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Pantelis Michelakis

In the last century and a half, the performance reception of Greek tragedy has been more widespread and varied than in any other similar period since the fifth century BC. One could argue that, despite all its popularity in previous centuries, the revival of Greek drama on the modern stage was established as a cultural practice only with the consolidation of the modern nation-states in the second half of the nineteenth century. Greek tragedy was reinvented within institutional frameworks that today we can easily recognize as "modern," namely schools and universities, and professional and avant-garde theater. It is therefore hardly surprising that the study of the reception of Greek drama on the modern stage is usually based on categorical—and hierarchical—distinctions between such frameworks. For instance, scholars often privilege the reception of Greek tragedy in avant-garde theater for its critical approach to contemporary culture.[1] Nor is it surprising that the performance history of Greek tragedy remains largely a history of national traditions.[2] The aim of this chapter is to explore some of the aesthetic and ideological forces that informed the reinvention of ancient drama in an institutional framework that does not quite fit into the dominant categories of contemporary theater practice and historiography. Theater festivals, and more specifically the festivals that emerged in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and up until the outbreak of the Second World War, have a historical significance that has escaped the attention of scholars working within rather than across national and generic boundaries. In their large-scale revival of Greek tragedy, theater festivals proved to be an international as well as national phenomenon. To develop a comparative perspective on this dramatic phenomenon, it is

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important to notice the interconnections and affinities of the festivals under consideration in terms of artistic principles and ideological aspirations, the speed with which they spread across Europe, and the wide range of cultural, social, and political practices on which they drew.

While a comprehensive study might consider synchronically how theater festivals differ from other festal activities of the period (such as official and unofficial ceremonies, processions, marches, demonstrations of civilian citizenry, or ambitious building programs of festival pavilions, open-air stadiums, and exhibition halls) or diachronically how festivals of Greek drama relate to festivals of theater, culture, and festivity of other periods (such as those that emerged in medieval times, in the royal courts of France and Italy, during the French Revolution, or in the aftermath of World War II), my interest here is in the utopian politics of classical reception. I will analyze the political contradictions of such theater festivals, as they sought to reclaim Greek drama as heritage to be displayed for the benefit and education of broadly defined communities. Festivals transformed the nostalgia for a lost order that cannot be recaptured and the discontent with a fragmented and heterogeneous present to a search for community and plenitude in the future. Like carnivals and other manifestations of festal culture, festivals can be seen as a radical force of protest, subversion, and revolt, but also as an ultimately conservative force, a carefully controlled safety valve helping to maintain the political and social status quo. Do festive practices have to be part of a wider strategy of resistance to play a significant role in effecting political change? The dialogue into which festivals enter with dominant social and political discourses, whether official state discourse or influential social movements, does not have to be antagonistic for festivals to maintain their politically transformative force. As I will argue below, what makes festivals a productive site for artistic, political, and hermeneutic negotiation is precisely the unresolved tension between the festivals' preoccupation with the cultural past and their orientation toward the future of the community, between their aspirations for artistic autonomy and their embodiment of social and political practices and strategies, and, finally, between their search for coherence and meaningfulness and their encounter with dissonance and fragmentation.

Apart from the civic festivals of fifth-century Athens (to which I will return below), the single most important event in the prehistory

