

Titanic resistance: immobility and use of space in Ronconi's production of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*

by **Giulia Torello**

Classical Studies Program, Monash University

Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* [1] is an exemplary case study for the use of theatrical space in ancient drama. The static presence of Prometheus throughout the play affects the perception of space at various levels and determines Prometheus' own relation with the inhospitable surroundings, as much as his interaction with the other characters. This paper explores the use and the dramatic significance of the theatrical space in a production of *Prometheus Bound* (*Prometeo incatenato*) staged under the direction of Luca Ronconi in Syracuse, Sicily in May 2002 [2]. Although I shall refer to the main scholarly debate on a number of staging issues, my focus will be mostly on the modern performance. *Prometheus Bound* has often been dismissed by the critics as a 'static play' (Conacher 25). However, in Ronconi's production the immobility of Prometheus is counterbalanced by the dynamic entries of the other characters and by an apt use of both the vertical and the horizontal theatrical spaces.

The vertical space

Wiles observes that in the ancient Greek world 'a vertical axis is crucial in demarcating the tripartite universe of immortals, mortals and dead' (176) [3]. This hierarchical verticality is specifically delineated on the tragic stage where the horizontal level on which mortals operate is set apart from the upper level, the realm of the gods, whose stage appearances usually occur from an elevated position. The human level is also set apart from the underground, the world of the dead and the realm of chthonic deities. In *Prometheus*, a play set at the edge of the world, in a no-man's land, featuring (Io excepted) only divine characters, the interpretation of this space is crucial. Moreover, the constant presence and total immobility of Prometheus urge a director to consider the onstage position of the protagonist with special care.

Many commentators believe that the chained actor who played Prometheus in the original performance must have been positioned in the central rear of the stage (Pickard-Cambridge 38; Arnott 96-8; Conacher 181. Neither Taplin nor Griffith seem to be concerned with Prometheus' onstage position). Davidson suggests that the Titan could have been chained to the *thymele*, right at the centre of the orchestra (34-6) [4]. The positioning of Prometheus in what Wiles describes as the natural focal point of the audience (67) could, however, potentially restrict the acting space to a very limited area. Conversely, to place him on a side would allow for a better use of the theatrical space and would visually convey the idea of a remote, inaccessible area, and effectively represent Prometheus' isolation [5].

The theatrical practicalities of his positioning must also correspond to Prometheus' own ambivalent position in relation to the vertical axis between gods and men. Prometheus is a Titan, a chthonic god, who therefore does not belong entirely to the upper-world, the spatial level of the Olympians. On the other hand, some of his outstanding qualities set him apart from the horizontal space in which humans operate. A Titan, Prometheus is the son of Ouranos, the Sky and Gaia, the Earth and therefore connected with the heavens as well as with the earth. His connection to the underworld is particularly intriguing. According to some versions of the myth Prometheus helped Zeus defeat his own siblings who were precipitated into the Tartarus. Moreover, Prometheus frequently speaks of the threat of a cataclysm and one is enacted on stage at the very end of the play. Thus to maintain Prometheus' ambivalent roles of both chthonic deity and hero who exists above the mortal realm, a staging must be found that both grounds Prometheus to the earth and reinforces his heroic stature.

In Ronconi's production, Margherita Palli's imposing set design responds effectively to Prometheus' complex characterisation. Prometheus is a gigantic statue melted in the mountainous surroundings. He leans forward, as if he were pushed down by implacable divine forces and yet resiliently resists them. Franco Branciaroli, the actor who gives voice and life to the immobile statue, is concealed in Prometheus' head, the centre of intellect and creativity, ten metres off the ground. Prometheus' voice is at times cavernous, earthy and at times trilling, almost squeaking when his words assume an elusive or threatening tone.



Plate 1

To represent Prometheus as a statue means at once to emphasise his status of total immobility and his superior nature that sets him above the human race, being suspended between heaven and earth. The scholion to *Prometheus Bound* 74 indicates that in the original staging of the play Prometheus was indeed represented by a gigantic statue with an actor concealed in it [6]. Whether or not one wants to trust the scholiast's notation, Ronconi certainly demonstrates that this staging solution can work effectively. One of Taplin's reservations to the so-called 'dummy theory' lies in a problematic entrance of Kratos and Bias 'each carrying one end of a rigid, giant dummy' (Taplin 244). In Ronconi's production, the statue of Prometheus formed part of the set design and could hardly be transported and secured onstage at the opening of the play. Its towering presence could not escape the notice of the audience, particularly in an open-air theatre such as Syracuse, where the absence of curtains makes set designs completely visible well before the start of a performance.

