo Graziosi. *Hyllus* Diego Florio. *Lichas* Luca Lazzareschi. *Messenger* Massimo Reale. *Nurse* Deli De Maio. *Old man* Francesco Alderuccio. *Iole* Lucina Campisi. *Coriphes* Simonetta Carti, Roberta Caronia.

The Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico staged *Trachiniae* for the first time at the Teatro Greco in 1933: translation by Ettore Bignone, art direction by Franco Liberati, music by Ildebrando Pizzetti, settings and costumes by Duilio Cambellotti. Forty-seven years had to pass before the second staging of Sophocles's masterpiece in 1980: translation by Umberto Albin and Vico Faggi, directed by Gianfranco Cobelli, music by Salvatore Sciarrino, settings and costumes by Paolo Tommasi; Deianira was played by Valeria Moriconi.

Euripides's *Hercules*, Teatro Greco, Syrecuse, 2007

Directed by Luca De Fusco. Translation into Italian: Giulio Guidorizzi. Settings: Antonio Fiorentino. Costumes: Maurizio Millenotti. Music and Chorus direction: Antonio Di Pofi. Choreography: Alessandra Panzavolta. Cast and characters: *Amphitryon* Ugo Pagliai. *Hercules* Sebastiano Lo Monaco. *Megara* Giovanna Di Rauso. *Lycus* Massimo Reale. *Herald* Luca Lazzareschi. *Madness* Marianella Bargilli. *Iris* Deli De Maio. *Theseus* Roberto Bisacco. *Coryphaei* Antonio Zanoletti, Giuseppe Calcagno.

Hercules had previously only been staged once during the whole history of INDA: translation by Salvatore Quasimodo, directed by Giuseppe Di Martino, music by Bruno Nicolai, settings and costumes by Mischa Scandella; Sergio Fantoni played *Hercules* and Arnoldo Foà interpreted *Lycus*.