

MUSIC AT THE FOREFRONT:
AESCHYLUS, *THE PERSIANS*, BY THE CYPRUS
THEATRE ORGANIZATION (2017)



ABSTRACT: This article focuses on a performance analysis of *The Persians*, directed by Aris Biniaris and produced by the Cyprus Theatre Organisation in 2017. It also adumbrates older productions of *The Persians* in order to contextualise Biniaris' work in the modern Greek stage history of the play. It suggests that various devices proved to be beneficial such as the re-invention of the Chorus of elders as a Chorus of young warriors brimming with energy and the development of a musical language based on the metrical analysis of the play. It also argues that the performance ideologically challenged the audience's expectations.

THIS ARTICLE EXAMINES a contemporary production of Aeschylus' *The Persians*, directed by Aris Biniaris in 2017. The main objective is to illustrate the novel artistic features of this production by taking into consideration the singular characteristics of *The Persians*, as well as its performance history thus far.

Biniaris' *The Persians* was produced by the Cyprus Theatre Organisation and presented at the 46th Olympus Festival in Cyprus,¹ as well as at the 2017 Athens & Epidaurus Festival in Greece. It premiered at the Makarios III Amphitheatre in Nicosia in July 2017 and subsequently toured through various cities in Cyprus.² A month later, the production embarked on a Greek

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1. The Cyprus Theatre Organisation is a semipublic theatre organisation, funded by the Cypriot Ministry of Education & Culture. In 2017, the 46th Olympus Festival was held in honour of archaeologist D. Pantermalis.
2. The performance was held in Cyprus at the following venues: Nicosia: Makarios III Am-

tour, first at the Ancient Theatre of Epidauros on 11 and 12 August 2017, and then at ancient theatres in various cities around Greece,³ before finally being presented at the Odeon of Herod Atticus in Athens. The cast and the crew consisted of both Greek and Greek Cypriot artists.⁴

This production is interesting in that it exploited the inherently musical character of the play, following a meticulous analysis of the metre of the original text. In fact, the prominent musicality of *The Persians* is one of its two distinctive qualities, the other being its status as the only surviving ancient Greek historical tragedy. Being one of only two extant ‘musical’ tragedies, *The Persians* is noted for its extensive lyrical and semilyrical verses,⁵ which take up almost 50% of the entire text. With the exception of Aeschylus’ comparably ‘musical’ *The Suppliants*, the quota of music in all other surviving tragedies is roughly half of that found in *The Persians*. This quantitative aspect lends an exceptionally lyrical quality to the tragedy, and, as a result, the Chorus emerges as the true protagonist.⁶

phitheatre, 13, 14 & 15 July 2017; Paphos: Ancient Odeon, 19 July (as part of European Capital of Culture - Paphos 2017); Limassol: Kourion Ancient Theatre, 21 & 22 July; Free part of the Famagusta District: Deryneia Municipal Amphitheatre, 26 July; Larnaca: Patti-chion Municipal Amphitheatre, 28 July (as part of Larnaca Festival 2017).

3. In Greece, the performance was presented at the following cities and venues: Epidauros: Ancient Stadium of Epidauros, 11 & 12 August; Ioannina: Society for Epirotic Studies open-air Theatre (Frontzou), 19 August; Dion: Ancient Theatre of Dion, 22 August; Thessaloniki: Teatro Dassous (Forest Theatre) as part of the 3rd Forest Festival, organised by the National Theatre of Northern Greece, 25 August; Athens: Odeon of Herod Atticus, 30 & 31 August.
4. Production credits: Translation: P. Moullas; Directing-Musical coaching: A. Biniaris; Dramaturgical collaboration: A. Solomou; Metrical coaching: Th. K. Stephanopoulos; Set design: C. Louka; Costume design: E. Tzirkalli; Movement coaching: L. Haraki; Lighting design: G. Koukoumas; Sound design: G. Christofi; Cast: K. Karampeti (Atossa), H. Charalambous (Messenger), N. Psarras (Darius), A. Miriagos (Xerxes); Chorus: E. Andreou, P. Giorkatzis, G. Evagorou, L. Zambetakis, N. Theodorou, M. Constantinou, P. Larkou, D. Malteze, Y. Minos, A. Biniaris, O. Onisiforou, A. Papamichalopoulos, M. Petrakis, S. Pittas, C. Sevdalis.
5. “The dialogue parts in tragedies are written in iambic trimeter (12-element lines), with a few verses being written in catalectic trochaic tetrameter (15-element lines). The lyrical sections are noted for their metrical variety. Metrical analysis reveals how the play is structured in bigger or smaller segments, sometimes on the basis of the ethos of specific metres. The semilyrical recitative parts — the so-called recitativo — are written in anapaestic metre”: Stephanopoulos (2017).
6. For an important discussion of the role of the Chorus in *The Persians*, see Hopman (2013) 58-78.