When the play began Hephaistos, Kratos and Bias all appeared on top of Prometheus' statue. Hephaistos did not chain Prometheus' limbs to the rock. Instead he appeared in the act of securing invisible bonds by hitting the statue with a sharpened stone. The scene of Prometheus' enchainment remained nevertheless extremely compelling. The audience could visualise the various stages of this process through Hephaistos' meticulous description. The resonance produced by his hitting the statue's empty frame well conveyed the violence, almost savagery, of the act, as well as Prometheus' silent sufferance. Kratos and Bias, Hephaistos' instigators, appeared bound together in chains back to back. This arrangement responded to their characterisation as the ruthless executors of Zeus' will and the two grim faces of his cruelty.

The vertical space in *Prometheus Bound* is dynamic. The theatrical rendering of downwards verticality appears in the form of airborne descents of divine characters (the Chorus of Okeanides, Okeanos and Hermes), as well as in the repeated allusions to a precipitation into Tartarus [7]. Conversely, metaphorical upwards vertical movements are created by Prometheus' prophetic threats against Zeus as well as by the Chorus' appeals to divine justice.

When Ronconi's production was staged at the Piccolo Theatre in Milan during the following winter season (January 2003) the set design had to be adapted to fit the much smaller size of the enclosed Strehler Theatre. The most significant change to the original setting was to place the twenty-metre wide and six-metre high statue of Prometheus directly on stage without any pediment. The gigantic cranes also had to be eliminated and the airborne descents of the characters were attained through the use of cables and harnesses. Undoubtedly the reduced height of Prometheus' statue from ten to six metres along with the minimal sound dispersion of the indoor venue had, according to Branciaroli (interview, *Il Nuovo*, 14 January 2004), the advantage of reducing the strain on the actors, allowing them to concentrate less on maintaining a high voice pitch and produce a more profound textual interpretation. In my opinion, however, this arrangement neutralised the significance of the vertical space that the Syracusan production had so deeply emphasised. Furthermore, Prometheus' connection with the natural surroundings and, in particular, with Mother Earth became less evident. Conversely, his physical closeness to both the Chorus and Io brought their relationship to a more intimate level. At some point during Prometheus' narration of her wanderings, Io languidly lay down on the Titan's gigantic hand in a gesture that equally conveyed a search for protection and an expression of intense sensuality.

Airborne descents

In Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Okeanos is said to arrive onboard a griffin (284). It has been suggested that Aeschylus could have staged this entry by utilising the *mêchanê* [8], by having him appear on the *skênê* roof (*theologeion*), or from one of the lateral entrances (*eisodoi*) [9]. How Hermes arrives on stage (944) is not specifically addressed in the Aeschylean play. Most critics have proposed that he simply entered the stage from one of the *eisodoi*, since the text does not imply in any way an aerial

entry [10]. An airborne descent could nevertheless be in line with the characterisation of the god as the wing-footed messenger of Zeus. Ronconi staged an identical entry for both Okeanos and Hermes. After all, they both display a servile nature complacent to Zeus' schemes. The aerial descent of Okeanos and Hermes ended with a landing on the gigantic statue of Prometheus. Ronconi utilised a big crane, the modern equivalent to the ancient *mêchanê*. However, the outsized crane did not carry the actors who played Okeanos and Hermes, but only listless puppets representing the gods. This arrangement not only avoided the actors having to perform a rather acrobatic landing, but also effectively represented their subservient nature and created a contrast with Prometheus' uncompromising resistance.

The entry of the Chorus of the Okeanides in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* has caused critics major problems, since in the *parodos* they refer to their arrival on winged chariots (128-30). Critics have proposed different staging solutions, such as the use of the *mêchanê* or of wheeled chariots, either coming directly from the *eisodoi* or appearing on the *theologeion* [11]. All these suggestions incur several technical difficulties. It is unlikely that the *mêchanê* could be able to sustain a full chorus of twelve or fifteen members. Moreover, it seems rather impractical that the Chorus could remain 'floating in the air' as the scholion claims, during the recitation of 155 lines (128-283). To suggest that the full Chorus appeared on the *theologeion* is equally problematic. A character that appears on the *skênê* roof is usually alone, although in some instances, can be accompanied by a maximum of two other characters [12].

