

The Meaning of Classical Theatre Through the Ages

compiled by
Anna L. Lea

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copy editors
Anna L. Lea
Madeleine Pappas

Front Cover Photo
William Hulings as Prometheus in The Studio Theatre,
2001 production of *Prometheus* by Aeschylus and
adapted by Sophy Burnham, directed by Joy Zinoman.
Photo by Scott Suchman.

Courtesy of
The Studio Theatre, Washington, D.C.

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The Contributors

Bernard M.W. Knox is Professor Emeritus of Yale University, Director Emeritus of the Harvard Center for Hellenic Studies, Washington, D.C., and Chair Emeritus of The Society for the Preservation of the Greek Heritage, Washington, D.C. His many books include: *The Heroic Temper*, *Oedipus at Thebes*, *Oedipus the King* (translation), *Word and Action: Essays on the Ancient Theatre*, and *Essays: Ancient and Modern*.

Michael Kahn is the Artistic Director of The Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C. and Director of the Drama Division of the Juilliard School where he has been a leading member of the faculty since its founding in 1968. Mr. Kahn holds a BA from Columbia College of Columbia University and an Honorary D.D.L. from Kean College. In addition to Juilliard, he has been on the faculties of New York University Graduate School of the Arts, the Circle in the Square Theatre School and Princeton University.

Joy Zinoman is the Artistic and Managing Director of The Studio Theatre, Washington, D.C. and also the founder of The Studio Theatre Acting Conservatory. Ms. Zinoman has been teaching and directing for 35 years in the U.S. and abroad. Under her leadership, The Studio Theatre, where she has directed 50 productions, has received over 160 Helen Hayes nominations. She attended Northwestern University, Radcliffe College and American University.

Michael Dirda, the moderator of the seminar, is a writer and senior editor of the *Washington Post Book World* where he has worked since 1978. His reviews and essays appear weekly and address a broad range of interests. Mr. Dirda received the Pulitzer Prize for Distinguished Criticism in 1993. He received his BA in English from Oberlin College and earned an MA and PhD in Comparative Literature from Cornell University. Mr. Dirda is also the author of a short paperback entitled, *Caring for your Books*, and has assembled some of his journalism in *Readings: Essays and Literary Entertainments*.

Introduction

In the summer of 2001, we realized that during the forthcoming season no less than four prominent theatres in Washington would present ancient Greek plays whose influence has ranged over the world during much of the subsequent 2,300 years.

This prompted SPGH to organize a discussion on the meaning today of ancient Greek theatre. We chose to concentrate on two contemporary and imaginative productions: a trilogy of Sophocles' three *Oedipus* plays, directed by Michael Kahn at his Shakespeare Theatre, and, *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus directed by Joy Zinoman at her Studio Theatre, for which a second Act was written for the occasion by Sophy Burnham to replace the author's lost sequels.

The death of interest in classical Greek plays and its European revival in 1585 was presented by our greatest living classicist, Prof. Bernard Knox, followed by presentations by Michael Kahn and Joy Zinoman to an overflowing audience. Michael Dirda, Senior Editor of the *Washington Post Book World*, moderated the ensuing discussion.

This renewed interest in ancient Greek drama in the Washington community, gave us the opportunity to reflect on the significant issues addressed in these plays and their enduring relevance throughout history and across cultures. "Conflict and questioning are vital to ancient tragedy," explains Prof. Marianne McDonald, and chair of SPGH's board, in her book, *Ancient Sun, Modern Light*, "man must ask questions even if it leads to his own destruction (as it did in Oedipus' case), because without the questions he is a puppet, not a man".¹

The popularity of certain Greek plays has been associated with the historical context of the times. During the 20th century in North America, Peter Arnott finds that "*Electra* was popular during law-and-order years, *Antigone* at times when authority was questioned, *Orestes* for the disenchanted youth, *Bacchae* for the drug cultists, and perhaps ominously, the apocalyptic *Oedipus at Colonus* for the 1970s and 1980s".² Or in Greece, for example, during the military dictatorship, when *Antigone* was staged every time the word "Freedom" was uttered by the actors it was met

with cheering by the audience. This resulted in the discontinuation of the play.

SPGH aims always to produce programs that reveal the relevance of ideas and principles contributed by the Ancient Greeks to issues and concerns of major contemporary importance.

Anna L. Lea, President, SPGH

Madeleine Pappas, Executive Director, SPGH

- 1 McDonald, Marianne, *Ancient Sun, Modern Light*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 13.
- 2 Arnott, Peter, "North America," in J. Michael Walton, *Living Greek Theatre*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), p. 377.

The Modern Revival of Greek Tragedy

Prof. Bernard M.W. Knox

Dirda: Let me explain a little about the order of events tonight. I will introduce each speaker just before his or her remarks, and at the end of the program I will invite questions. I have spoken with my fellow panelists, and everyone agrees that the question and answer period is often the most enjoyable part of an evening. So please prepare them.

One of the great moments of my life came when I first arrived in Washington 25 years ago, a friend of mine, the writer Robert Phelps, told me I must go out and look up Professor Bernard Knox. And so I did, partly for my own selfish pleasure, because when I was in 10th grade we had to read *Oedipus the King* and the translation was by Bernard Knox. So to meet him was almost like meeting Sophocles himself, although Bernard was and is a much more dashing fellow. Let me tell you a little bit about Bernard Knox. He is, I think in the view of many people, America's greatest living classicist. He has had a distinguished career as a professor at Yale University, and as director for the Center for Hellenic Studies. In his youth, Knox fought in the Spanish Civil War and as a guerrilla behind the lines in Europe during World War II. Once, years later, he was at a conference when a fellow came up to him saying, "Professor Knox, Professor Knox, you probably won't remember me, but you taught me how to blow up trains."