THE PERSIANS – STAGECRAFT AND THE CAUSES OF THE DEFEAT

Before further elaborating on the performance, it should be noted that each new attempt to stage *The Persians* invariably produces new meanings, and this constant shift in focus happens on account of two reasons: on the one hand, the text sets forth a number of secular and theological interpretations to explain the Persians' defeat at the Battle of Salamis; on the other hand, the onstage presentation of these interpretations varies wildly across performances. The expansionism and transgressions of the Persian Empire, the evils of unchecked totalitarianism, and the attempt at subjugating nature are but a few of the conspicuous causes of the defeat triggering the sequence *hubris-ate-nemesis*. (l. 821: ὕβρις γὰρ ἔξανθοῦσ' ἐκάρπωσε στάχυν ἄτης – 'Arrogance in full bloom bears a crop of ruinous folly'). In hindsight, other causes, including the excesses of the youth, father-son antagonism, ill-advised schemes, lack of naval skill, and the Greek *metis* (cunning wisdom) combine to give the facts a cause-and-effect consistency, as suggested by Aeschylus' text. Theological interpretations are dominant, too: god is envious; Zeus serves as punisher and guarantor of certain universal laws, which all people are forced to obey. Depending on each director's viewpoint, the aforementioned points are illuminated to varying degrees.⁷

At any rate, the play is intrinsically political insofar as Aeschylus seeks the causes of the historic facts. In fact, the tragedian keeps the premise of the play extremely close to lived history.⁸ Furthermore, by choosing Susa, a remote, exotic, almost mythical location, as the setting of the play, Aeschylus maintains the distancing effect necessary in tragedy – a geographical rather than temporal distance in this case, considering the play was presented only a few years after the Battle of Salamis.⁹ The prominent political dimension of *The Persians* has also been pointed out by numerous scholars.¹⁰

In view of the above, it follows that productions of the play have been predominantly defined by its political and its patriotic character – especially

7. See e.g. Garvie (2009) xxii-xxxii.

8. For a discussion on the historical value of the play, see Pelling (1997) 1-19; Harrison (2000) 25-30; Goldhill (1998) 189-193.

9. Garvie (2009) xi.

10. E.g. Garvie (2009) xviii argues that "If any play is to be regarded as 'political' it ought to be *Persae*", while Edith Hall described the play as "the most overtly political of all extant Athenian tragedies". See also Meier (1997) 89-106.

for the Greeks —, despite the fact that the text itself seems to suggest a combination of various causes leading to the Persians' downfall. *The Persians* was first presented in 472 BC (only eight years after the Battle of Salamis) at a time of celebration culture that glorified the heroes of the Greco-Persian wars.¹¹ One of the heroes in question was Aeschylus himself, having fought in the Battle of Salamis in 480 BC.¹² Several members of the audience also had firsthand experience of the battle. Thus, almost from the outset, the Greek/barbarian binary opposition became central to political readings of the play, suggesting a rising Orientalism, with the Persians being henceforward perceived as Others on both an ethnic and a cultural level.¹³

It is evident from the production history of the play that the abovementioned political reading has been enhanced over the years, serving as the main framework of *The Persians* for contemporary audiences as well. Historical confrontations, ideological differences between the Orient and the Occident, democracy versus totalitarianism, identity versus alterity, all these themes have, to varying extents, informed the revival of the play again and again over the years. In some cases, even certain motifs of the play typical of Aeschylus' oeuvre, such as the light and darkness motif in the Messenger's speech, have been re-interpreted to signal the difference between the Greeks (heirs of light) and the barbarians (heirs of darkness) in a straightforward symbolic manner.¹⁴

I will now touch on productions of *The Persians* since the establishment of the modern Greek state, each of which made a sensation for different reasons. I shall attempt to briefly outline each production's main approach, in an effort to explore the place that the performance occupies in the play's overall production history in Greece.¹⁵

11. For a thorough discussion of the topic, see Taplin (2006).

12. See the ancient *Life of Aeschylus* in *TrGF* 3 T 1. 4, 11, 144.10-11.

13. Hall (1989) 57.

14. Garvie (2009) xi.

15. I should clarify here that the present article focuses exclusively on Greek stagings of the play, and, as such, the production of Cyprus Theatre Organisation is examined in the context of Greek theatre tradition. Furthermore, this article is interested only in adumbrating the main points of each of the productions mentioned and in no way attempts an in-depth analysis of these performances. An exhaustive performance analysis would form the basis for an altogether different article.