Technical difficulties aside, a vertical entry would put the Chorus to the same emotional level of Kratos, Bias, Okeanos, Hermes and Zeus, Prometheus' oppressors by means of physical or verbal abuse or threatening silence. The easiest and, in my opinion, most convincing way of staging this scene, as proposed by Thomson (142-3) [13] is simply to make the chorus enter from the *eisodoi* to perform a dance that would probably be suggestive of a flight. Ronconi made the Chorus enter the theatrical space from different directions, from the *eisodoi*, from backstage and from behind the rock to which Prometheus was chained. The chorus members appeared dressed in long white tunics. Their heads were crowned by fair, almost white hair that, as Renato Palazzi noticed, made them resemble elegant women of Victorian England.



Plate 2

These women, ageless and ethereal, seemed suddenly to materialise like swinging, living drops of water springing from the rocks. In Syracuse, the natural surroundings would have made this appearance particularly effective. Although they did not perform an aerial descent, their graceful movements and their converging in the acting space from different direction suggested a winged arrival, while exemplifying the different sources from which springs the natural element they represent.

The horizontal space

Prometheus' imposing figure acted as a space divider between heaven and earth. But he also acted as the unifier of these two worlds, being the only character who was physically connected with the earth and the sky, with mankind as embodied in the suffering Io, and with the realm of the gods represented by Kratos, Bias, Hephaistos, Okeanos, Hermes and by the invisible, tyrannical Zeus. The gigantic statue was grounded in the earth; his body lay on the rock, his left hand leaned against the ground, whereas his right hand stretched out with the palm facing the sky in a giving and receiving gesture. The physical connection with the earth reflected his connection with the other characters: with the Chorus who emerged from the ground level and with Io. In the role of Io, Laura Marinoni displayed at once innocent fragility and consummate sensuality. She entered the stage troubled by a frenzy that gave her no rest. It was only towards the end of Prometheus' prophecy, when Prometheus revealed her journey's final destination, Egypt, and the birth of a child to Zeus, that she seemed to find some peace. But this peacefulness was only a

temporary state and soon after Io was forced to continue her painful journey. She left the stage in the same state of frenzy as she entered it.

With the exception of Prometheus' elevated position, the horizontal space was a homogeneous acting area so that Io and the Chorus acted within the same dramatic space. The back stage was occupied by a central pool, from which part of the Chorus of Okeanides emerged. Arguably, Prometheus' towering presence on the right hand-side of the stage (from the audience's point of view) could have focussed the audience's attention on that specific area, particularly given that the emissaries of Zeus all appeared on top of him. The arrival of the Chorus from different directions and their movements throughout the play certainly had the effect of diverting the audience's attention to different areas of the acting space. The choreography of Marise Fach, who has been teaching mime and body expression at the Piccolo Theatre Acting School and has collaborated with Ronconi in several productions, was particularly effective in making the Chorus a homogeneous as much as a dynamic ensemble. Moreover, Ronconi chose to position a squared stone on centre stage [15]. This central stone gave in turn a momentary rest to the tormented Io and, for a longer period of time, to the Chorus Leader during her exchange with Prometheus. This setting created a more balanced arrangement of the theatrical space.

Entrances and exits

McAuley notes that a character's entry to the acting space is usually signified, often by another onstage character, in order to draw the audience's attention to a specific point (96). In the original performance of *Prometheus Bound*, according to all commentators [16], Prometheus entered the scene escorted by Kratos, Bia and Hephaistos through one of the *eisodoi*. In Ronconi's production of the play, the audience entering the *cavea* of the theatre of Syracuse, would have seen immediately the statue of Prometheus and would have perhaps wondered what it represented (a god? a wounded hero?) without realising that the statue far from being an unanimated stage property, would soon come to life. Moreover, when the music signified the start of the show, the audience probably expected the characters to make their entrance from a lateral entrance. Instead, Kratos' opening lines would have unexpectedly diverted their visual focus to the top of Prometheus' statue.

Like entrances, exits are equally signified in theatre, often by the departing characters and help construct the off-stage space in the audience's mind (McAuley 98). The unconventional setting of *Prometheus Bound* and Prometheus' permanent condition of immobility undoubtedly hampers the construction of an off-stage space. For all the divine characters that visit Prometheus, the off-stage space is the heavens from which they have descended to complete their assigned tasks and to which they are expected to return. For the Chorus of Okeanides that space is the ocean which, according to the ancients, surrounds the globe and to the ocean they will return. For Prometheus, the off-stage space is the bowels of the earth from where he originated and where he would rather be, away from the public display of his misery. Prometheus' revelation of Io's wanderings alone seems to create a more defined, although mythical, off-stage geographical space.