It is my great pleasure to start tonight's program by introducing Professor Bernard Knox.

Knox: Ladies and gentlemen, my subject is the revival of Greek Tragedy. To have a revival of course you have to have a death, and before that a birth. The Western theatre was born in Athens towards the end of the 6th century B.C. and the death of that theatre in Western Europe was a long slow process. The theatre, of course, was originally strictly an Athenian affair - annual performances in the theatre of Dionysos in the spring, and at a different time in the harbor city of Piraeus. But even in the theatre's great century, the fifth, Aeschylus left Athens for the Greek cities of Sicily, where he wrote and performed in plays and where he died. Towards the end of the century, Euripides and his younger contemporary, Agathon, who, as some of you may remember played a role in Plato's *Symposium*. He left Athens for the kingdom of Macedon in the North, where Euripides wrote his final masterpiece, *The Bacchae*.

By the 4th century, there were theatres all over the Greek world and traveling companies of actors organized in what we call Guilds, who performed the classics of the 5th century and the comedies of the 4th, those of Menander and Diphilos - plays of mistaken identity, recognition and happy endings with a marriage. We have inscriptions that date performances in the theatre of Athens as late as the 2nd century B.C. and they may well have continued, though after that Athens became a backward town no longer of any importance except as an educational center.

But long before that time, a theatre had become a necessity for any Greek city of any stature - Epidaurus, for example, the great shrine to the healing god, where visitors can sit in a theatre that is still intact - Delphi, Syracuse, Pergamon, on what is now the Turkish Coast, Alexandria, and performances went on for many centuries.

We have an account of one spectacular performance, far outside the Greek world, in the capital of the Eastern Kingdom of Parthia, Rome's enemy on its eastern frontier. It took place in 53 B.C., the year Marcus Licinius Crassus,

a Roman billionaire, led an army into Parthia in search of military glory to put him on level with his partners in power in Rome. This included Craeus Pompeius who had suppressed pirates in the Mediterranean and won victories over Rome's enemies in the East and Julius Caesar who, in defiance of orders from Rome, was busy adding to the Roman Empire what is now France, Belgium, and Holland.

But Crassus instead of winning glory, met defeat and death. The Parthian general Surenas cut off his head and ordered a staff officer to ride to the Parthian court and hand it to the king. The court, when he arrived, was watching a troupe of Greek actors headed by one actor called Jason, performing *The Bacchae* of Euripides. The play was almost over. The actor playing the part of Agave, mother of Pentheus, the Theban King who had resisted the cult of Dionysus, was about to arrive on stage holding what she did not realize was the head of her son, which in a Dionysic frenzy, she and the other women of Thebes had torn off his body. The officer shouted, threw the head of Marcus Licinius Crassus on stage, where it was caught by Jason, who, quick to take a cue, danced forward singing Agave's triumphal hymn: "*pheromen ex oreon helika neotomon...we bring from the mountains a branch fresh-cut.*" The house exploded in wild applause.

Performances, though not like this one, seem to have continued through the first two centuries A.D. but later ceased as the northern tribes broke into the empire to seize territory, leaving behind them sacked cities and general devastation. Not only did performance of ancient Greek theatre come to an end, but even the text of plays, preserved on fragile papyrus scrolls, vanished in the libraries or disintegrated in the damp of ruined buildings.

By 1300 A.D., the date on which Dante tells us he saw Homer, and other great poets unfortunate enough to be born before the birth of Christ, confined on the threshold of hell. He had never read Homer nor could he have read

him if presented with the Greek text. Knowledge of Greek had been lost in the West together with the texts of the plays. It had survived in Byzantium, the capital of the eastern half of the Roman Empire. Seven plays of each of the three great tragic dramatists had been selected for educational use; the texts were eventually transferred from fragile papyrus to durable vellum. Interestingly enough this thoroughly Christian and somewhat Puritanical society also preserved the texts of eleven of the raucous, often highly obscene, but always hilarious comedies of Aristophanes, whether this was done for educational purposes is not known.

In the Italian Renaissance with its renewed interest in the ancient sources, Greek was studied under professors from Byzantium. There was a Platonic Academy of the Court of Lorenzo II Magnifico and Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes were read again in the West, this time in books printed in Venice.

The revival was due, and we know the exact time and place, March 3, 1585 in the Teatro Olimpico at Vicenza in North Italy. A decision to stage a Greek tragedy was taken by The Academia Olimpica, a humanistic society of 21 members which is still in existence. One of its members was Palladio, the famous architect of the Veneto, and he designed a theatre for the performance. For the opening play the academy, strongly influenced by Aristotle's high praise of it, finally chose "as the ideal presentation for an ideal theatre, the ideal tragedy, *Oedipus the King*," - in spite of the fact that there was no Italian translation of it. One was commissioned and the performance, magnificently costumed, was cast on a regal scale. Oedipus had an escort of 28 servants, pages and guards; Jocasta 25 (one of them holding up her train); and Creon 6. The action was played out against a backdrop that is still in place in the theatre. Through the central aperture the visitor can see a magnificent *trompe l'oeil* perspective of ancient Thebes, which looked, of course, like Renaissance Vicenza.