of modern festivals of Greek drama was the opera festival that Richard Wagner inaugurated in 1876 in the small town of Bayreuth, in southern Germany. In the spirit of German romanticism, Wagner sought to create a musical drama serving the same communal ambitions as the drama of classical Athens. As a new Aeschylus, Wagner addressed his modern *Oresteia*, *The Ring of the Nibelungs*, to "the people" at large, rather than to the bourgeois "public," seeking to replace conventional opera with a new lyric drama in which dramatic, musical, and visual-art values would once again be inextricably linked so as to serve communal ends.[3] As "total works of art," the music dramas composed, produced, and directed at Bayreuth combined and re-energized forms of art that were kept apart until Wagner's time, namely music, poetry, dance, and theater (see Berghaus). Wagner's music dramas, repeated on a regular basis, in an opera house built especially for this purpose, offered a sense of ritual and communality. What is more, this semireligious experience, which fused German mythological traditions with the art and politics of Greek drama, helped shape a sanctioned past for its audience, providing the socially and politically heterogeneous audiences of Wagner's festival with a national identity (Dahlhaus; Frank; Spotts). It is in this sense of a multimedia spectacle dramatizing and celebrating the unity of the nation that Bayreuth became an institution of the newly created Second German Empire (Wessling) and a symbol and prototype for the theater festivals of Greek drama to come. The appropriation of Wagner's music, ideas, and the Bayreuth festival itself by National Socialism is only one dimension of a much richer and more diverse legacy that throughout the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century spread across Europe and North America and which, under the concept of "Wagnerism," encompassed a wide range of often competing visions and interests by artists, intellectuals, entrepreneurs, and politicians (Weber). Wagner's music dramas and his views on the power of Greek tragedy to revitalize the theatrical practice acted as a catalyst for the revival of ancient drama on the modern stage: if contemporary opera and theater were in urgent need of reform and rejuvenation, Greek and Roman drama performance was truly dead. Bayreuth became a reference point, a model and antagonist against which the achievement and success of all subsequent festivals of ancient drama were to be measured. In 1900 the German journalist Ludwig Bräutigam published

a monograph entitled *The French Bayreuth* (*Das französische Bayreuth*) on the revival of ancient drama at the Roman theater of Orange in southern France. Around the same time, the Greek journalist and novelist Pavlos Nirvanas put forward his vision for the revival of ancient drama in Greece in an article entitled "Greek Bayreuth" (Sideris, 140–42). And in the early 1930s the Italian scholar and theater director Vincenzo Bonaiuto gave his review article of the Syracuse Greek play festival the title "Syracuse, Bayreuth of the Classical Theatre" ("Siracusa, Bayreuth del teatro classico").

The impact of Richard Wagner on theater theory and practice was felt first of all in Germany itself. At the beginning of the twentieth century the German director Max Reinhardt used Greek drama as a platform for his vision of a "theater of the people," a theater that departed from the bourgeois character and spatial structure of the naturalistic proscenium theater. Reinhardt drew on the repertory of Greek drama for impressive spectacles based on crowd scenes, motion, music, and colors. As a setting for his ambitious productions he chose such alternative performance spaces as circuses and squares. Between 1909 and 1917 Reinhardt directed spectacular productions of *Lysistrata*, *Oedipus the King*, and the *Oresteia* in the festive atmosphere of circuses throughout Europe, from London to Oslo and Kiev (Leisler and Prossnitz; Styan; Fischer-Lichte, 255–58; Macintosh 1996, 298–301; 2009, chap. 4). The influence of Wagner's Bayreuth can also be felt behind the French movement of "popular theater," which emerged in the course of the Third Republic (Fischer). In the late 1910s the French director Firmin Gémier, one of the pioneers of the movement, staged Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* on a gigantic scale in a circus, and he combined it with athletic displays by hundreds of athletes. Inspired by Reinhardt and Wagner, but also by the recently revived Olympic Games, Gémier attempted to recreate the spirit of the collective celebrations of ancient Athens where theater, processions, and athletic games were all combined in public festivals (Whitton, 217; Blanchart; Macintosh 2009, chap. 5). Gémier appropriated Greek tragedy to realize his vision of a theater that is both popular and national, a vehicle for the celebration of what he called a civic religion, whose principles were capable of uniting all the people of France regardless of class, religion, and political party (Whitton, 217; Rearick). In England, where the Shakespeare Festival in Stratford-upon-Avon had opened only

three years after Wagner's Bayreuth, the first permanent indoor theater to be based on a Greek theater was built in Cambridge. Between 1926 when the Cambridge Festival Theatre opened with a performance of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and 1939 when it finally closed, the director and stage designer Terence Gray produced a number of Greek plays, both comedies and tragedies. Heavily influenced by Max Reinhardt and the director and stage designer Gordon Craig, Gray sought to create a theatrical institution and an artistic movement that would appeal to large audiences and would eventually serve as a basis for an annual dramatic festival. The Cambridge Festival Theatre was geographically and conceptually remote from mainstream theater audiences and, unlike the influential productions by Reinhardt in Berlin and other European capitals and Gémier in Paris, it failed to become the national institution to which its name, Festival Theatre, aspired (Cave, 12–15; Macintosh 1996, 305).

