Staging Greek Drama: An old-fashioned exercise at Northwestern University

by Kathryn Bosher
Northwestern University

Theatre departments generally require a survey of theatre history, or a course or two on early theatre, of their majors; an almost universal component of these is ancient Greek drama. In such classes, ancient plays are read and analysed in translation and situated in their ancient contexts; broad themes are addressed, and the universal appeal and relevance of the great Greek plays are set out. Core theatre classes, however, unlike the theatre history requirements, tend to focus on technical aspects of production and artistic development of the professional actor. Details of production are meticulously studied and rigorously put into practice. The next generation of actors learns, in a multitude of highly focused classes and rehearsal and production sessions, the mechanics and the art of mounting a play. The theatre history course, then, is something of a fish out of water – a course of ideas and survey history in a whirlwind of practical work.

Nevertheless, the importance of Greek drama to a theatre degree has long been recognised in theatre programmes, not only in the course requirement but also in official university productions. A quick survey of the last 75 years of Northwestern University theatre archives turns up more than 60 productions either of Greek plays in translation or plays based on Greek and Roman plays – and this does not include smaller or student productions. Prompt books and production records attest to the rigour and professionalism of cast and crew alike. Directed, in the main, by theatre faculty, this staging of Sophocles and Euripides is used to strengthen and mould the technical and artistic skills of students, no less than are Shakespeare or Ibsen.

The student has two ways of approaching these productions: modern systems of acting and production, and a general concept of ancient plays formed in the history survey class. Occasionally, the director has a special interest in the Classics. At Northwestern, one such was Lee Mitchell who staged nine Greek plays, starting with Sophocles's Oedipus the King in 1939 and ending with the more rarely seen Ion of Euripides in 1967. His programme notes and lengthy analyses of the plays written out in longhand reveal an interest in the ancient context and meaning of Greek theatre, sharpened perhaps by his own doctoral work on the staging of Elizabethan plays. Nevertheless, in the notes published in the programme for his 1948 production of Sophocles's Antigone, he puts most emphasis on its modern relevance: "The conflict which it presents […] is as meaningful today as it was twenty-four hundred years ago, and modern sympathies, like those of the original audience, favour the individual. […] The arguments to which (Creon) gives voice are familiar to all of us, from our childhood homes, from school, from the army […]" Scholars from the Classics department are sometimes invited to advise in theatre productions. For example, Francis Dunn, a well-known classicist, and member of the Northwestern Classics department, was the advisor for a 1993 production of Electra. The director of the play, David Downs, took his cast to a local amphitheatre to get a sense of the size and open-air nature of ancient performances. His aim was to reproduce the feeling of Greek theatre: "What we wanted to do was to take a look that comes from classical architecture and art, but not to repeat it. It’s going to be true to the spirit of ancient Greek." (Downs 1993) For the student actors, however, this play and its characters were explained through analogy to their own lives. In an interview, the lead actress said "I have to go in and pull out a lot of shit from my own life and use that to find the ways Electra feels" (Downs 1993) and, for the audience, the programme notes emphasised the universality of the themes. Thus, in the main, the production of ancient plays on the university stage is approached with a detailed and professional knowledge of modern systems of acting and production (occasional use of antique costume notwithstanding), and the meaning of the play is drawn from a literary interpretation of the text of the play, which often owes much to modern understanding of human psychology. In other words, these performances, rather like the theatre degree as a whole, focus on interpreting ancient play texts for the modern stage.

This is a valuable and important element of the theatre curriculum, and corresponds no doubt to methods employed in the production of plays written in more recent historical times. It reveals, however, a gap in the students' education, which has grown wider and wider as our own educational system has put less and less emphasis on the classics. Students, who generally have no high school or undergraduate exposure to the classics, receive these plays essentially as works of English literature. Greek tragedies are studied as works that shed light on life and morals, on philosophy and human nature, perhaps on the culture and history of the ancient world, but are not grappled with as artefacts of a wholly alien theatrical system. That is to say, the practical and artistic brilliance of theatre students is not brought to bear on their study of ancient plays, until the play is being revived for the modern stage, and then it becomes, for all technical purposes, a modern play. The missing link, I believe, is the study of the theatre production of ancient Greece, not as, or not only as, an academic and literary problem, but as a theatrical one.
It is in this pursuit, I believe, that the Classics department has much to offer the Theatre department, and something to gain in return. Problems of staging, style, aesthetics and emotional impact of ancient productions have largely remained academic, because of the difficulty and the scarcity of sources – but could some of these problems be raised in the context of a theatre course, with students deeply engaged in the practical business of theatre?

