

BOOK REVIEW

Theatre of the Condemned: Classical Greek Tragedy on Greek Prison Islands. By Gonda VAN STEEN. Classical Presences. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xiv + 354. Hardcover, £71.00/ \$125.00. ISBN 978-0-19-957288-5.

Theatre of the Condemned deals with a topic that has hitherto received little attention in work on the reception of Classical Greek Tragedy. The reason for this neglect is that it inevitably revives memories of painful episodes in modern Greek history, for it deals with the role of Classical Greek Tragedy in the lives of those imprisoned on the islands of Makronisos, Trikeri and Ai Stratis from the 1940s to the early 1960s. The defeated opponents of the Greek nationalists in the civil war in liberated Greece were confined to the islands in an attempt to eliminate their influence by removing them from society.

Gonda Van Steen's pioneering work presents the context in which these political prisoners were held and the ways in which they used the study, creation and performance of plays as a means of education, a release from their plight, but often also as an opportunity to express covert resistance to the regime. As there was no systematic documentation of these activities, Van Steen has supplemented available information by interviews with survivors. One of the merits of this volume is the creation of a permanent record of many aspects of theatrical activities on the prison islands which risked passing into oblivion with the demise of the participants. Plays studied, written and produced on the islands included many later and modern works as well, as indicated by Van Steen, but her concentration is on Classical Greek Tragedy. She demonstrates that Greek prisoner theatre in some of its features predates the radical revisionism of Classical Greek Tragedy that was to become the trend in the West from the 1960s onward.

Van Steen singles out four tragedies that resonated particularly with the inmates and could be understood to reflect the complexities of their situation and continued resistance to the regime. These were Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, Aeschylus' *Persians*, and Sophocles' *Antigone*.

The portrayal of Prometheus as a stalwart hero, who suffers but remains defiant in the face of his abuser, is situated in the context of similar wider leftist

and Marxist interpretations of the tragedy in twentieth century Eastern European literature. The eponymous hero of *Philoctetes* was also seen as epitomising the plight of the exiles: “he remains an exemplum of integrity and defines the concept of tragic heroism anew in—temporary—defeat and isolation” (71). Van Steen points out that in some cases the people she interviewed could not remember whether a play had actually been staged, but that even the process of rehearsal had given the participants the opportunity to experience the emotions evoked by their collective engagement with the play.

In a production of *Persians* on Aï Stratis in 1951 the exiles explored the effect of the recent military defeat of the Left. It was a counterpoint to the National Theatre’s productions of the tragedy which identified the modern communist enemy with the Persians of antiquity. This is just one example of many instances Van Steen adduces of the authority and prestige of Greek Tragedy being claimed by both the regime and the prisoners as endorsing their cause.

Another tragedy which often gives rise to conflicting interpretations is Sophocles’ *Antigone* where some champion Antigone’s cause as the noble defence of freedom, while others support Creon’s desire to maintain order and control as desirable. Van Steen discusses several versions of this play associated with the prison islands. The first was produced on Makronisos in 1948 (65–70) by a group of actors who had “repented.” Thus their performance was intended by the authorities to enhance the importance of patriotism. Van Steen shows that players and audience nevertheless interpreted the themes in their own way. The second *Antigone* discussed (108–13) is a reading of the play by female prisoners on Trikeri. The process, led by an interned actress, served both to educate and to raise awareness amongst the female prisoners who saw Antigone as exemplifying their own predicament. The third *Antigone* analysed is offered as an example of creative playwriting by an island inmate. Van Steen argues that its inclusion compensates for the lack of detail of other productions. It is in fact the only play from the prison islands that has been published. The full text of this adaptation of *Antigone* by Aris Alexandrou is included (172–230), as well as an English translation by Van Steen (239–306). This play, which has influences from Brecht and Anouilh, was not produced during the lifetime of the playwright, but first staged in 2003. Van Steen notes that Alexandrou’s version has “an expressly democratic subtext that undermined dogmatic leftism” (150). Her analysis of the play and its production is sensitive and illuminates the complexities of the political and social identities that were involved in the prison camps.

The references (318-44) form a substantial bibliography for the topic.

Gonda Van Steen in this book sheds light on an important period in the recent history of Greece and in particular the part of Classical Greek Tragedy in it. *Theatre of the Condemned* contains scrupulous scholarship, sophisticated analysis and a huge amount of new material. Everyone who works on the reception of Greek drama should read it.

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