This, however, was not only the first, but also the last attempt to recreate a Greek tragedy in its original form for more than two centuries, during which the texts were adapted, re-written or expanded, as in the opera or in the French classical theatre of Racine and Voltaire. Racine's *Phèdre* was based on a close study of Euripides' *Hippolytus*, as we know from a copy in the Bibliotheque Nationale of the Greek text which is studded with notes in Racine's handwriting. Voltaire read Sophocles' play for his own *Edipe*, remarking in the preface that he had corrected Sophocles' errors.

Later, in Weimar in 1791, Goethe took over direction of the Hoftheater and oversaw the production of over 600 plays, among them the version of the Euripides' *Ion* by August Wilhelm Schlegel, who decided to "improve" the original by eliminating among other things the chorus and the prologue. Since the prologue, spoken by Hermes, explains the complicated relationships of the characters in this play of mistaken identity and recognition, its omission naturally caused complete confusion in the audience. On opening night in fact the audience was so unruly and disorderly that Goethe had to shout loudly from his box, "*Man lachte nicht!*" - "No laughing!"

More successful was an earlier production of a farce based on Aristophanes' *Birds* in which Goethe got to play a part. "Those who appeared in costume," he wrote, "(of whom I was one), could move their head freely, lift their wings and the tail was able to make a slight motion from side to side; the owl could even make his eyes roll."

The first version of a Greek tragedy in German translation that was free from addition, subtraction, and adaptation, was the famous production of *Antigone* in 1841 in Potsdam, Germany. This was the country in which during the 19th century, while the Dons at Oxford and Cambridge guzzled their 50-year-old port wine, the study of classical antiquities was put on a scientific basis. The great scholar, August Böckh, was called in as a philological advisor and the music

for the choral odes was composed by Felix Mendelsohn. It was a great success. It was also the beginning of a new life for Greek tragedy on the stage. And the *Antigone*, the play chosen for this ground breaking performance, was to become the most performed and most discussed play for the next century and a half - a phenomenon discussed in George Steiner's book, *Antigones*, which ends with the words: "new Antigones are being imagined, thought, lived now; and will be tomorrow." Wherever and whenever there is a conflict between an individual conscience and a tyrannical state, Antigone reappears on the modern stage.

A much more controversial *Antigone* was staged in Paris in 1944. It was written by Jean Anouilh in 1941, when the German occupation looked permanent, resistance futile, collaboration the only choice. In Anouilh's play, Antigone is a rebel without a cause, Creon a ruler puzzled by what seems irrational opposition, but it was not produced until 1944 when the situation had changed dramatically. It opened again in a liberated Paris on September the 29th, 1944 and no one knew how it would be received. As the curtain fell, there was silence until General Koenig, De Gaulle's military governor of Paris, stood up in the box and cried out, "*C'est admirable.*" The play went on for a run of 645 performances and was later performed in translation all over Western Europe and in New York.

Bertholdt Brecht staged an *Antigone* in Switzerland in 1948. His Creon is a Hitler figure who has plunged his city into a disastrous war. Brecht wrote a moving poem addressed to the actor playing the role.

*Komm aus dem Dämmer und geh
Vor uns her eine Zeit
Freundliches, mit dem leichtem Schritt
Der ganz Bestimmten...*

Come out of the shadows and
Walk before us for a while

Friendly, with the light step
Of one whose mind is firmly made up.

Since that time there has been a steady increase in the number of Greek tragedies restaged in Europe, the United States and Japan. Some directors have aimed at recreating the original performance. Tony Harrison's production of *Oresteia* in the National Theatre, for example, had an all-male cast wearing masks. It was played in the Olivier Theatre, which resembles a Greek theatre in its open stage and fan-shaped auditorium that can seat over 1,000 spectators. But other twentieth-century dramatists and directors have played fast and loose with both text and staging Suzuki, for example. I first heard of Suzuki in Italy where I once opened a copy of an illustrated magazine to a photograph of what looked like a half-naked Samurai warrior about to cut off a woman's head. The headline of the article was, "The other night I got a phone call from Aeschylus." (*L'altra sera mi ha telefonato Eschilo*). The violent anachronism had its point; the set of Suzuki's *Clytemnestra*, for example, was equipped with wastepaper baskets advertising Marlboro cigarettes. But most of the modern productions try to walk a line between two extremes as in the case of our own Washington Greek theatrical season in which many of us here present have already seen and appreciated, Michael Kahn's African *Oedipus*, and look forward to *Agamemnon's Daughters* (which uses material from plays of all three of the Athenian tragedians), and Joy Zinoman's recreation of the Aeschylean Prometheus trilogy which she will now speak to you about herself.³ ■

3 This lecture is heavily indebted to two brilliant studies of Greek drama on the modern stage: Hellmut Flashar's *Inszenierung der Antike. Das Griechische Drama auf der Bühne der Neuzeit*, (München: C.H. Beck, 1991) and Marianne McDonald's *Ancient Sun, Modern Light*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

The Oedipus Plays

Michael Kahn

***Dirda:** Michael Kahn is the Artistic Director of the Shakespeare Theatre and Director of the Drama division of the Juilliard School where he has been a member of the faculty since its founding in 1968. Perhaps the simplest way to indicate the degree of Kahn's importance in the theatrical world is just to cite some of his former students. These include the actors William Hurt, Harvey Keitel, Val Kilmer, Kevin Kline, Kelly McGillis, Christopher Reeve, Robin Williams and many others. So let me present Michael Kahn.*

Kahn: It is quite daunting to follow Professor Bernard Knox especially for someone who has done an African Oedipus all in one evening. Since you have mentioned all those actors' names that I taught but rarely mention, let me tell you a story. I was invited to Africa this summer because it was known that I was going to set the theme of this trilogy in Africa. I was invited to see dancers, musicians and rituals that I thought would inform our thinking for the play. Also, I was asked to make an interactive workshop of Hamlet with 400 young South African students. After it was over, I signed autographs for the students asking everybody what their name was and I wrote to so and so with best wishes Michael Kahn. One girl said, "Would you please write to Sheria with best wishes from Michael Kahn who directed and taught Val Kilmer." I knew who I was finally.