The activities of Reinhardt in Germany, Gémier in France, and Gray in England suggest that in the first decades of the twentieth century Greek tragedy was, for the first time since its rediscovery in the Renaissance, used as a vehicle for a new type of theater, which sought to address not individuals or classes, but nations at large. This function of Greek drama as a spectacle for the people was more successful in southern Europe, where Greek plays could be performed in the theaters of the Greco-Roman world, against the physical landscape of the Mediterranean. By the time of the Second World War more than thirty ancient theaters were used for performances of Greek and Roman plays in Spain, France, Italy, Greece, Egypt, and Libya. The revival of classical drama in ancient theaters was aligned with the theatrical avant-garde of the time, which, as we have seen, promoted a theatrical experience based on multimedia spectacles and new performance spaces. What is more, the production of ancient plays in Greco-Roman theaters of the Mediterranean brought together and enabled the display of knowledge drawn from the fields of theater, archaeology, and folklore, and in so doing it became a privileged locus for the production and consumption of a collective past.[4] For instance, the Roman theater of Orange, situated in the valley of the Rhone in the South of France, was first used for the performance of medieval dramas as early as 1859. However, it was not until 1888, some fifteen years after the foundation of the Bayreuth Festival in Germany and

during the "heyday of French republican festivals" (Rearick, 457), that Orange became the focus of attention on a national scale. In a tour of the Comédie Française in the French provinces, the theater of Orange was chosen for the performance of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* by the actor Jean Mounet-Sully (see, for instance, Réal; Mariéton; Macintosh 2009). The imposing setting of the aggressively restored theater, the stardom of the protagonist, and the cultural ambition and pride of local elites led to the success of the performance and the foundation of a festival that, in direct reference to the institution of liturgies in classical Athens, was named "The Choregies of Orange." The practice of performing Greek plays in ancient theaters soon spread to other parts of rural France. By the end of the nineteenth century there were productions of Greek plays in a dozen newly excavated archaeological sites around the country.

Another important step toward the foundation of a theater festival around the Mediterranean was made in 1914 when Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* was presented in the Greek theater at Syracuse in Sicily. Between 1914 and 1939 the classicist Ettore Romagnoli, first with the generous help of local aristocrats and later with the support of the Italian government, transformed the Greek theater at Syracuse into one of the most important venues for ancient plays worldwide. In the first years of the festival the modest stage sets enabled the spectators to watch the performance against the natural background of Syracuse and the sea. The archaeological site of the ancient theater and its physical surroundings served to enhance the authenticity of the spectacle and to legitimize the revival of Greek drama as a "natural" practice. The "authenticity" of the productions was not simply related to, but in fact dependent on, the authenticity of the setting. The "organic" link between Greek drama, the archaeological site, and the Mediterranean landscape informed all visual and verbal representations of the early productions of the Syracuse festival, ranging from production photos, to theater posters, to travel guides, to newspaper reports.[5] The success of the festival soon attracted the interest of the Italian government. In 1925 Mussolini directed that the festival should be managed by the "National Institute for Ancient Drama." This initially academic organization was made an official organ of government in 1929, under the Ministry of Education, and in 1935 its direction was transferred to the Ministry of Propaganda (Beacham, 320). Between 1924

and 1939 the Syracuse festival of Greek drama served to promote Mussolini's populist and nationalistic ideology, above all, ideas about the continuity of the Italian nation and the rebirth of the classical past. The decisive influence that these developments had on the character of the Syracuse productions (Beacham, 320) meant that in the aftermath of the Second World War, the Syracuse festival had to break away from the prewar climate to redefine its aesthetic and ideological orientation.