A STAGE HISTORY

Already in the first presentations of the play in modern Greece overt nationalist and patriotic overtones can be easily detected.¹⁶ *The Persians* was first presented in October 1889,¹⁷ in June 1891¹⁸ and in September 1920,¹⁹ each time on the occasion of national triumphant celebrations.²⁰ These early modern attempts at presenting ancient Greek drama have little artistic merit. Tellingly, the patriotic character of each of these performances was informed by the occasion on which they were presented. The first occasion was the wedding feast of the heir to the Greek throne. The second occasion was the unveiling of the statue of Athanasios Diakos, a hero of the Greek War of Independence. The third performance coincided with the signing of the Treaty of Sèvres between the Ottoman Empire and the Allied powers two years after the end of World War I. According to modern Greek theatre historian Giannis Sideris, the 1920 production marked the first time that the audience was deeply moved upon hearing the politically charged, patriotic verses²¹: ὦ παῖδες Ἑλλήνων, ἴτε, / ἐλευθεροῦτε πατρίδα [‘O sons of the Greeks, go on! Free your fatherland’].²²

The first artistically ambitious attempts at reviving the play were by Fotos Politis (National Theatre of Greece, 1934) and Dimitris Rontiris (National Theatre of Greece, 1939).²³ The translation used in both cases was provided by the poet Ioannis Gryparis. The sets and costumes were designed by Kleovoulos Klonis and Antonis Fokas respectively, both long-time collaborators of the National Theatre. Both performances were staged at indoor theatres²⁴

16. However, Greek and philhellenic readings of *The Persians* were also common before the outbreak of the Greek Revolution.

17. The play was staged with a non-professional cast at the Municipal (Demotikon) Theatre of Athens. See Sideris (1976) 87.

18. The performance was given at the Municipal (Demotikon) Theatre of Athens, featuring a student theatre group and encompassing excerpts from various plays, including *The Persians*. See Drossinis (1889).

19. Theatre group: Eteria Ellinikou Theatrou. Odeon of Herod Atticus, directed by M. Lidorikis. See Sideris (1976) 281-5.

20. There was also a historically unconfirmed performance staged in 1571 by Greek students in Zakynthos on the occasion of the victory of the Christian forces against the Ottoman fleet at the naval battle of Lepanto. For more discussion on this, Mavromoustakos (2007) 1-23.

21. Sideris (1976) 283.

22. It should be noted that even nowadays Greek audiences are moved by these lines. In many performances, spectators applaud on hearing these specific lines being delivered.

23. See Arvaniti (2010) 136-42, 235-52.

24. National Theatre of Greece at Agiou Konstantinou St.

and adopted an archaic, neoclassical style, in line with the model of ancient drama revival that was favoured at the National Theatre at the time. An aspect of Politis' production that was widely discussed was its impressive building set, placed on a stage divided vertically in three sections.²⁵ In 1939, Dimitris Rontiris staged a new production, using the same cast as Politis.²⁶ Rontiris, strongly influenced by Max Reinhardt, introduced the technique of the Chorus speaking in unison and also established the practice of reciting the choral odes in various tones and rhythmical, stylised movements (e.g. having the members of the Chorus kneel and beat their chests during invocation and lamentation scenes).²⁷ The 25-strong Chorus of defeated men praised the victors high and loud. The repetition of this production at the National Theatre on October 28th 1948, on the occasion of the national anniversary of Greece's resistance during World War II, is indicative of its patriotic character.²⁸

Linos Karzis' staging followed in 1975. Karzis had first staged *The Persians* in 1945. His two adaptations were rather similar in style. The director was strongly convinced that ancient drama productions should be presented in a manner as faithful as possible to their original presentation in ancient times, making use of masks, *cheirides* (sleeves) and *kothornoi*. Ultimately, Karzis was more interested in highlighting the origins and ritualistic character of ancient drama than communicating their ideological content to the audience.²⁹

Karolos Koun's *The Persians* (1965) has in many ways been the definitive production of the play, having had a massive impact on subsequent productions and on the revival on ancient Greek drama in general. The legendary collaboration between Koun and composer Jani Christou,³⁰ who provided an original score for the production, breathed new life into the play.³¹ Panagiotis Moullas' faithful and rhythmic translation, and celebrated artist Yannis Tsarouchis' brilliant set and costume design completed the picture. Guided

25. See, indicatively, Oikonomides (1934).

26. Rontiris' production was also staged at various dates (1946, 1947, 1948 and 1950). For a discussion on the differences between Politis' and Rontiris' productions, see Bostantis (2013) 53-65.

27. Mavromoustakos (2004) 296.

28. National Theatre of Greece at Agiou Konstantinou St. (see the Digital Archive of the N.T.).

29. For a detailed list of the productions of ancient Greek plays directed by Linos Karzis, as well as a list of their theatre reviews, see Ziropoulou (1999). For an interesting study on the reception of the work of Linos Karzis, see Tsatsoulis (2017) 108-117.

30. For his entire work, see Lucciano (1987).

31. For reviews, see Karolos Koun (1972) 282-283.

by his unwaveringly sound instinct as a director and being opposed to the established academic style of ancient Greek drama performances that was favoured by the National Theatre, Koun emphasised Aeschylus' political concerns about imperialism and also redressed the balance between the divine and the human order of things. Koun re-imagined the Chorus, allowing the actors to improvise on the music and text, and effectively securing a long run for the performance. In particular, the scene in which the ghost of Darius is summoned was imbued with allusions to primitive rituals, punctuated by the Chorus' inarticulate cries. It is considered one of the pivotal moments in both Koun's and Christou's body of work, and a watershed in the history of world theatre.³²

In 1971, in the midst of the Greek military dictatorship (1967–1974), a new production was held at the National Theatre, with Takis Mouzenidis as the director. As mentioned above, details of the productions' aesthetics fall outside the scope of this article; suffice it to say that it was widely criticised by theatre reviewers for being extremely bombastic.³³ What is of interest here is, again, that it was held as a tribute to the 150-year anniversary of the Greek War of Independence against the Ottomans. The acutely nationalistic character of this production is easily explained as a product of its time, in light of the fact that Greece was run by a right-wing military dictatorship at the time.