I was struck by something Professor Knox said which I think is actually the ideal that all of us as directors of plays,

whether of Shakespeare or Sophocles or Schiller or whomever, aspire. It is to recreate an experience like the one in Parthia when Marcus Crassus' head actually arrived on the stage. While it may sound funny, that sense of immediacy, that sense of surprise, that sense of being taken out of purely sitting in your seat and actually being caught and involved in something so personal and so important to you that evening, something you did not expect when you walked in the door. This is probably what we all strive for. We do not cut off people's heads, though I must say it gives us some ideas. While we are privileged to work on such extraordinary plays of the past, as I know I have spent most of my life doing primarily Shakespeare and the Elizabethans. We do try to recreate in some way our idea of what it might have been like, not necessarily physically, definitely not scenically - but how we can recreate at least the same emotional and psychological relationship between the audience, the actors and the playwright, as audiences, who had never seen the play before, must have experienced it.

In many ways, this means spending a lot of time trying to understand what it was the playwright was actually trying to tell us when he or she wrote the play. But often it means finding a way of denuding the play of some of its cultural baggage that sometimes sit on it like barnacles on a ship. So that audiences who see a play, do not only feel that it is an extraordinary artifact, but rather ask, "What am I? How am I involved in it?"

So sometimes, a playwright may perhaps be excessive, for instance, Mr. Suzuki in Japan. Although I must say in Mr. Suzuki's defense, that he directed the greatest actress I have ever seen in my life. She was speaking Japanese, so I had no idea what she was saying. But what she was doing physically, and with the notes in her voice would have been the envy of any actor in Athens at that time.

So, when I get up in the morning and feel privileged to work on a play by a writer far greater than myself, it is with

a lot of humility that I start to think about how can I tell his story. And it is also with a certain amount of hubris in the case of Greek plays, that I try to imagine what can happen between the audience and the actors on stage that will actually make a great play live. I am always reminded of an extraordinary statement made by Peter Brook who said, "If you let a play speak for itself, it often remains silent." It is our responsibility as artists to try to bridge the gap in the best way we can, often feebly, often successfully, whether a play is 2,500 or 500 years old, so that the play will strike us perhaps as freshly as it did those audiences in Athens, and those audiences in Shakespeare's London.

When I chose to do *Oedipus*, with a lot of fear and trembling, and I must say that I have not really gotten over that fear or trembling, I was aware of a huge weight of tradition, a huge weight of scholarship, a huge weight of my own training with several great professors at Columbia. I remembered that I have had two extraordinary experiences with Greek plays. One of these experiences was when I read them for the first time in college - not seeing them, not hearing them - but reading them and finding that my imagination was captured by the very story and the very words. The second experience was in Greece, when I saw a production in the language I did not understand, but in which the music and the movement touched me in an extraordinary way. So when I began to think about *Oedipus*, the first thing I thought was that it had to be original, and it had to have music and dance in the way that we understand the Greek chorus had in addition to chanting.

I have found myself somewhat removed by some other Greek productions that have tried to imitate a classical Greece that actually I assume resembled none of the original productions of Sophocles' time. When I was growing up, there was a tradition of Greek plays where the directors very often went to the Metropolitan Museum and studied

Greek statues and assumed that the poses of Greek statues were actually the way people in classical plays moved. I found that some of those positions removed excitement for me and made me feel that somehow this was outmoded, overly formal, and not very good.

I tried to find what affected me the most in terms of story telling, ritual, music and dance. I discovered that I had the same feelings when watching African storytellers, and Africans listening to the rhythm of African music. I felt that culture was as connected to spirits, as connected to the earth, as connected to the past as any culture I know. So, I chose to create an ancient Africa in the same way that someone might try to create an ancient Greece. There is very little research about ancient Africa, as there is very little research about how Greek plays were actually performed, although we know a good deal about the actors, chorus, and the metaphors.

I then thought I wanted to do all of the three *Oedipus* plays together. I have a penchant for putting on the whole story, as those know who have seen all the *Henry VIs* or all of *Henry IVs* in one evening. Being able to tell the whole story, the whole wheel of the story moves me in some way. So I took a huge liberty, something that Sophocles did not do, in terms of the theme as a trilogy following the actual story. We know that the plays were not written in that order. We know that *Antigone* was written later, and that *Oepidus at Colonus* was written when Sophocles was in his 90s and never produced during his lifetime. It interested me why a great genius like Sophocles would continue to come back to the story of this family, even at the end of his life, and that he felt the need to take himself and us through the final *Oedipus* story. I chose to do the plays, not in the order that he wrote them, but in the chronological order of the story.