Since the publication of Csapo and Slater’s *The Context of Ancient Drama* (1995), which collects and translates many of the hitherto inaccessible pieces of evidence for the production and context of ancient theatre, such a theatre course is much more practicable than it has been hitherto. This collection gives students a window into the complicated world of sources through which scholarly ideas about ancient theatre have been formed and refined. Good secondary discussions of acting, staging and production now abound, especially since Taplin’s seminal *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (1997). The old chestnut debate about the shape of the orchestra, *skene*, stage and altar can be accessed through recent English language sources, such as Gebhard, Wiles and Scullion, in addition to the standard works of, for example, Pickard-Cambridge (1968).

In the short ten-week span of the Northwestern University quarter, we tried this experiment in a course offered by the Classics Department called Staging Ancient Greek Drama. The project was to study ancient sources and recent scholarship on questions of staging and production, draw the best possible conclusions in a short paper, and then to try out the theories in a ten-minute performance. Each production choice had either to be defended by an analysis of the relevant ancient evidence to be found on the subject, or a good case to be made for the absence of evidence. Of the 16-person class, some 14 students were theatre majors, fulfilling a distribution requirement in theatre history or taking an elective. Of these 14 students, one was a double major in classics and theatre, and two were minors in classics. The text chosen was the scene of the raising of Dareios (lines 634-718) in Aeschylus’s *Persians*. We used Edith Hall’s commentary and translation of *Persians*, which, in addition to a facing translation, offers many helpful comments about aspects of the ancient production. Csapo and Slater’s *The Context of Ancient Greek Drama* (1995) was the course textbook, supplemented by many articles on specific questions of ancient stagecraft and staging.

Each student was assigned an individual topic on some question of the ancient staging and production of plays. Some worked directly on practical questions: they were asked to analyse the main sources about, for example, the costumes, the stage area, or the music, and to draw what conclusions they could. Others worked on social historical questions, like the role of the *chorégos*, the development of the acting profession or the audience. Still others worked on the text and asked questions about various themes. Those who worked on theoretical questions were asked to share their research with those developing practical aspects of the production. For example, one student researching necromancy made suggestions about the staging of Queen Atossa’s pouring of liquid offerings.

In the performance of the scene, the students tried out on stage the conclusions they had drawn in their papers. All students participated in the production; many in the creation of sets, costumes, masks and other technical aspects; most in acting and some in direction. There was, of course, much imaginative filling of gaps, when no concrete evidence could be found. The *chorôdidaskalos*, for example, studied many vase paintings, and fragments of ancient discussion to try to put together a possible sequence of movements for the chorus, but added movement and modified it where necessary.

In the creation of music and in memorisation of the lines, new technology was invaluable. Two music students, having examined the recent work of M.L. West (1995) and others on ancient music, put together a musical accompaniment electronically. With mp3 recordings it was possible to play the tune over and over both in full class rehearsals and for private practice. There is not enough evidence to know if the result, beautiful as it was, was at all close to choral music of early tragedy, but it was the concrete version of their academic papers.