The longevity and cultural significance of the Syracuse festival may be closely linked to the fortunes of the political framework within which it operated, but its aspiration to reach a large audience made it appealing outside Italy in ways that have little to do with its domestic allegiances. In 1924, when for the first time the Syracuse festival attracted the attention of the Italian government, the Greek poet Angelos Sikelianos and his American wife, Eva Palmer, started planning a cultural festival at Delphi. The first Delphic festival took place in 1927 and was followed by a second festival in 1930. The highlight of the two festivals were the theater productions of Aeschylus's *Prometheus* and *Suppliants,* but along with the two performances there was a broad program of events, which also included sport, folk dancing, and demonstrations of weaving and other popular crafts. In a way reminiscent of Firmin Gémier's festival in France in 1919, this feast of cultural activities was an attempt to revive the public festivals of ancient Greece. What is more, the Delphic festival was an attempt to display the "organic" relation between the classical past and modern Greek folklore. The "authenticity" of the festival was also dictated by the newly excavated archaeological site of Delphi and by the imposing mountain scenery. As at the Syracuse festival, the archaeological site and the surrounding landscape were part of the spectacle, an indispensable part of experiencing "authentic" Greek tragedy. Despite the fact that Sikelianos and Palmer rejected the possibility of tourist development of their festivals, their preoccupation with folklore, archaeology, and the physical environment of rural Greece were soon to become emblematic of the Greek tourist industry. Eventually, political pressure and financial constraint prevented any further attempts to revive the ancient Delphic festival (Macintosh 1996, 305–6). Yet in 1936, just six years after the second festival at Delphi, the National Theatre of Greece recast the initiative with the foundation of a festival

of ancient drama in the theater of Herodes Atticus in Athens. The Roman theater of Herodes Atticus, used only occasionally in the past, was now chosen to host regular performances of ancient Greek plays. Two years later, in 1938, the National Theatre of Greece founded another festival, inaugurating the modern use of the ancient theater of Epidaurus in the Peloponnese. The two festivals were supported by the Greek state right from the beginning and, like the Syracuse festival in Italy, they resumed after the war to become major cultural events.

At the end of the nineteenth and in the first half of the twentieth century, the emergence of theater festivals was inextricably linked with their ability to bring together knowledge drawn from different fields and disciplines, and to unite audiences of different social and cultural backgrounds in the name of a shared past and a common identity. Wagner's concept of "total works of art" or "artworks of the future" best encapsulates the utopian character of these festivals, their vision of a community without politics and outside history. Both in his writings and in his work for the Bayreuth festival, Wagner identified himself with such nonpolitical roles as the Romantic genius, the cultural hero, the philosopher, the messiah, or the prophet, roles that numerous other individuals involved in the organization of festivals were also ready to assume. Similarly, the roles of the Christian martyr or the tormented sinner attributed to dramatic characters such as Oedipus or Prometheus enhanced the ritual experience of the festal spectacles and the sense that the beneficiary of the events was none other than the spectator. A similar effect was achieved through the massive choruses, which danced, sang, and acted as one body, blurring the distinction between the performance space and the auditorium. The geographical distance that often separated festival venues from urban centers was another feature that made possible the celebration of physicality and emotions, the harmonic union of the spectator with the natural world and the ruins of the past. As in a rite of passage or in a religious ritual, it helped mark the liberation from social and political identities and the beginning of a new life in communion with the other. Theater festivals, like religious rituals, broke down psychological, economic, and even linguistic and ethnic boundaries. They touched the emotional core of the individual, leading it out of the everyday sphere. They reorganized the boundaries of the self in society, holding the promise of a community where state power

and the interests of the individual were not mutually exclusive but interdependent. Transcending divisions of class and rank, rationalism, individualism, and the alienation, fragmentation, and dehumanization of everyday life, they became the model of a self-contained, indivisible, seamless, communal web.