This allowed me to investigate the politics and emotions. Particularly the working out of self discovery that Oedipus finds, and how this eventually works its way through his redemption, and then through Antigone's sense of Oedipus who commits an unconscious crime, and Antigone who commits a conscious act against the state. As well as how the lessons are learned from one generation to the other. Now I do not suppose Sophocles meant that because he did not write them in that order. But this struck me as being a very important thing to talk about. How in a family one kind of discovery can lead into a deeply heroic act. It excited me to see the little Antigone move to the grown up Antigone having gone through the wilderness with her father, the dark night of the soul with her father, and *Oedipus at Colonus*. So, I hoped that I was not doing something that Sophocles would have objected to. It is my responsibility 2,500 years later to find an interpretation for a play that was written so long ago.

I hope that as all of us who come together to an event, such as a play from the past, bring our appreciation of the past to it but also see how it resonates for us now. I am very lucky to work on the greatest plays ever written that ask the most important questions of all time. I think the greatest playwrights - Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides, Shakespeare - asked us to look at the questions but did not tell us the answers. That is what I will put first if you ask me to define a classic play. So, in whatever way we, as artists, can try to honor the playwright, understand as fully the culture and mind of that playwright, and then filter it through the century we live. We do not have to set it in modern dress, but we have to make it understood in 20th and now 21st century eyes.

I believe that it is our responsibility, and I believe that is actually what the writer, if he were here today, would want us directors to do. He would want us to honor what he meant and he would want us to make it mean a great

deal to you. So, I am grateful that I get to do these plays. The other day, I said that I was grateful after September 11th to be privileged enough to doing *Oedipus* and *Hamlet* now. I am not a fire fighter, I am not a policeman, I am not a doctor, I am not a member of President Bush's anti-terrorists, and I am not a soldier. Our audiences brought a huge number of tickets after September 11th, they came to see a 2,500-year-old play in which someone discovers the evil in themselves, tries to work through it, and a daughter tries to bury somebody who no one wants to bury. Our audiences are now seeing a play about something as rotten, where time is out of joint, and where someone tries to adequately solve it. What happens to people now who see such plays means a great deal to them. The fact that the plays are old, and without our saying it takes place in 2001, they resonate and mean something to people now. The very act of going to the theatre creates a community at a time when we feel fragile, we feel vulnerable, we do not know what tomorrow will bring, and yet here we are sharing something.

That is something that art can do. And that is something these plays can do better than any other art I know, and I am very grateful to be allowed to do it at any time, especially at this time. I am very pleased to be here tonight.■

On Preparing a Production of *Prometheus*

Joy Zinoman

Dirda: Let us proceed to Joy Zinoman, Founder and Artistic Director of The Studio Theatre. Joy has produced many, many productions that have received numerous nominations and prizes, including the Helen Hayes Award in 2000. Like everyone on the panel, myself excepted, these are very distinguished and amazingly learned people. I just discovered from talking to Joy before we even began that she knows several languages, including Japanese.

Zinoman: Thank you Michael. You thought you had problems. Would you like to follow these three? About seven months ago, the author Sophy Burnham and I made a pilgrimage to see renowned classics scholar Bernard Knox at his home in Darnestown, Maryland. I had a very serious question for him.

Before I could ask that question, I had the opportunity to meet his charming wife and his blind dog, and to steal glances at the extraordinary range of books that were stacked around his desk, towering to the ceiling and covering every conceivable subject. I invited him to see my current production of *The Invention of Love* by Tom Stoppard, which concerns the classics scholar A.E. Housman. Not only did Professor Knox tell me that he had read the play several times, but that he had met Housman while a student at Cambridge - or, at least, passed him in the stairwell. They nearly had to pick me up off the floor. I knew then,

of course, that Bernard Knox knew everything about everything, which wound up being completely true.

I immediately thought of abandoning my original purpose and merely begging him to tell all about Housman, but I had come a long way and I might not have another opportunity to seek his guidance. I had decided to direct a production of *Prometheus Bound* in the 2000-2001 Studio Theatre season, and I needed his expertise.

Prometheus Bound would be the third Greek play I had directed at Studio Theatre, and the fifth of my directing career (only 26 more to go). Although I had directed Euripides and Sophocles (the latter a one-evening production of *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, in Malaysia, with Indian actors from Kerela, presented simultaneously in English and Malay), I had never attempted a play by Aeschylus. I had long been haunted by the character of Prometheus, the rebel god who gave man fire and was punished by being chained to a rock beneath the open sky. I had never seen a production, and almost no one I knew had either. The Studio Theatre does many regional premieres, but this was carrying things a bit far.

Aeschylus is the earliest of the three great tragic writers, and his work embodies cosmic conflict, contains lavish symbolism and spectacle, and portrays characters who are incisive and powerful but who display a very limited number of traits.⁴ *Prometheus Bound* carries us back almost to the very beginning of our universe, when the gods of Olympus were new, when sea, earth and sky were still tangible personalities. From a far-off, international myth, pre-dating Greek civilization (possibly from the Near East, Gaul, or India), Aeschylus conjured a political, perhaps religious, and in any case *human* figure whose influence has expanded with time.

It was at the end of his life, perhaps two years before his death at 69, that Aeschylus imagined a conflict that explores a split between divine powers and the very nature

of God. A pre-Christ figure in some ways, Prometheus, flawed, suffering, and extraordinary, is pitted against the unseen Zeus. Prometheus describes his nemesis as a cruel and tyrannical despot, bent on suppressing mankind's benefactor and preventing the awakening of humanity, for the stolen fire is more than literal - it represents art, education and knowledge for mankind.