Only a couple of the students had had any training in ancient Greek, but the actors and chorus memorised the words of the ancient text. A transliteration and word-by-word translation was provided, but, most important, the text was recorded on mp3 files so that the class could listen to the text, hear the pronunciation and commit it to memory. Stephen Daitz has produced many CD versions of Greek and Latin texts for years and new recordings of various classical texts are now available on several internet sites. These are enormously helpful, but the ease of recording mp3s means that specifically tailored excerpts can be created to suit exactly the task at hand. Of course, pronunciation is an unresolved issue and our barbarian version of the Greek might well have offended some modern scholars; it would probably have left an ancient Greek wholly confused.
Despite the uncertainties of pronunciation and the extra burden that memorisation of the Greek text added, it served useful purposes. First, it gave theatre students, without Greek, a window into the world of the ancient poetry of Aeschylus. Once familiar with the short passage for production, it was possible to consider matters of style and meter in that small section, and to follow the shifts in meaning and intensity which are bound up with meter, even more, perhaps, than they are with words. This study of the text allows students to come to grips with the sound, emphasis and unfamiliar word order of the early text, in a way that would not be possible through an English translation. This is, of course, a poor substitute for many years of language study which it normally takes to become familiar enough with the language to appreciate Aeschylus, but nevertheless it gave students an impression of the issues at play in a much more concrete way than a lecture could. Second, it allowed us to build other aspects of the performance on the text and in particular the meter of the text. The music and choreography, for example, followed the meter very closely. Whereas with an English translation, all music and choreography are immediately influenced by the English rhythms (or lack of rhythm as the case may be), in this exercise it was possible to build directly on the meter of the Greek.

The theatre students profited not only from this window into the structure of an ancient play text, the sound of the words, and the importance of the meter, but also from their attempt to grapple with the conventions of the ancient theatre. The exaggerated importance of movement where facial expression is erased by masks preoccupied both the student director, didaskalos, and the

Plates 1 & 2 Classroom rehearsal at Northwestern University, March 2007.
student chorus director, chorodidaskalos. In attempting to arrive at ways to convey meaning without facial expression, both looked to symbolic, stylised movement. The director, Justin Heyerdahl, attempted to balance arguments, made by late nineteenth-century scholars such as A.E. Haigh, that stage action bore similarities to statue and frieze sculpture, with Sourvinou-Inwood’s discussions of the ritual nature of tragedy, with Aristophanes’s mockery of Aeschylus’s exaggerated style, and with Aristotle’s nod to the importance of delivery in acting. He turned for practical help to two modern movement-based acting styles, Suzuki and Laban. “While neither existed in fifth century Athens,” he acknowledged in his final paper, "they nevertheless rely on the body and voice to completely carry out any intention of emotion; the face is almost useless." The chorodidaskalos, Morgan Miller, a skilled dancer herself, but who had almost no previous knowledge of ancient Greek dance, likewise surveyed ancient comparisons of dance to military formation (all of which are handily collected in Csapo and Slater 1995), examined many vases depicting Greek dance, and worked closely with the text. Both Heyerdahl and Miller tested their interpretation against the text of the play and, especially, Edith Hall’s notes on the dramatic relevance and importance of various words and phrases in the scene. Thus, both directors drew from the structure and production values of what they understood to be the Greek original. They were not forced to gauge the success of their staging solutions from the reactions of a 21st century audience, nor to invent psychology of the characters by analogy with their own 21st century lives in the American mid-west.

In most introductory classes on ancient plays, students can offer something to a discussion of, for example, moral values in a play and debate the relative arguments of, say, Jason and Medea or Antigone and Creon, even if such discussions are often grounded in each person’s private experience of the world. Students, however, are usually incapable of joining in debates about context and production, since they only know the few facts fed to them by the instructor. In this class, however, having built up a very basic knowledge base of accepted views about the possible elements of ancient production, these theatre students could debate the relative merit of solutions to canonical staging problems. A quick classroom brainstorming session, for example, produced many of the solutions to the depiction of Ajax’s death, which are offered in the scholarly literature. Likewise, for their own staging, students grappled with ancient fragments, depiction on vases and arguments in secondary literature to put together an argument to support their various production choices.

In stage choices and scene and costume building, the students were restricted by the theatre area at our disposal and by the budget allotted the class for this project. Some aspects of the staging will seem particularly odd to the viewer looking for features of an ancient production, in particular, perhaps, the raised stage and the lighting. Neither of these was intentional. The raised stage on which all the action of the piece takes place is built in to the black box theatre we used and our class did not have the authority to dismantle it. The lighting was the result of a miscommunication with the lighting technician. We were necessarily performing indoors since the performance was in early March, when Illinois is still bitterly cold. Although these affected the artistic result of the performance, they did not negate the value of using the performance as an academic testing ground. All the actors, if not the audience, recognised the many anachronisms of the production.

