

A Chorus of Approval.

Have you ever seen a Greek play? I imagine a chorus of "YES" - but I have a vivid imagination. Indeed it is vivid enough to imagine a Greek Chorus - as well as yours! But imagining is not seeing, and I fear that we will never see a thoroughly Greek play; that is, one as envisaged by a dramatic poet of the fifth century. We should never forget the role of the choreagos; having been selected, it was a matter of honour to produce a memorable rendering of the play, and he received the prize, and thereby the honour - if his production was judged the best; it is reasonable to assume that the poet's contribution played a part, but it may be that this part can be overestimated by us: Aristotle claimed that the three great poets were Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, but Euripides had very few successes as a competitor; this could mean that his contemporaries did not agree with the later Aristotle; or that his adversaries were more fortunate in their allocation of a choreagos. In our literate society, it is natural that we read and re-read the surviving works, but I think that there is little evidence that they were ever intended to be treated in this manner, so we are losing a great deal and I wish to draw attention to a few productions which have moulded my thoughts and invite you to draw on your experience.

At a post-production discussion, a member of the audience asked if it might not be that some plays were just boring - I do not know if this implied criticism of the company, but it did make me think of the production of Medea in Manchester in 1991. Claire Benedict was magnificent; but the production was enhanced by a chorus of 8/9 who moved/danced and sang/chanted - in Greek. This meant that it was probably as incomprehensible to the majority of the audience as it was to me, but it threw the "dramatic" episodes into high relief and enhanced the experience, and was entertaining in its own right. I think that we came somewhere near to where Euripides intended to lead us. It was an experience which involved one more in the play than a production in Epidauros in 1990, where the chorus was "static". Though the production was memorable for other reasons. Following my thesis through to its extreme conclusion, I would ask what "the Trackers of Oxyrhynchus" would be without its chorus of satyrs; of course, a satyr play would be nothing without satyrs - but what is the "Trojan Women" without the women of Troy? Unfortunately, at a time when it is possible to see so many productions, and so many small companies are turning to Greek drama for their repertoires, it is so difficult to see a full chorus; Fiona Shaw in the R.S.C.'s production of Sophocles' "Electra" was spell-binding, and I would not criticise the chorus, only say that they never looked like fifteen in number and so could never have the presence (literally) of that number; so, was it really "Sophocles"?

An interesting production at the Contact Youth Theatre in Manchester in 1992 was "The Minotaur", by the writer-in-residence Jan Maloney; the play was modelled on a Greek play in structure, and told the story of Theseus. It was entertaining, but not because of its timelessness, I would not put it in the same category as "Antigone", but because of a vibrant young chorus. I assume that the writer knew the cast and the play brought out their great talent, so in some ways, I believe that it had a dimension which was authentically classical - its chorus. I hope that this was its intention, I went because of its Greek theme and came away having felt that I had experienced something of the emotion that was intended in the Classical era (though not the catharsis, I hasten to add). In my mind's eye I tried to see them acting with some of the companies which I have seen who have tried to make do with one actor speaking the choral lines, and this is why I ask myself, too, "Have I seen a Greek play?" I can only muster a qualified "Yes"

Again at the Contact theatre in February 1992, there was a production (not by the youth group this time) of "Oedipus Tyrannos" and this was a "promenade" performance, so it succeeded with a small chorus (members of the cast not otherwise engaged) because they kept popping up in the audience and this made us feel that we were "citizens of Thebes"; so we were involved in a way which I feel is legitimate in our times, but not part of the Greek experience. It might be that this is the only way that we could have been reduced to tears by the (lost) "Siege of Miletus", but Herodotos' account must always be kept in mind to ensure that we are aware of the power of Greek theatre.

The York Mystery plays this year (1992) is a tremendous spectacle; it is a pity that it is indoors, but one can see how it would be difficult to produce it outside because of its elaborate staging. I was impressed to read that there is only one professional actor, the rest of the cast is drawn from "the people of York", one must assume that they were not chosen at random, but their performances, individually and collectively, would not make one think of them as amateurs. My first response was "How Greek!", people picked from willing citizens who had worked hard under (I presume) professional guidance, and probably unpaid. I understand that the Chester Mysteries are to be produced in a similar way, and I wonder if this could start an epidemic? It is not just that those of us who are interested and will go to anything, however small the chorus, would like to see a full (and active) chorus, but it might make others more eager to attend; even if it is only the parents, the aunties and the grannies of the cast, but it would probably be more, and I do not think that they would suggest that Greek plays might be "just boring".

I should like to make two pleas; first, that the professional companies (R.S.C., N.T.) take a play on tour but recruit a chorus locally - professional actors:amateur chorus and try to reproduce the play. We all might learn something from different interpretations of/by the chorus and I should like to think that it would be enhancing for the professionals to face the challenge; the Greeks did it! I would imagine that there might be a restriction on professionals working with non-union "actors", but would ask if one is trying to promote theatre, or restrict it? If the main reason for not having a chorus is cost, then this is a potential way round it. My second suggestion is aimed at teachers and is that instead of reading plays, they should act them; this need not be as drastic as it may sound, simply that students stand up and move around as the mood takes them, clambering on the furniture if they feel it to be appropriate. This would involve them in the action and I think would bring home to them the meaning of the play - and if my first suggestion were ever to be realised, would provide a strong body of candidates for choruses up and down the country.