I love the structure of Greek plays, and the formality in *Prometheus Bound* is very strict, alternating scenes with choral odes and preserving the unities of time, place and action. The play opens with a tempestuous prologue, followed by a series of visits from three extraordinary visitors. The first arrives on a hippocamp (half horse, half fish, with the wings of a bird), the second is a young woman transformed into a cow, and the third, Hermes, arrives on his winged sandals. The eruptive finale is the destruction and collapse of the high mountain peak where Prometheus is chained.

Prometheus Bound is only one play of a trilogy, and a short play, perhaps only forty minutes long in performance. I had already decided to direct a traditional, stripped-away production, complete with a large, entirely unison chorus, which is rarely seen in American productions of Greek plays. I also knew that I wanted to commission an entirely new play as a companion to *Prometheus Bound*, imagining the events of the two lost plays.

So I asked Bernard Knox, now seated and surrounded by multiple editions of *Prometheus Bound* in its metaphor-rich, muscular, original language, "What happens in the lost plays? What of this universe-sized conflict?"

After we talked for a while about whether *Prometheus Bound* was actually the first or the second play in the trilogy, after he compared the play to others by Aeschylus, and after we imagined the content of *Prometheus Unbound* and *Prometheus the Fire-Bearer* (these being the names of the two lost plays), he told us that the subject of the trilogy as

a whole - and thus the challenge for our new second act - was not a universe-sized conflict, but reconciliation. As with so much Greek drama, this trilogy offers more than a simplistic opposition between blameless virtue and incurable wickedness, and moderation is the goal.

It has been noted that romantics, liberals and socialists have all found justifications in the figure of Prometheus. On the other hand, authoritarians can approve of the control and punishment of a rebel. Prometheus can be seen as a humanist and radical cry of pain in a universe ruled by a malignant mind, or as the relationship of humans to a powerful god, rather than to political tyranny.

Is Prometheus, in the end, a human sufferer or a divine seer? A champion of humanity, or a discontented member of the divine totalitarian party? Is Zeus the pitiless dictator of the universe, or its benevolent father? Is there a strain of Zeus in Prometheus himself? So, the modern play of Sophy Burnham's imagination includes reconciliation of the almighty power of Zeus with the civilizing intelligence of Prometheus; it is a play about the possibility of reconciliation and its relation to violence.

Our *Prometheus Unbound* utilizes the few remaining fragments of the lost play, including the great "eagle speech," where Prometheus details his torture by Zeus' ravaging eagle, who appears each day to devour his liver, which regenerates each night. The action concludes with a fifteen-page scene between Prometheus and Zeus imagining a resolution.

It seems to me that Greek drama has been most prominent when our country was involved in war, and that the prominence of certain plays in the classical repertoire is cyclical, and perhaps related to the degree to which both their themes and production styles resonate within modern contexts. A classic play ought to be so stimulating and ambiguous - in the poetic sense - as to provoke endless

interpretation. As we see here in Washington this year, multiple production styles are not only likely, but also I think healthy, as they provoke fierce, creative debates about staging, interpretation and acting style.

This sort of interest in both tradition and innovation should be our guiding spirit as moderns. One particular challenge regards language. Finding translations and adapting works is always a challenge for the theatre artist, nowhere more so than in Greek drama. One might think of looking for translations close to everyday speech, but while this makes for great clarity, it can also obscure the knotted imagery and tortured, brilliant struggle with ideas that mark and elevate Greek verse. Sophy and I have spent the last six months working together, surrounded by translations.

In our work in the Theatre there are no answers, of course, only secret admissions, vain boasts, and questions, questions, questions. I feel privileged to work with Ted van Griethuysen as Zeus, and William Hulings as Prometheus. To quote Michael Dirda in his recent, wonderful *Book World* article: "The dramas of ancient sagas are compelling because they *admit* to human frailty, the shameful acts and sullied breasts of our species."

Thank you for being here.■

4 Brockett, Oscar G., *History of the Theatre*, (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1982), 4th edition.

EXCERPTS FROM THE DISCUSSION

Dirda: Let me restate the first question, “What is the balance, or does there really need to be a balance between preserving the play as it was conceived by the author and his time, as far as we can understand that, as against making it more contemporary and relevant?”

Kahn: Let me say that I am asked that all the time of course, and I appreciate people’s concerns and different opinions about acting. On the other hand, when people ask me about Shakespeare, “Is this going to be a traditional production?” I say the following. A traditional production of Shakespeare, as far as we know from research on Elizabethan Theatre, is that the play was outdoors, the people in the orchestra would have been standing, and the play would have started in broad daylight without scenery. The actors would have been wearing Elizabethan dress, which meant modern dress, and which meant that everybody in the theatre looked like everybody in the play. Also, all of the great women’s roles were played by boys. So, if I were going to do a modern production that would be equivalent to Shakespeare’s, it would be in modern dress, it would be outdoors in the rain, and it would be with boys. Now I believe in penicillin, I believe in the telephone, and I actually believe in the future. So I do not feel that it is necessary for the play to be traditional. Now for some people it is because that is the full experience, but for others it is not. I feel that the way we can best tell the story is to create the atmosphere. I felt very strongly that these myths predated Sophocles, that they came from a more primitive culture than classical groups, and I wanted to explore them.

Question: Just a clarification on the same theme. The speakers discussed the dilemma of keeping the plays both traditional and contemporary. The essence of these plays and the reason why they are so relevant and so attractive to us, and why they were selected for today's presentation is that they have a universal content. Therefore, the main attraction, the main message, if you wish, that is brought to us is this universality. The plays are relevant to people of all kinds.