The geography of *Prometheus Bound* has appeared to various commentators inaccurate and contradictory. Prometheus' place of enchainment to the extreme north-west as described in *Prometheus Bound* is in conflict with the more traditional location on the Caucasus Mountains, in the extreme North. This anomaly has caused trouble to commentators since ancient times [17]. Finkelberg, who has recently reconsidered this topic, argues that geographic inaccuracies and discrepancies between *Prometheus Bound* and *Prometheus Lyomenos*, the second play of the Prometheus lost trilogy, can be solved if one admits that large part of the account of Io's wanderings is a later interpolation.

A modern director of the play who decides to maintain integrally the Aeschylean text as the tradition has preserved it could use these "wild inaccuracies" to his or her advantage. The positioning of Prometheus' place of enchainment to the extreme "north-west" justifies in itself Ronconi's choice of placing Prometheus at one side of the acting space. The theatre at Syracuse, in particular, presents a south-facing *cavea* (Sear 191). Therefore the right-hand side of the audience, where Prometheus is chained corresponds to the West whereas the left-hand side corresponds to the East. It is not surprising then to see Io, who is known to have started her long journey in Argos and is heading north-west along the Ionian coast, enter the stage from the right *eisodos*. Conversely, she leaves the stage through the left *eisodos* heading, as we know, eastwards.

In *Prometheus Bound*, Io's adventurous journey via the Cimmerian Isthmus goes Far East to the land of the Arimaspians towards Egypt, her final destination, describing almost a circle. This circular orbit was mimetically enacted by Laura Marinoni's scattered, almost mechanical, movements. The description of the inhospitable lands that Io is destined to visit bears mythical and cosmological connotations. Like Prometheus, Io faces alone extreme conditions and is going to see places removed from humanity and civilisation [19]. The detailed account of her perilous journey accompanied by Io's movements around the orchestra poignantly transfers it to the here and now, eliminating the temporal lapse. As a result the entire cosmos is geographically mapped within the acting space and when, at line 886, Io exits the stage, the audience could still have visualised in their mind the off-stage space.

The cataclysm

The final scene of the play has also been the centre of an animated scholarly debate. The assumption that the play must have ended with Prometheus being swallowed by the earth, has generated some unconvincing staging reconstructions [20]. Taplin rightly observes that neither textual references nor the hypothesis or scholia to the play support such assumptions. Indeed, Prometheus describes the cosmic cataclysm (1080-1090) but does not comment on what is happening to himself as a result of it [21]. Davidson conclusively remarks that this scene could be staged effectively in a number of ways that do not require 'rock fissures, collapsing structures, 'Charon steps' or the *ekkyklêma*.' (38).

Ronconi simply signified the natural catastrophe through the roar of a thunderstorm which was followed by a desolated silence. Only Prometheus remained in the deserted setting, motionless. After a few moments his outstretched palm kindled a flame. Whether this represented the gift of fire that Prometheus had stolen from Zeus to give to humankind or the flame originated by Zeus' thunderbolt, this final scene undoubtedly sealed Prometheus' victory. Ultimately, he could not be annihilated even by Zeus' thunderbolt, the most powerful of all weapons. Gradually he has gained control of the natural elements: [22] of the earth in which his body is melted, of the water which is embodied by the Okeanides who are siding with him and eventually of the fire. His endurance is unshakeable.

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Foot notes

[1] The authenticity and the dating of Prometheus Bound is disputed; some scholars recognise the play as the genuine work of Aeschylus and date it to the end of his career (456-454 BCE), whereas others claim that Prometheus Bound is the work of a later imitator of Aeschylus. For arguments in favour of the Aeschylean paternity see, among others, Hammond (1988:11ff.) and Pattoni (1989). Contra Griffith (1977), West (1990: 51-72) and Marzullo (1993). Some useful references are in Davidson (1994: 40, n. 34).