At one level, then, theater festivals can be seen as being directly equivalent to Bakhtin's idea of carnivalesque art, whose antiauthoritarian, dialogic structure enabled the mixture of different genres and media, affirmed physicality, and revived the spirit of medieval festivities (Innes, 107). From Wagner onward, festivals were the product of a deep distrust and dislike of politics, politicians, and political models from across the spectrum, including the radical Left, communism, liberalism, parliamentary governments, and the monarchy. As a lived experience, however, the festivals whose aim was to revolt against social and political realities ended up seeking symbolic answers to problems posed by such realities, while also internalizing and replicating their unresolved contradictions. They were not the spontaneous manifestation of popular sentiment but strictly controlled and carefully orchestrated projects propelled by a desire for consensus and unity. Like many movements of the theatrical avant-garde that emerged during this period, theater festivals were hierarchically structured systems in which liberation from existing conventions went hand in hand with the total subordination to a new order, under the benevolent protection of the director and his or her sponsors. The festivals of ancient drama in France, England, Italy, and Greece were all founded by the initiative of individuals who maintained strict control over all aspects of the spectacle, acting as stage directors, composers, designers, fund-raisers, publicity and marketing managers, and so on. The future of the festivals was ultimately dependent on leadership as well as on their backing by, and suitability as ideological platforms for, political and economic elites. The success of the Syracuse festival in Italy and of Wagner's Bayreuth in Germany, the limited impact of the Festival Theatre of Gray in England, or the financial disaster of the Delphic festival in Greece cannot be fully understood without considering their social function and value. The economic exigencies of the fast developing tourist industry across Europe, the nonparty politics of regional resistance against state centralization, and the internationalist tendencies of cultural and intellectual elites

were at least as important as driving forces behind the festivals as the artistic vision of their organizers or the national—and often nationalistic—politics of unity and cohesion of the states that supported them. The remoteness from urban centers could further accentuate social and political differences or the need to foster the politics of alliance, as only a small—and heterogeneous—part of potential audiences could afford the leisure time, financial independence, and intellectual vigor required to reach places such as Bayreuth, Orange, Sicily, or Delphi.

A feature of the festivals that illustrates succinctly the illusory nature of their homogeneity and totality is the reenactment for the benefit of the audience of the drama of mythological heroes. The drama of such figures as Prometheus, Oedipus, and the Nibelungs gave meanings to the tensions between individual and society and between myth and history that could not be contained within the conceptual framework of the festivals intended by their organizers. For instance, in the *Prometheus* performed at Delphi in 1927, the protagonist was undoubtedly a focal point of attention. As noted in several reviews of the production (collected in Papageorgiou), the centrality of the bound Prometheus was to a great extent the product of religious syncretism: Prometheus was presented not only as a divine figure of Greek mythology but also as a Christlike figure whose punishment was reminiscent of the iconography of the crucifixion and whose suffering for the benefit of humanity sought to bind the world of classical antiquity with the world of the audience ("his mask, very gentle and passive, and his whole acting, indicated Prometheus's affinity with Christ" [Thrylos, 49, my translation]). However, the production had a second focus of attention, the Chorus of the Daughters of Oceanus, who "took again the position that they most likely once had: the principal one" (Thrylos, 47). The novelty of their dancing and singing met with the enthusiasm of reviewers who found inspirational their blending of poses from archaic iconography and sculpture, movements from modern Greek folklore dances, and music inspired by the Byzantine tunes of the Orthodox church (Papageorgiou; Van Steen; Michelakis). The two centers of attention of the performance shared the same preoccupation with the fusion of myth and history, and should in theory complement each other. In practice, however, they maintained their relative autonomy and contributed to a sense of aesthetic dissonance and fragmentation. Of the two organizers of the festival, Eva Palmer

took greater interest in the role of the Chorus (her pains to train it are well documented in her autobiography), and she had little to do with or say about the training of the actor who played Prometheus. Angelos Sikelianos, on the other hand, although only marginally involved in the practicalities of the production, was the poet-prophet whose public persona was heavily indebted to the mythical and religious symbolism of the poetic word and to the self-sacrificial heroism of characters such as Prometheus. If both the protagonist and the chorus offered to the audience models of emotional engagement, the antagonism between them made more difficult the transcendence of the differences between the new age heralded by the festival and the historical reality of the world of the spectators. Similar tensions can be traced in the theater productions of other theater festivals both before and after Delphi, whether one turns to the Parisian stardom of Mounet-Sully's Oedipus in its encounter with the monumentality of the Roman theater of Orange (in Sophocles/Jules Lacroix's *Oedipus the King*, 1888) or to the reenactment in Syracuse of the heroic and violent fall of Heracles (in Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, 1933) and Ajax (in Sophocles' *Ajax*, 1939) for the future of their community under the auspices of Italy's fascist government.