Zinoman: I quite agree with you that it is the most specific thing that often becomes the most universal. But let me add, however, that about 10 days ago, Michael and I were in New York and the questions there were very similar. There seemed to be a deep feeling about taking these plays out of their specific time or place. That this was questionable or was something that we had to talk about for a long, long time.

Kahn: I do not think you need to modernize a play to make it relevant. In our *Oedipus*, there were no references to anything modern. The translation, which was muscular and maybe more direct than Joy would like, had no references to anything that was not in Sophocles or in that period. I felt that it was in one form or another equivalent to Sophocles. I think that great plays can withstand moving outside of their indigenous cultural situation. I totally appreciate when somebody disagrees with that. All I can do is to try to make the play as relevant to my understanding as I can without, I believe, betraying the reason that play was written.

Dirda: I have a question about *Antigone*. I presume that most productions of that play see Antigone as a heroic figure doing the right thing. But I wondered, have there been interpretations where Creon might be presented as a far

more sympathetic character, one who was trying to preserve a government that is obviously in shambles for some time, and who has one more rabble-rouser to deal with?

Zinoman: As I said before the characters are illusive, and not uni-dimensional. I think in the best productions of *Antigone* you are not sure on whose side you are. That if a production is simply Antigono-phobic, it is not a true Greek conflict realized.

Dirda: Michael Kahn made this point, and I made a similar point in a piece I wrote a couple of weeks ago, about passion, obsession and reason. The plays you say raise these questions, but do not necessarily answer them. But I wonder in what way the Greeks themselves, as far as we know, viewed them. Or, did they in fact expect the plays to offer answers?

Knox: Well some of the plays offer the answer. Creon at the end of the play is a completely ruined man. He has obviously done something wrong and he is being paid for it in spades. It is quite clear what side, so to speak, the play is on. Antigone, of course, is a rather difficult character to simplify. She pushes things to extreme, she has only one thing in mind, she is obsessive. But she is right in the end. It is clear. You have to bury the dead, and that is the whole point.

Question: I wanted to ask whether there was a difference in the way an audience in ancient Greece would see this play as opposed to the way an audience today would see it?

Knox: Were the audiences' expectations different? I do not think so. They expected to be moved and excited. We have several accounts of audience reactions in some form, we have expressions of boredom or impatience. One unfor-

tunate playwright wrote a play about the sack of a Greek city that had just been attacked by the Persians. The audience was so enraged that they had to take the play off, and inflicted a stiff fine on the playwright. It was obviously a very excitable atmosphere. After all, it was a competition among three dramatists for a prize. This event went for a whole week, and you can imagine that there were fans of Aeschylus, and fans of another who applauded or did not applaud. The audience sat there all day long, they were real theatrical maniacs. I think they came to the play with the same expectations that we do. They wanted to be moved.

Zinoman: I would like answer that question also. I think that perhaps a Greek audience knew the story, knew the myth and maybe did not come to find out what happened, but how it happened. This is most comparable to my experience with Peking opera, in that aficionados wanted to see how something is done differently. They already know how it is going to end. Also, there is a concept in ancient theatre called "selective inattention." You do not have to watch the whole play because it goes on for hours, 14 hours even. You can go out, buy something good to eat, take a walk. Nobody watches the whole thing, only the parts they like best, some like the choruses, while others like the big scenes. This is very different from our modern theatres, that are like churches, where you have to be on time, behave, be quiet and not unwrap your candy. These plays came from a theatre where you did not have to behave yourself. It was a play's responsibility to move you, to grab your attention. So you have a very different relationship between the audience and the production.

Dirda: When I think about the Greek tragedies, I see them as being examinations of all aspects of suffering.

Knox: Let me say something about the intellectual climate of Athens when *Oedipus* was produced. People were questioning everything, questioning the truth of myths, questioning the existence of the gods, putting forward ideas, that could be termed almost scientific, except that they were pure theory without any experimentation. All the old certainties were being undermined by new thought. *Oedipus*, of course, is meant to represent that particular thing. He is the practical man. He knows what to do. He is the one who solved the riddle of the sphinx after all and saved Thebes. He is compared in one image after another with all the components of modern progress as the Greeks saw it and as it is detailed in *Prometheus Bound*. This is the man who comes to his total collapse and re-emerges, but he is something very different. Now, that has a resonance for today too, and you get this theme again and again. And, of course, the famous chorus in the play, "*pola ta deina*" "many the strange, wonderful, terrible things but nothing more strange, terrible and wonderful than man." The play goes through recital, and steps to progress, and then it says, "But," and that But is what the play explores.