[2] Aeschylus staged a play, The Women of Aetna, at the theatre of Syracuse in the mid-470s BCE to celebrate the foundation of the new colony of Aetna. Those scholars who recognise Prometheus Bound as a genuine work of Aeschylus have suggested that this play could have also been written for the Syracusan stage around 456 BCE when the dramatist retired in Sicily at the end of his career. Griffith (1978) argues that there are no elements in the play to suggest a Sicilian staging. If, as is probable, the third play of the trilogy dramatised the founding of the Prometheia, the Athenian festival par excellence, it is most likely that Aeschylus wrote his play for the Athenian stage (see Conacher 24). As Sear has pointed out (191), the theatre currently at Syracuse has been subject to major structural alterations both in Hellenistic and Roman times and bears little resemblance to the fifth century structure.

[3] Mastronarde argues that in Greek tragedy the gods' higher position 'gives strong visual marking to distinction between the human and the divine.' (273). An exception to this hierarchical division, Mastronarde observes (274), are Aeschylus' Eumenides and the Prometheus trilogy in which Io (in Prometheus Bound) and Herakles (in Prometheus Lyomenos; cf. Hypoth P.V. 11-3) are on the same level as the divine characters. On the characters' spatial separation in Prometheus Bound see infra. An invaluable analysis of the Prometheus trilogy is in Griffith (1983: 281-305).

[4] Rhem (2002: 357-8, n. 210) observes that 'locating the central figure there causes catastrophic upstaging problems'.

[5] Aeschylus repeatedly alludes to the remoteness and inaccessibility of the place, where no human being ever set foot. Cf. Rhem (2002: 156). Finkelberg remarks that 'Prometheus' position was generally regarded as symbolic of the end of the earth.' (132 n. 39).

[6] Taplin accounts for what he defines a 'weird theory', according to which in the original production Prometheus was represented by a giant dummy with an actor conceal in it (1972: 243-4; see also Conacher, 182).

[7] First by Prometheus, who wishes he had been precipitated down into Tartarus to be hidden from public view (152-7) and again by him when he recalls Atlas' and Typhon's chastisements (199ff.); then by Hermes who threatens Prometheus (1015ff.) and by Prometheus' words of defiance (1043-53) and finally by his own description of the cosmic catastrophe at the end of the play (1080-90).

[8] Griffith (1983: 140); Mastronarde (287).

[9] Davidson (37 with n. 28).

[10] Taplin (1972: 279 with n. 1) lists a series of scholars who favour the use of the *mêchanê* also for Hermes' entry; cf. Griffith (1983: 250).

[11] The use of the *mêchanê* to stage the Chorus entrance is suggested by West (1979). Sommerstein (1996) proposes that the chorus could enter from the lateral entrances onboard of wheeled chariots. Pickard-Cambridge (1946: 39-40), Conacher (1980: 183-4 n. 17), Griffith (1983: 109) and Mastronarde (282) all argue that the chorus appeared on the *theologeion*. Some valuable objections to these staging reconstructions are in Davidson (36).

[12] The Dioscuri appear in Euripides' *Electra* and *Orestes*, Hermione and Pylades appear simultaneously in Euripides' *Orestes*. See Mastronarde (267-8).

[13] See also Taplin (1972: 255-6) who expresses some reservations, which are addressed by Davidson (36).

[14] Palazzi, Renato. *Il Prometeo incatenato*. Gennaio 2003. (http://www.delteatro.it/hdoc/area_rec.asp?recensioneid=56119).

[15] Wiles (70-2) observes that the central position of the orchestra can make actors 'feel dynamically weak', whereas the preferred positions for performers are behind or at the sides of the centre. For the use of the orchestra as acting space in modern performances of Greek drama cf. Ley & Ewans (1985).

[16] Thomson (1932: 132); Griffith (1983: 80). Taplin (1972: 240-1), remarks that the simultaneous entry of four characters is unique in extant Greek tragedy; Conacher (32) alludes to the enchainment without commenting on the characters' entry.

[17] See in particular Griffith (1974: 79-80, 213-4), West (1990: 305) and Finkelberg (120).

[18] Finkelberg (140-1).

[19] Katz (1999) analyses Io's journey as a metaphorical rite of passage into adulthood.

[20] The hypothesis that the *ekkyklêma* might have been used to withdraw Prometheus and the Chorus is discussed by Taplin (1972: 273-4 with references).

[21] Taplin (1972: 272-3). Cf also Conacher (188-9).

[22] Prometheus' first speech starts with an invocation to the four elements (88-91). Cf. Griffith (1983: 101-2).

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