

BOOK REVIEW

How to stage Greek tragedy today. By SIMON GOLDHILL. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. Pp. 248. Paper, \$18.00. ISBN 0-226-30128-1.

Simon Goldhill has long been interested in Greek tragedy and critical theory, and is well-known for books such as *Language, Sexuality, Narrative, the Oresteia* (1984), *Reading Greek Tragedy* (1986) and *Aeschylus: the Oresteia* (1992). *How to stage Greek tragedy today* is somewhat of a departure, in that it addresses the issue of contemporary dramatic performances, and reveals Goldhill's interest as a spectator, augmented by his experience producing the Greek play at Cambridge for three years.

A consistent theme in Goldhill's work has been the unreliability of language, and the title of his latest book itself seems to be an example of this. We quickly learn that Goldhill has no intention of telling us how to stage Greek tragedy. It is "counterproductive to lay down the law about how Greek tragedy must be produced." (p. 3) Instead, he lists six "pressing problems" and devotes a chapter to each, first discussing the problem from a classicist's perspective, and then describing and discussing some contemporary examples. This witty treatment of the title may have, I suspect, some reference to a darker theme that underlies Goldhill's text, particularly in its later chapters.

This book has two irritating aspects, which perhaps should be mentioned immediately. First, Goldhill offers close readings of passages from various plays, where much of what he says is available to a careful reader of a conservative translation, and takes no account of the fact that the actors and directors of his putative audience are close readers themselves. Second, he treats literary theory in a general way, again not taking notice that theory is available to directors and actors. Indeed, my own students from drama are essential in keeping me abreast of developments in critical theory. I thus suspect that directors and actors (along with dramaturgs, critics and general readers) will sometimes sense that they are being patronized. I would urge them to read on, because this book makes an implicit but compelling case that Greek drama cannot be produced today, and challenges us to find a way to rise above the problems it describes.

The six problem areas Goldhill lists are space and concept, chorus, the actor's role, tragedy and politics, translations, and gods. Goldhill's remarks on space are his most substantial, and rely on interesting modern work, most notably by David Wiles. When he

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turns to modern examples, he gives a fine account of Ariane Mnouchkine's *Les Atrides*, a production to which he turns on several occasions. In this chapter Goldhill praises *Les Atrides* for its large acting area, but objects to the location of the central door under the audience, just as Wiles has done. Although he concludes that more is lost than gained by staging the play thus, he gives a fair account of the translator (and feminist theorist) Helene Cixous' reasoning: "the horror behind the locked door was now located within themselves (the audience) as a body (as it were)—a point which gains poignant force from Cixous' feminist argument about the inevitable absorption of misogynist myth inside the psyche of the subjects of a patriarchal system"(p. 17).

In his general discussion of the chorus, Goldhill stresses its function as a "hinge" between scenes. But in the discussion he describes other interesting uses, pointing out that individuals in tragedy need the communal voice to both support and oppose them. He usefully distinguishes the chorus as a "character" and as the voice of choral poetry itself. In some cases, Goldhill claims, when the chorus mainly serves as a sounding board for the lead character, the current practice of a reduced chorus is sufficient. But when the chorus speaks as the poetic tradition, a full chorus is needed.

Injecting the element of dance into the drama is not easily done. Two productions of a Greek tragedy highly praised here, Peter Hall's *Oresteia* and Lee Breuer's *Gospel at Colonus*, integrate poetry and music but fail to include dance. Goldhill rejects the American musical theater as an artificial construct, but the highly trained chorus of the Greek National Theater surely deserves mention. The only incorporation of choral dance Goldhill praises is Mnouchkine's use of the Kathakali theater tradition of India, which includes dance. Although Goldhill mentions the word "Gesamtkunstwerk" with reference to this tradition, he overlooks other more recent attempts to create a union of dance and poetic drama in respect to which this term is often used. This includes what is usually called dance theater, which dates back to the *Clytemnestra* of Martha Graham and includes such recent works as the *Dido and Aeneas* of Mark Morris and *To You the Birdie* (a version of *Phedre*) by the downtown collective The Wooster Group and Mac Wellman's *Antigone*, performed by Big Dance Theater.

In Goldhill's chapter on acting, comments on physical action, props and the use of silence as "an aggressive gesture" (p. 94) would all seem to be obvious even to the non-expert. The substantial message in this section is that long speeches, loaded stichomythia and lengthy

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debates require actors trained to perform Shakespeare or similarly complex rhetoric. Actors do not require this skill to perform most modern drama. Although Goldhill strikes a characteristic self-mocking pose when he observes that rhetoric is not a matter of “men barking” (p. 108), trained actors are necessary for the performance of almost any Greek tragedy and the lack of them is a considerable problem outside of state-funded or otherwise well-heeled dramatic organizations.

On the topic of tragedy and politics, Goldhill identifies the main political themes of tragedy as “the violence that emerges from the pursuit of justice, ...the corruption of power in the pursuit of war, ...the humiliation and misplaced confidence of the aftermath of military victory, ...the battleground of gender within the social order.” This list is good as far as it goes, but ignores one important issue. While discussing the chorus, Goldhill uses the phrase “transgression and transcendence.” This is a pervasive blind spot in his view of tragedy, in which tragedy explores the “fissures” in self and society. In the context of theory, to account for transcendence, I suggest, one can turn to Hegel and his followers, to the concept of self-realization. Although Goldhill refers to Steiner’s *Antigones*, he has not made use of the valuable discussion found there.

In his chapter on gods, monsters and ghosts, Goldhill discusses (mainly based on various productions) how the Furies should be depicted, and concludes that a modern audience finds it hard to accept monstrous females representing the darker part of the psyche. This may satisfy a theoretical and political view, but it ignores the multitude of such females on the stage, e.g., in Shakespeare and in opera. I think that Goldhill and others also overrate the difficulty of presenting Greek gods on stage. Some highly praised modern translations downgrade or leave them out, but one cannot underestimate what an audience’s imagination will accept.

Goldhill is too ready to approve of translations that have been used in performance and to dismiss conservative translations. Watling’s translation, which Goldhill rejects for production, is very effective in making clear the subtleties of Sophocles. The use of multiple translations, which is common practice in the theater, either to check the translation being used or to construct a new one, should be suggested. Surely a classicist should take notice of the more adventurous translations and versions, whose authors are often knowledgeable about Greek tragedy. In one of his rare acknowledgments of American productions, Goldhill gives little more than a mention to Chuck Mee’s adventurous versions.

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Goldhill's most troubling remarks concern the translation of choral songs. Wertebaker's versions of Sophoclean odes are spare but intense, and she receives his highest rating for the so-called Theban trilogy. His only unqualified praise for choral translation, however, is for Seamus Heaney's *Cure at Troy*. Basing his view on what he thinks is theatrically effective, Goldhill is forced to praise other translations that he admits have not translated these songs adequately. (This is seen most clearly in his mixed comments on McLeish's versions.)

Goldhill's chapter on space is thus the most hopeful in the book. Problems with long speeches and debates can be overcome by utilizing appropriately trained actors; the problem of the chorus is more intractable. If, as Goldhill says, "the space of the festival is danced into being by the choral movement," the dance is not a dispensable component, and the choreographer and the composer become as essential as the director. In his discussion of translations, Goldhill reveals that those used in successful productions are mostly inadequate, especially in the lyrical element. Although he does not conclude that Greek tragedy as it is produced today is gravely flawed, it is hard for the reader to conclude otherwise.

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