The year 1978 saw a production of *The Persians* by director Spyros Evangelatos and the National Theatre of Northern Greece.³⁴ By this time, politically charged performances were becoming common, as a result of censorship laws having been lifted after the fall of the junta in 1974. The performance was fraught with tension between totalitarianism and democracy, reinforcing the idea that arrogance precipitates fall from power.³⁵ Giorgos Patsas' imaginative set design, a representation of several thrones extending all the way to the orchestra, vividly brought to life the ruins of Persepolis. The oriental-like costumes emphasised the divergent aesthetics of the two cultures. Antiochos Evangelatos' music, with its allusions to Byzantine and folk song, including songs from the regions of Epirus and Pontus, combined with stellar performances by actors Antigoni Valakou, Manos Katrakis, and Petros Fyssoun, made for a fascinating production.

32. Hall (2007) 185–186; Van Steen (2008) 262.

33. See among others: Klaras (1971); Kalkani (1971). For more theatre reviews, see the digital archive of the National Theatre of Greece.

34. For theatre reviews, see the digital archive of the National Theatre of Northern Greece.

35. See Georgousopoulos (1978).

Two classic-oriented productions of *The Persians* ensued. In 1984, Alexis Minotis' production together with Embeiriko Theatre Company was along the lines of the popular performing model of the National Theatre of Greece, whose foundations had been laid by F. Politis and D. Rontiris. However, Minotis had a different take on the Chorus, dividing it into small groups.³⁶

There followed Kostas Bakas' 1990 production of the play for the National Theatre of Greece. By this time, significant steps had been taken in reviving ancient drama in Greece; established directors had tried their hand at the genre; the audience also had higher expectations, having been exposed to several ancient drama productions. Bakas' performance was, for the most part, considered a failure, despite his collaboration with two accomplished artists, choreographer Sofia Spyratou and musician Periklis Koukos. His directing style was dismissed as uninspired, awkward, and devoid of vision, with theatre critics stressing that the production's patriotic agenda was working to the detriment of the play's other qualities.³⁷

It is no coincidence that from that point onwards — especially in the early 1990s — the nationalistic/patriotic overtones of *The Persians* were significantly toned down. The Greek theatre milieu was by now much more open to influences from international artistic practices, leading to various formalist and aesthetic experimentations. International meetings on ancient Greek drama in Delphi since 1985 had also contributed to that direction.

Lefteris Vogiatzis' 1999 production of *The Persians* was widely discussed, largely due to Vogiatzis' stature as one of the leading theatre directors in Greece, notwithstanding his relative lack of experience in ancient drama (at that time, he had only directed an experimental, indoor version of Sophocles' *Antigone*). Vogiatzis was celebrated for his ability to delve into the texts and capture their deeper meaning into his performances. His version of *The Persians* was considerably different from earlier productions of the play.³⁸ Oriental rhythms and motifs were conspicuously absent, as were the elements of ecstasy and ritual which had been routinely employed in previous productions during the famous scene of the ghost's invocation; furthermore, the music adopted a distinctly western style. Vogiatzis himself had remarked that Aeschylus' Persians behave in a manner typical of the Greeks

36. For further details on Minotis' positions on staging the ancient drama, see indicatively Minotis (1987); Georgopoulou (2009).

37. Varopoulou (1990); Pangourelis (1990); Varveris (1990); Kaggelari (1990).

38. Arvaniti (2011) 299-300.

— an accurate remark,³⁹ especially in view of the play's characters appearing to hold beliefs (particularly religious ones) characteristic of the Greeks of the classical era. The production did not meet with acclaim and was dismissed as rather 'cerebral'.⁴⁰ Regardless, Giorgos Patsas' set and costume design caused a sensation. The set was reminiscent of scorched earth; an extremely tall stele stood for Darius' grave; the Chorus held long, metallic spears of various heights, conveying to the audience the sense of the Persians' great numbers and power. Dimitris Papaioannou, in later years internationally acclaimed for his performances and for directing the 2004 Summer Olympics opening ceremony, had created the choreography.⁴¹