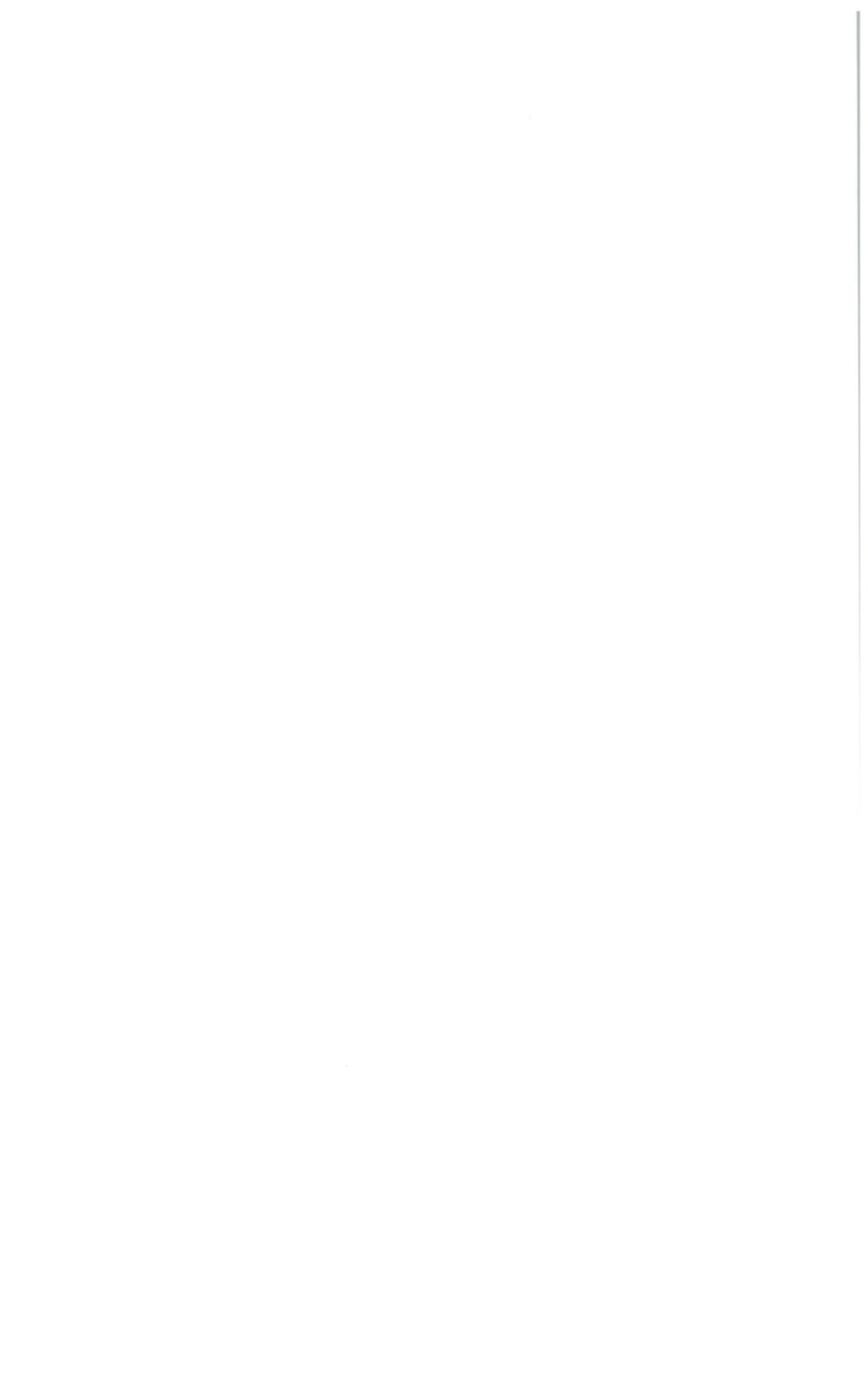
Question: Why do you think that Greek plays are produced much less frequently than Shakespeare, for example, or other classical works?

Kahn: I think that in part, this has to do with the question of the chorus. The chorus is what every director struggles with first. Until you figure out how you want to do the chorus, you do not have any idea how you are going to do the play. I had not thought of Africa until I thought about what I wanted to do with the chorus. I knew I did not want to do what other modern productions have done, using an older woman, a middle-aged woman, and a young woman with a shawl. I think this has been one of the greatest problems. There is a built-in resistance to going to

Greek plays, as there is probably to Shakespeare. And what I think is exciting, is that every once in a while, somebody does a Greek play and people love it, and they wonder why they were resistant to it in the first place. You also need wonderful actors, and you need wonderful translations.

Zinoman: I think the language issue cannot be underestimated. Shakespeare is in English. My own teacher said "Modern man can no longer deal with the suffering of the traditional," and I do not mean it in that sense, but as a tragic hero. Modern man perhaps does not want to come to the theatre and experience that amount of pity for the character, and boldfaced terror for themselves. I am not sure if that is true in the year 2001. So perhaps, Greek plays will be on the rise again. I think it has been a cyclical thing. When I was a young acting student, Greek productions were extraordinary. There was much more of it than there is now. Now there are two or three Shakespeare theatres in every major city in this country, and in a lot in minor cities too. Shakespeare is our kind of "go to" culture. But the truth is that Greek theatre was as vigorous an institution, with about the same body of work, the same number of plays, and it is much less known and understood in America certainly. And I think that is too bad.

Dirda: Thank you all for coming. ■



About SPGH

The Society for the Preservation of the Greek Heritage (SPGH), a not for profit organization, was founded in 1974. SPGH was originally founded to assist in Greek restoration of Byzantine monasteries, churches, and the historic Plaka House in Athens Greece - now serving as the headquarters for "Elliniki Etairia", an environmental protection agency, and for SPGH activities in Greece.

Our present programs are dedicated to increasing awareness of and appreciation for ancient and modern Greek culture and philosophy, and exploring the interrelationship between the Greek heritage and contemporary society worldwide. The programs and activities of the Society for the Preservation of the Greek Heritage in the United States and in Greece are supported by memberships and donations.

*For more information on SPGH, contact us at:
5125 MacArthur Blvd., NW, Suite 38, Washington, D.C. 20016.
Tel: 202/363-4337; Fax: 202/363-4658.*

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