I began my analysis with the significance for the festivals of Wagner's distinctly non-Mediterranean reworking of Greek tragedy in Bayreuth. It may be instructive to conclude with the other important chapter in their genealogy, the markedly non-modern theater festivals of classical Athens: for all their temporal distance, not only do they account for the preoccupation of the festivals under consideration specifically with Greek drama, but they also served as a precedent and model for them in terms of organization and overall dynamics of artistic production. As a site for the production and reception of Greek drama at once artistic and political, the theater festivals of classical Athens participated in a complex discourse of power that was negotiated between individuals and larger social groups with competing interests (see Wilson). Not unlike them, modern festivals of classical drama sought to become public platforms on which the social and artistic energies and ambitions of individuals could be directed in ways beneficial not only to themselves but also to ruling groups, be they kings or governments, and to the larger community. Like the festivals of classical Athens, modern festivals offered a social performance

or "social drama" (Turner) played out in ways resembling those of the dramas enacted on stage. However, modern festivals never succeeded in establishing their activities as a communal way of representing and containing political conflict in the way ancient festivals arguably did. Modern festivals emerged not so much in a culture of prestige, where the power of the few can be productively controlled and channeled, but in a free market of ideas where the energies that make artistic production possible can also be poorly invested and misdirected. The sponsorship of modern festivals never developed within a competitive system similar to the ancient institution of khoregia. Modern festivals were not the product of a desire by the collective to control the financial power and to channel the political ambitions of individuals. Rather they were the product of a desire by individuals to mobilize and celebrate forms of the collective. The role assigned to audiences was primarily dictated by strategies of containment and politics of alliance rather than by the qualities of criticism and dissent now customarily—and not without nostalgia for a lost unity of politics—attributed to the audience of the festivals of classical Athens.

Unmasking the totality of modern festivals as a failure or as an illusion, pointing to their contradictions and shortcomings, breaking them down and reassembling them as fragments of a messy reality, does not do away with the concept of totality. This discussion has sought to focus attention not only on a set of theatrical practices largely marginalized by the categorical distinctions of contemporary theater theory and practice, but also on a relation between performance and social change at odds with the currently prevalent tendency to associate Greek tragedy with the politics of contestation and dissonance. We cannot consider the historical specificity and contradictions of modern theater festivals without also reflecting on the historical specificity and contradictions of the contestatory politics of Greek tragedy that a framework of "post-structural celebration of discontinuity and heterogeneity" (Jameson, 41) has projected onto ancient Greece. If the wholeness pursued by theater festivals is an illusion, any attempt to rewrite their complex and multifaceted specificity into the confines of an interpretative model has its own pitfalls and limitations. Artistic or interpretative utopias of totality may be illusory, but their social function is very real and present: without them the play of possibilities around the realities of culture, politics, and history has no future.

Notes

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1. For examples of this dominant trend in recent scholarship on the reception of Greek tragedy, see, for instance, the contributions in Hall, Macintosh, and Wrigley.

2. See, for instance, Hartigan (United States), McDonald and Walton (Ireland), and Sideris (Greece). For isolated studies of individual festivals, see Mariéton; Spotts; and Papageorgiou.

3. Brandt, 3. On Wagner as a follower of Aeschylus and on his *Ring of the Nibelungs* tetralogy as the new *Oresteia*, see his own "The Art-Work of the Future" (1849) and "Opera and Drama" (1852). See also the study of Aeschylus's influence on Wagner by Ewans.

4. Open-air theaters were first used in the nineteenth century, but under the rules of the naturalistic theater, plays were divided into acts and were performed after sunset, with artificial light; see the reviews of productions in Herodes Atticus and Orange in Sideris. With the search for new performance spaces at the beginning of the twentieth century, open-air theaters were used for experimental performances in broad daylight, thus being legitimized as alternative performance spaces to proscenium theater; see further Corsi.

5. On production photos and posters, see Amoroso; for travel guides, see *Siracusa*, a booklet published by the Italian State Tourist Department in 1922, page 11, as well as Brown, 21–24; Emerson, 101–2; Forman, 101–4.

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