Since the dawn of the second millennium and as of today, Theodoros Terzopoulos' performance at the opening of the 2006 Epidaurus Festival is generally considered as the most artistically interesting production of *The Persians*.⁴² The cast was comprised of Greek and Turkish actors, performing in their respective languages. The performance also opened the Istanbul International Theatre Festival. Distinguished for its high aesthetics, typical of Terzopoulos' entire body of work⁴³ — the director has been lauded for his intensely personal take on theatre and his distinct physical-based methods — this version of *The Persians* emphatically condemned the horrors of war and contemporary violence. Borrowing elements from modern-day conflicts and showing suffering, tortured, self-flagellating bodies, Terzopoulos' performance moved and captivated audiences, employing the discourse of the body and physicality. In sharp contrast to the once prevalent conceptualisation of the Persians as Others, Terzopoulos opted for focusing on the two nations' shared destiny, calling attention to the universal experience of suffering and its expression.⁴⁴

Since the 2000s, there have also been two notable productions of *The Persians* by Stavros Tsakiris, one in 2003 and one in 2008. The former was noted for its multicultural aspects, featuring artists of various ethnic backgrounds, with a focus on the anti-war message of the play. The latter was

39. For a discussion see Garvie (2009) xiv.

40. Angelikopoulos (1990).

41. For more theatre reviews, see the digital archive of The National Theatre of Greece. www.nt-archive.gr/playMaterial.aspx?playID=423#publications

42. For an in-depth analysis, Sidiropoulou (2017) 53-62.

43. Sampatakakis (2008); Terzopoulos (2015).

44. Earlier, Terzopoulos had directed *The Persians* twice: In 1990 at Crete, a minimalistic version, and 2003 in Moscow with actors originating from the ex Soviet Union, having incorporated Russian cultural elements.

a predominantly ritualistic production, referencing dervishes and lament songs.⁴⁵

A production directed in 2006 by Lydia Koniordou, with the director herself portraying Atossa, was not met with acclaim by critics and audiences. In fact, it was poorly received by most newspaper critics. Koniordou has a rich and successful background in ancient drama, primarily as an actress but also as a director; in this case, however, her attempt to employ new styles by turning to more experimental techniques ultimately proved fruitless. More specifically, Koniordou adopted an unnatural manner of recitation/enunciation and a breakdance-type of movement. Unfortunately, these two styles clashed.

In 2009, Dimitar Gotcheff, well-known Bulgarian-born German director, staged *The Persians* for the National Theatre of Greece in what turned out to be a deeply divisive performance for critics and audiences alike. The director adopted various liberties, including replacing the Chorus of Persian Elders with a Chorus of seven women, distributing the Messenger's famous speech across seven performers, having the paean 'On, sons of Greece' spoken in a very low voice, re-inventing the ghost of Darius on stage as a dictator, and inventing a new character, a commentator on the goings-on. The performance was perceived as scandalous mainly, among other reasons, because it openly undermined the ideological expectations (superior Greekness) of the audience.⁴⁶

Dimos Avdelioidis and Niketi Kontouri also tackled the play in 2011 and 2014 respectively. Avdelioidis' production was considered as overly 'academic and formalist' in style, whereas Kontouri's performance, in which Atossa was portrayed by a male actor, was deemed by most critics as 'decent', without however contributing anything novel to the stage revival of the play.⁴⁷

Last but not least, Yolanda Markopoulou presented an interesting version at the Athens Festival 2015: a documentary theatre performance featuring Pakistani and Bangladeshi refugees, which was only loosely connected to the original play. In this performance, titled *We Are the Persians*, the refugees narrated their personal stories. Intermittently, selected excerpts from Aeschylus' *The Persians* were spoken aloud, serving as a type of social commentary, shifting the focus from the lament of ancient Persians to the impact of contemporary migration and displacement of refugees in the East.⁴⁸

45. Arvaniti (2013) 13-25; Tsatsoulis (2017) 152-170.

46. For an illuminating discussion on the topic, see Sampatakakis (2014) 435-450.

47. All the reviews of the performance can be read online. See the digital archive of the National Theatre of Northern Greece.

48. Tsatsoulis (2017) 39-42.

THE CYPRUS THEATRE ORGANISATION'S
THE PERSIANS, SUMMER OF 2017⁴⁹

The mere fact that *The Persians* is a production by the Cyprus Theatre Organisation cannot but evoke kneejerk associations with Cypriot history. Cypriot cities (Paphos, Soloi⁵⁰) are mentioned in the ancient text, and the past and the present come together in the traumatic 'here-and-now' of the narrative, referencing those killed or missing in action, keeping in mind that the narrative is uttered at the same time as the drama unfolds, with the narrators themselves serving at once as victims and as witnesses.

The connection between Cyprus and Salamis is a well-established one in modern Greek literature. A case in point is George Seferis' poem 'Salamis of Cyprus', envisioning a future in which justice prevails in Cyprus and the island is liberated from British occupation. In the present time, the connection between Cyprus and foreign occupation — from the East no less — might be even more pronounced.

Nevertheless, Aris Biniaris upset audience expectations, refraining from focusing on the ideological differences between the two nations. Combining traditional and modern elements, Biniaris' artistically solid and interesting work attempted to read the text through modern rhythmic analogies to the emotions produced by ancient metres.