Plate 3 Dareios, raised from the dead, addressing the chorus and his queen. Northwestern University, March 2007.
The scene was performed before a small group including Classics faculty and students and some members of the theatre department. Following the performance, the cast stood for a formal question and answer session in which they defended their choices and explained their sources and lack of sources to the audience.

The performed scene was not polished, nor as perfect as imagined. This was in part due to time constraints: the first six or seven weeks of the class were devoted to research and analysis and the performance was put together in the last few weeks of the class. The aim, however, was not to offer a finished production, but to test out the research of the students. In this, I believe, the class was moderately successful. When classicists in the audience questioned the students about their decisions, they were ready with photocopies of vases, with references to ancient sources, and any one of them could, I believe, have rattled off supporting scholarship for their decision to set the scene in a non-circular orchestra, without a raised stage.

As at so many universities, the study of Greek and Latin at Northwestern University dropped off sharply at the beginning of the 20th century and took an increasingly smaller role in undergraduate education as the century progressed. Whereas every 19th century student was given entrance examinations in both languages and required to continue studies in classics for several years, few students in the 21st century ever consider studying Greek. The history of the theatre department follows an almost exactly inverse trajectory. After early days as a department of elocution and speech, the theatre department began to grow and now, in 2007, is one of the most prominent schools of the University. When students from the theatre department take courses on ancient theatre from the Classics department, therefore, they come, in general, with very little preparation in the history and culture of the ancient world, but with a highly sophisticated understanding of what it takes to stage a play. One way of making the ancient plays accessible is to appeal to the moral and philosophical issues raised by the ancient masters. This is done in most ancient drama classes with great success. Another angle of approach, however, particularly for students of theatre, is to approach the ancient texts, ancient theatres and disparate pieces of evidence as artefacts of an ancient production system, which can be compared and contrasted with the modern systems with which they are so familiar.

To stage a play in ancient Greek with costumes and masks is, in a sense, a very old-fashioned way to approach the texts. Late 19th century universities expended a fair amount of energy reviving ancient plays with as much attention to classical detail as possible, including recitation of the plays in Greek. This tradition has continued in some Classics departments, most famously, perhaps, that of Cambridge University. These productions by students and faculty immersed in the Classical world have an enormous appeal to antiquarians and classicists, but this method has had very little hold within the theatre world. Such productions have no place in popular theatre, and they are very difficult for non-classicists to engage in. However, in an
undergraduate theatre class, it is possible for theatre students to take an academic approach to questions of ancient staging and to test their theories in brief performances.

Kathryn Bosher is Assistant Professor of Classics at Northwestern University, where she specialises in ancient theatre and its reception.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the students, whose labour and fine sense of theatre made the class possible. Thanks to Associate Dean Mary Finn and Weinberg College for funds to buy costumes, props and set. Thanks to LaDonna Forsgren and to the staff at the Northwestern University Archives, especially Kevin Leonard, for their help in my research on productions at the University.

References


Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the students, whose labour and fine sense of theatre made the class possible. Thanks to Associate Dean Mary Finn and Weinberg College for funds to buy costumes, props and set. Thanks to LaDonna Forsgren and to the staff at the Northwestern University Archives, especially Kevin Leonard, for their help in my research on productions at the University.

Participants in Staging Greek Drama, Winter Quarter 2007

Eponymous archon, Menon (Jessica Puller)
Choregos, Pericles (Shira Abrams)
King Dareios (Aeschylus Matt Shore)
Queen Atossa (Audrey Klein)
Aulos Player (Christopher Strauss)
Production
Chorus movement researched by Morgan Miller
Costumes researched by Charles Gaidica
Direction and acting style researched by Justin Heyerdahl
Masks researched by Robin Willis
Music and aulos researched by Christopher Strauss and Carly Kincannon
Metrical and Greek vocabulary analysis by Audrey Klein, with help from Kathryn Bosher
Set design researched by Jacqueline Hunzinger

Context
Actors researched by Anne Middleton
Audience researched by Kirsten Huppler
Choregia researched by Shira Abrams
Military imagery and the depiction of the Persian wars researched by Matt Sheelen
Necromancy rituals researched by Piper Sagan
Political and democratic context researched by Jessica Puller
Religion and statue of Dionysos researched by Alexandra Hegel
Themes of the play researched by Aeschylus, Matt Shore