

## BOOK REVIEW

*Tragedy's Endurance: Performances of Greek Tragedies and Cultural Identity in Germany since 1800.* By ERIKA FISCHER-LICHTE. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xix + 398. Hardcover, \$115.00. ISBN 978-0-19-965163-4.

**T***Tragedy's Endurance* is not simply a welcome addition for the field of Classical Reception, but it is also a book which offers a new methodological paradigm to a thriving discipline. The book presents a new approach to theatre historiography by relating the performances of Greek tragedy to the formation of cultural identity in Germany (from Winkelmann's idealist Philhellenism to contemporary deconstructionist approaches). Commencing from Goethe's production of Euripides' *Ion* (1802) in Weimar, which was guided by the principle of harmony between all the elements of the performance (music, picturesque sets and costumes), Fischer-Lichte calculates firmly the starting ideological point of her discussion. Consequently, beauty, harmony and Philhellenism epitomized the romantic idolization of Greek Antiquity, strengthening thereby the "institutionalization" of *Bildung*.

Potsdam's *Antigone* (1841) continued the cultural production of Greek tragedy performances as "unmissable sensation[s]" (45) at times when Philhellenism was linked with the emerging nationalism in Europe and Classics were becoming the focus of the new university in Germany. The author rightly underlines that in this historical context a new *Weltanschauung* was born due to the prevalent phenomenon of *historicism* according to which a past epoch could be "understood on the basis of acknowledging its fundamental difference and foreignness" (50). Not surprisingly, the production of *Antigone* was the

first in the German states strictly to follow the principles of historicism, particularly in the sense that the great and immortal qualities of the ancient texts were to be filtered and *returned to reality* with a contemporary and alterable effect (55).

A new era began with Richard Wagner's theorization of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* which "ultimately aim[ed] to realize a socio-political utopia" (74) for a people's democratic assembly in theatre, developed in the first Bayreuth Festival of 1876. Using her favorite anthropological model of analysis (employed by Victor Turner), Fischer-Lichte interprets the Festival as a "liminal experience," "characterized by the separation from everyday life" and causing thereby "the destabilization or affirmation of an individual's identity but also towards the coming-into-being of a community" (83).

At the beginning of the twentieth century Max Reinhardt inaugurated the era of the Director who must use the Classics in a way that complies with modern times. With his productions of Greek tragedies between 1903 and 1919, Reinhardt proved his awareness "of the tension between historicity and topicality" and he developed new methods and "modes that were strongly related to contemporary life in the modern metropolis" (96). But what makes Fischer-Lichte's analysis more significant is her theatrical sensitivity in concluding that Reinhardt employed theatrical "devices that directed the spectator's attention to the performers' bodies—to the individual bodies of the protagonists as well as to the masses of bodies in the case of the chorus and sometimes even to their own bodies" (96). Thus, a Nietzschean vision of an ecstatically "primitive" Greekness was chosen for Sophocles' *Electra* (1903) not only to allude to ancient maenads, but to attract attention to the protagonist's "phenomenal body" (100). Additionally, the "atmosphere" of "coming-into-being of a community exclusively through performance" (120) is an important remark that Fischer-Lichte makes in discussing Reinhardt's legendary *Oresteia* (1911–1912).

A new step in the contemporary approach to staging Greek Tragedy was recognized in Leopold Jessner's production of *Oedipus* (1929) that acknowledged ancient Greece as a model "al-

beit defined by everyone in their own way according to their artistic and political leanings and *Weltanschauungen* (141).

Greek tragedy was of course very popular during the Third Reich due to a perverse Philhellenism that was looking for some racial kinship between Germans and Greek beauty. Fischer-Lichte deals with the subject quite bravely and only to make a deep ideological critique to German cultural history. For example, she maintains that the 1936 Olympic Games *Oresteia*, which emphasized the subject of sacrifice for the motherland, thereby connecting sports with violence and patriotic death, allowed the Nazis to introduce their ideology “under the banner of Olympism” (154). But there are also positive cases of usage discussed by the author, as, for example, Karl Heinz Stroux’s *Antigone* (Berlin, 1940) which proved that Greek Tragedy began to serve as “a code of sorts for the intellectual resistance against the Nazi regime” (168), being faithful to the original text despite the advances in the Art of Theatre.

Issues of topicality emerged quite naturally after the War, in as much as the *Oedipus* productions of the first post-war years were associated with the acceptance of a collective guilt as well as with the inescapability of one’s own fate (190). Along the same line, Bertolt Brecht’s epic and de-familiarized version of *Antigone* (1948) was interpreted as a “bitter accusation, charging the *Bildungsbürgertum* with a relapse into barbarism despite their constant talk of humanism” (194). And quite comfortably, the fifties found the performances of Greek Tragedy in search of abstraction, rhythmicality and the essence of the “universal and timeless human” (209), while the sixties problematized further the cultural stability of the reception of Greek tragedy in Germany by blending Ancient Greece with “African and Asian cultures” (236).

With the work of Peter Stein and Klaus Michael Grüber in the seventies the actual *sparagmos* of Greek Tragedy was performed on stage, “raising the question of how the scattered pieces can be restored to the former—or a new—wholeness” (291). Accordingly, these unorthodox performances disclaimed

the affirmation of the *Bildungsbürger's* former convenient but fictitious cultural identity through Greek tragedy, as Fischer-Lichte explains (294). Finally, the author pays tribute to one of the most important modern directors, Einar Schleef (1944–2001), whose choric theatre is pronounced as “the new tragic theatre” of the contemporary human condition that entails this “permanent conflict between individual and community” (325).

With *Tragedy's Endurance* Erika Fischer-Lichte installs a new critical perspective on German cultural history, proving that the latter was highly preoccupied with the ideological usage of Greek Tragedy. As a new epistemological paradigm the Epilogue of the book sets a fundamental issue for every reception history by examining the performance as a cultural and not merely as an aesthetic or social event: how can the performances of Greek tragedies contribute to the shaping, stabilization, and destabilization of the cultural identity of any national culture that is obsessed with using Greek Drama?

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