Aris Biniaris, born in 1981, has a significant background in musical education, drama studies, and a professional acting career. He began directing in 2007. Before *The Persians*, he had a rather limited experience in ancient drama, having directed only two such performances, a 2007 production of Sophocles' *Antigone*, and a 2010 production of Euripides' *The Bacchae*, both of which had been presented on stage by two performers (Biniaris himself and a musician). In these performances one can already detect an attempt at reconstructing the rhythmic of ancient texts. Gradually, the director began to investigate ways in which ancient rhythmic can be transcribed musically. He was established as an up-and-coming director thanks to the performances of *The Holy Billy Goat* (Bios, 2011) and *'21* (Athens Festival, 2015).

49. My analysis was predominately based on having seen the performance at the Odeon of Herod Atticus in Athens and having studied the video that was kindly provided to me by the Cyprus Theatre Organisation for the purposes of this research.

50. *Soli* or *Soloi* (Greek: Σόλοι) is an ancient Greek city in the island of Cyprus. Since 1974 the city has lain in the de facto Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

Biniaris' *The Persians* stood out for its attempt to convey the meaning of Aeschylus' tragedy by way of its metrical analysis, that is, by examining the ways in which meaning may be structured and conveyed by use of rhythm. The director collaborated with Professor Theodoros Stephanopoulos to achieve a detailed and in-depth metrical analysis of the ancient text, and subsequently attempted to transcribe it on stage. Judging from the result, one could safely argue that Biniaris' endeavour proved fruitful. The director was also significantly assisted by Panagiotis Moullas' equally rhythmical modern Greek translation.

According to the director, the process of metrical analysis "helps reveal the universal character of ancient drama".⁵¹ Notwithstanding this rather exaggerated position, it is true that Greek tragedy is a supremely musical form of theatre. Music in ancient drama betrays its double heritage, which on the one hand hails from the worship of Dionysus and, on the other hand, from the great, lyrical tradition of the archaic period. Every metre is associated with a specific type of musical/rhythmical performance and, occasionally, even with specific types of music, meaning that metrical analysis both in the choral interludes and in the spoken parts, which are always in verse, can suggest the different speeds at which the text is spoken, but also the style of the lyrical parts.

The Persians in particular consists of extensive lyrical and semi-lyrical sections, and is densely packed with metres associated with a particular ethos (such as the oriental-like, exotic ionics), while it is also characterised by a repetition of metrical patterns in the choral odes and an unusually high percentage of trochaic tetrameters in spoken dialogue, whenever high-rank characters take the floor.

Especially felicitous was the director's choice to have the first 40 verses of the choral Parodos delivered in the original Greek (with impeccable reconstructed pronunciation and in accordance with the rules of ancient Greek prosody and metre).⁵² The reception of the rhythmic structure of this section was, no doubt, facilitated by the fact that, despite the radical differences between the prosodic ancient Greek metre from the stress-based modern Greek metre, the marching anapaests in which a large portion of the parodos of *Persians* is composed is not all that distant from its modern Greek equivalent.

The result was a 75-minute music-based performance, which remained absolutely faithful to the text's translation. The only musical instruments on

51. Biniaris (2017).

52. Liapis (2017).



The Persians, directed by Aris Biniaris, 2017 (photo by Stelios Kallinikou).

stage were a *tzouras* — a string instrument with a distinctly oriental sound — and two drums, placed on either side of the audience, keeping rhythm during the choral interludes. The coryphaeus sang and played the *tzouras*, while the members of the Chorus sang and played the drums.

Music dominated the entrance of the Chorus in the orchestra. Unlike most other tragedies, *The Persians* has no spoken prologue. Certain verses were repeated rhythmically, in a refrain-like manner, for emphasis (for instance, verses stressing that the Persian army is invincible and that the heart of its people is made of steel). In moments of tension, or whenever bad news was about to be announced, the soundscapes froze. Since certain rhythms can cause certain emotions and bodily reactions,⁵³ the alternation of rhythm and melody was defined, each time, by the meaning itself. The way the actors breathed and recited the text also betrayed a rhythmical quality, with the actors elongating the final syllables, especially at moments of anxiety (l.155-244). The audience watched the plot unfolding and simultaneously could feel the story through the rhythm. In this sense, rhythm does not mean musical metre, but, as Fisher-Lichte has pointed out, it means “an organizing

53. See discussion in De Boise (2015) 94-121.

principle that does not aim at symmetry but regularity” and it is instrumental in the success of a performance.⁵⁴

The music drew on traditional oriental religious rituals, processed through contemporary compositional modes. The outcome was musical analogies and a culture-specific choreography, that both corresponded, partly, to the modern hip-hop and rap sub-cultures. Interestingly so, ancient and modern juxtaposed the forms and contexts of ancient elements with modern reflections.⁵⁵ Either music conveyed the dynamics of a mass frenzy (especially at the climax of the messenger’s account of the battle) or it emerged as a collective mumbling sound (lamentation scene). Musical motifs from the greater Iran region further underscored the play’s mystical qualities, creating a highly moving effect. These motifs were particularly prominent in the Darius scene, whose staging drew on Sufi rituals. The pulsating, vibrating repetition lent an air of ecstasy to the contact with the great beyond. The lament of the Chorus for the casualties of war, and especially the traditional Georgian song during the production’s quietest moment, the appearance of Darius’ ghost at the play’s climactic moment, immediately after an ecstatic summoning ritual, also stood out for their remarkable musical qualities.⁵⁶

The Chorus consisted of twelve men and the coryphaeus. The latter was played by the director himself, suggesting the role’s significance both in the play and in the context of this particular performance. A major device on the director’s part, which considerably influenced the end result of the performance, was his choice to re-invent the Aeschylean Chorus of elders as a group of young warriors brimming with passion and vigour, and expressing intense, constantly alternating emotions, which were conveyed to the audience almost automatically through the music and rhythmical movement.⁵⁷

54. For the impact of the rhythm on a performance, E. Fischer-Lichte (2014) 25 gives a very convincing explanation: “One reason that rhythm is such a powerful organizing principle lies in its fundamental connection to the human body. Our pulse, blood circulation, and breathing follow their own rhythm; when we walk, write, speak, or laugh, we continuously produce rhythmic patterns. Even movements within our bodies that we are not conscious of are rhythmic. Indeed, the human body is a rhythmical instrument, particularly suited to perceive and be moved by rhythm. In performance, different “rhythmic systems” come into contact: the rhythms of production with those of the spectators. [...] It is decisive for the success of a performance to develop strategies to calibrate the spectators’ internal rhythms to the rhythm of the staging”.

55. On the reception of ancient Persian culture, see Harrison (2008) 50-61.

56. For discussion on musical themes and motifs in the play, see Haldane (1965) 33-41 and mainly 35-36.

57. Sampatakakis (2017).



Chorus (photo by Stelios Kallinikou).

The performance's music and rhythmical structure, as personified by the Chorus, vividly conveyed the range of emotions so prominent in *The Persians*: anxiety and fear for the imminent catastrophe; anger; despair, mourning; acceptance. The tragedy is built upon the following triptych: Phobos (fear), Pathos (suffering), Threnos (lament). Respectively, Biniaris' production evokes a sense of fate and inexorability; the news of the catastrophe triggers both secular and metaphysical interpretations about the limitations of human power. Darius' appearance signalled a shift to introspection. The arrogance of power and human transgressions were embodied in the figure of the devastated Xerxes. On Xerxes' arrival, the director focuses on the rise and fall of those in power (a source of pity and fear), on contrition, awareness of how things stand, and the therapeutic power of lament. The performance actually finishes in a semilyrical manner, halfway between song and recitation, allowing the Chorus and the actors to follow the path of the metre.⁵⁸

The director had scored several choral interludes before the rehearsals, based on the metrical analysis of the text. During rehearsals, performers were asked to interact with specific soundscapes; the performance was built on the basis of this interaction. The internationally acclaimed choreographer

58. Stephanopoulos (2017).



Karyofyllia Karampeti as Atossa (photo by Stelios Kallinikou).

Lia Haraki was instrumental in ensuring a solid, organically structured end result. Refraining from imposing her own take on the tragedy, Haraki followed the rhythm closely and underlined the ways the performers' bodies needed to move whenever they recited or sang the text. The choreographer conjured a kinetic universe brimming with energy and repetitive vibrations, which were successfully conveyed to the audience; the latter was perhaps even unconsciously encouraged to respond with the vibrations of their own bodies. The members of the Chorus moved around the entire orchestra in a fast-paced succession of moves, coming together, dispersing, forming circles, twisting and turning, walking tall or with bent knees (upon learning of the catastrophe). The impressively coordinated movements highlighted the collective emotion of pain, as well as the consolation stemming from the knowledge that this is a shared experience. A more stylised ritualistic movement was registered in the scene of Darius' invocation:⁵⁹ the members of the Chorus performed a whirling movement, reminiscent of the dances of Mevlevi dervishes, while the audience was guided to that cardinal moment, the supernatural experience of the dead Darius' ascent from the Underworld. Karyofyllia Karambeti, the actress portraying Atossa, remained still, repeatedly moving only her head from left to right for a span of ten minutes. Atossa's

59. See also Haraki (2016).

presence in the summoning scene (second stasimon) was yet another interesting innovation on Biniaris' part, accentuating the mystical ecstasy of the scene and anticipating the ghost's entrance.

Constantinos Loukas' set design evinced a non-historical approach, conveying time and space without making any specific references. This approach was in line with the overall spirit of the performance. The mostly stark set consisted of a circular elevated floor on top of the circular orchestra, and was divided vertically into segments. In the background, a high, arched gate represented the entrance to Darius' grave. The whole set enabled the youthful Chorus to move freely around, without being constrained by elaborate sets of royal thrones or other such props typical of most productions of *The Persians*. Moreover, there were several reviews that contended that its symbolic connotations were unsuccessful.⁶⁰ Along those lines, there were also other theatre reviewers that were critical on specific parameters of the production.⁶¹

Eleni Tzirkalli's costume design and Georgios Koukoumas' lighting design were the two aspects of the performance that most diverged from the predominant artistic approach. The costumes demonstrated clear oriental influences, conspicuously so in the case of Atossa's costume: burgundy and gold ornaments in the queen's first appearance; a black royal garment, alluding to mourning, in her second appearance. The members of the Chorus were dressed in military outfits — a choice more consistent with the overall spirit of the performance. The lighting design (red, blue, and white) attempted to underline certain scenes in a frequently exaggerated manner. The effect was particularly intense in the scene in which Darius' ghost appears, with its use of white light which ultimately worked to the detriment of the scene. In any case, neither the costumes nor the lighting were among the strong points of this production.

The actors' performances were instrumental in the production's success. The director succeeded in bringing together the Chorus and the actors, each of them with their own important artistic credentials and different backgrounds, into a harmonious whole. The continuous rhythm throughout the performance, as a result of its dominant musicality, served as a glue holding the entire piece together. The actors were intense and emotionally charged, both when they spoke and when they fell silent; their emotions were convincing without the slightest whiff of melodrama. In the beginning

60. See, among others, Sampatakakis (2017).

61. See Arkoumanea (2017); Liapis (2017); Moleski (2017); Sarigiannis (2017).

of the third episode, upon Darius' appearance (played by Nikos Psarras), the rhythm became slower and mellower. Capitalising on the trochaic tetrameter (not at all amenable to movement) of the original text, the director chose a soft, traditional Georgian song to signal the arrival of the dead king. After all, Darius' speech has a calming effect, marking a shift from despair to introspection. The Chorus maintained the slower rhythm all the way to the finale: the mourning had by now been fully experienced, and all the characters adopted a more introspective stance, in contradistinction to the frenetic movement of the earlier part of the performance.

The cast was praised by many critics.⁶² In particular, the performance of Kariofyllia Karampeti, who has a rich background in ancient drama, was met with great acclaim. Considerable attention was drawn by reviewers to what can only be described as an astounding physical feat during the invocation and appearance of Darius. In that scene, Karampeti followed an impeccably executed dervish-like whirling movement for all ten minutes of Darius' on-stage presence; immediately after Darius' departure, she resumed a quiet, soft style of delivery (with merely two verses of the Chorus in between).

The director succeeded in capitalising on each performer's unique background in acting, incorporating this diverse pool of experience into his vision. Antonis Miriagos portraying Xerxes was a good example of that. A long-time collaborator of Theodoros Terzopoulos, Miriagos riveted audiences with his intensely suffering physicality and the way he recited the text, resisting the dominant rhythm. The director thus not only underscored the loss of rhythm but also emphasised the loss of meaning,⁶³ elevating the hero to a level beyond history and making a universal example out of his travails.

CONSLUSIONS

In conclusion, I argue that Aris Biniaris based his performance on a metrical analysis of the *Persians* and attempted to read the text through modern musical analogies. This tragedy lends itself well to such an endeavour, thanks to its overtly lyrical and semilyrical character, and its high density of metres associated with a specific ethos. The director developed a musical language,

62. See among others: Ioannides (2017); Karaoglou (2017); Sampatakakis (2017); Tsatsoulis (2017).

63. I borrow this comment from the theatre review of G. Ioannides (2017).

capitalising predominantly on the *dynamics of the rhythm*, encompassing aspects of traditional, oriental music and combining them with modern sounds that to some degree corresponded to hip-hop and rap. The movement style of the performance resulted from the interaction between the actors/Chorus and the above soundscapes and subcultures. The performance shed light on the fear of calamity, the anger in the face of the catastrophe itself, and the attempt at tracing its causes. These aspects had such an extremely powerful effect that the audience derived meaning primarily through the alternating rhythm and vibrato. The meaning corresponded to an interpretational scheme emphasising fear, suffering and lamentation, and emerging gradually out of the Chorus' reactions to the news of the disaster at Salamis. The director followed Panagiotis Moullas' rhythmical translation. However, two innovative dramaturgical devices proved to be multiply beneficial, in that they brought out the dynamics of the rhythm, without disrupting the poetic language: first, the Chorus of elders was re-invented as a Chorus of young warriors brimming with energy; secondly, Atossa remained active on stage during the second stasimon, participating in the invocation to the dead man through her frenetic, whirling movement. The visual aesthetics of the performance attempted to transcend its narrow historical context, making use of largely oriental elements without directly referencing either the past or the present. Ultimately, the production proved to be challenging, not only in terms of the research on the pattern of emotional and rhythmical fluctuations but also in terms of ideology. The latter was achieved by the displacement from the conventional polarization East-West towards various subcultural fields that slyly undermined the audience's expectations.

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HELLENIC OPEN UNIVERSITY
ziropoulou.konstantina@ac.eap.gr