

Ancient Theatre: Edifice and Spectators

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The inheritance of Antiquity reached us not only fragmentary, but also in a unilateral way: the ancient edifices are for us mostly ruins, so that the imaginative power is a determining factor in completing the shapes and structures of the vestiges. The statues we know are considerably different than the ancient people used to see, either as lacking the colours and ornaments or as placed in the artificial light and atmosphere of a modern museum. Missing the limpid and sunny ambience of their original setting, the statues are less vivid and credible. On top of these inconveniences, most works of plastic arts and literary texts (in a largely comprehensive sense) share the status of being intermediated, transmitted by means of copies. The example of Myron's Discobolus is highly relevant for reconstructing the primary bronze statue by means of a number of marble copies, implying the incertitude regarding the general posture and various details.

The dramaturgical texts are even farther from the realities of ancient world. The basic misfit of written versus performed text, still valid in modern culture, is multiplied in several steps of estranging from original theatre of antiquity. Rarely is to be heard the original (not translated) text of an ancient dramaturgical work. Not being the native language of anyone in the audience, the Greek or Latin words are to be read – as surtitles or in the booklet of the spectacle, the libretto – during the performance or simply remain a familiar sound, without complete disclosure of their meaning, no matter how well educated the spectator is. Besides being different from the maternal language of the addressee, the text is more familiar as a written reality, for the reason that phonetic rules and reading habits allow different modalities of expressing the ancient words. Listening to erasmic or

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reuchlinian Greek, to traditional or *restituta* Latin – just as approximate as they are even when trying to get closer to classical stages of these two languages – roughly suggests the dichotomy of pronouncing ancient words. Approaching Greek and Latin accentuation rules, we have to admit that the subtle harmony of ancient prosody is hardly found in the modern habit of replacing musical accent with dynamic prominence, leaving the poetic rhythm without the proper tone of each word. Consequently, the literary works of antiquity seem to exist solely as mute descendants, intimately spoken by the inner voice of individual scholar.

The edifices themselves are poles apart: our theatres and the theatres of the ancient world are differently placed, built, designed, and meant.

Our knowledge on ancient theatres is both direct (vestiges) and theoretical (ancient treatises, encyclopaedias, various literary testimonies). The success of performances depended not only upon the quality of the play written by a skilled (and/or famous) author, but also upon some specific elements: architecture, scenery, acoustics, and comfort devices for the spectators.

Vitruvius's *De architectura* (5,3-9) is a useful source of information on edifices of Roman and Greek theatres. The natural qualities of the place are highly regarded, equally for the play and the spectators. First among the qualities of the place is its salubriousness, as the audience consists in whole families, with women and children, staying for long in restricted positions, captured and absorbed by the play, immersed in a state of artistic enchantment: “the pores of their bodies being opened by the pleasure they enjoy, are easily affected by the air, which, if it blows from marshy or other noisome places, infuses its bad qualities into the system” (5,3,2)ⁱ. The careful choice of placing the theatre also concerns the sun: the midday heat would affect the public, mostly considering the air circulation inside the hemicycle: “for when the sun fills the cavity of the theatre, the air confined in that compass being incapable of circulating, by its stoppage therein, is heated, and burns up, extracts, and diminishes the moisture of the body” (5,3,3).

eligendus est locus theatro quam saluberrimus, uti in primo libro de salubritatibus in moenium conlocationibus est scriptum. per ludos enim cum coniugibus et liberis persedentes delectationibus detinentur et corpora propter uoluptatem inmota patentes habent uenas, in quas insidunt aurarum flatus, qui si a regionibus palustribus aut aliis regionibus uitiosis aduenient, nocentes spiritus corporibus infundent. itaque si curiosius eligetur locus theatro, uitabuntur uitia. etiamque prouidendum est ne impeus habeat a meridie. sol enim cum implet eius rotunditatem, aer conclusus curuatura neque habens potestatem uagandi uersando conferuescit et candens adurit excoquitque et inminuit e corporibus umores. ideo maxime uitandae sunt his rebus uitiosae regiones et eligendae salubres.

Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis historia*, 19,23)ⁱⁱ mentions linen covers used for shadow in theatre for the first time when Capitol was inaugurated, by Q. Catulus; at a later period, Lentulus Spinther seemed to be the first to spread awnings of linen over the theatre, when celebrating the Games in honour of Apolloⁱⁱⁱ.

postea in theatris tantum umbram fecere, quod primus omnium inuenit Q. Catulus, cum Capitolium dedicaret. carbasina deinde uela primus in theatro duxisse traditur Lentulus Spinther Apollinaribus ludis.

The preliminary research for building a good theatre is meant to create the necessary bond between the performance (play and actors) and the audience, in a material space obeying rules long-established and confirmed. For getting enchanted by the play, spectators have to feel comfortable and close to the actors; the salubrity of the place is only the general background of this complex network. Acoustics is probably the focal component of a good theatre, as it allows the magic of the drama to occur: the actors dominate and master the public amid words that have to be flawlessly received to be effective. Perfect acoustic belongs to the place itself and is revealed by the architect and is strengthened by the constructor. The bronze vases (*uasa aerea*, Vitruvius, 5,5,1) are technically placed to structure acoustic vessel systems, according to rules regarding the sound scales studied by mathematicians and musicians (ex his indagacionibus mathematicis rationibus fiant uasa aerea pro ratione magnitudinis theatri

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[...] *ratione musica ibi conlocentur*: “...mathematical proportions, depending on the size of the theatre [...] disposed therein in musical order”, 5,5,1). Pliny the Elder (11.270), speaking about voice^{iv}, mentions – less technically – the sand (thrown down in the orchestra of a theatre), the rough walls and empty casks:

mira praeterea sunt de uoce digna dictu: theatrorum in orchestris scobe aut harena superiacta deuoratur, item rudi parietum circumiectu, doliis etiam inanibus. currit eadem recto uel conchatum parietum spatio, quamuis leui sono dicta uerba ad alterum caput perferens, si nulla inaequalitas impediat.

Equally important for the success of the dramatic representation are the entrances, access ways, the porticos, used to retreat from the theatre in case of sudden rain showers and, nevertheless, suitable for the rehearsals of the chorus (Vitruvius, 5,9,1):

post scaenam porticus sunt constituendae, uti cum imbres repentini ludos interpellauerint, habeat populus quo se recipiat ex theatro chorgiaque laxamentum habeant ad comparandum.

People can not become an audience without proper access and, nevertheless, only throughout an appropriate retreat each spectator will return home with a new artistic strength of mind. The edifice of the theatre becomes a station in the individual journey of every person that decides to participate in the spectacle and to finally receive a renewed spirit.

Long established rules of theatre, both as building and spectacle, grew concurrently with drama itself. Innovations began to occur, as ancient sources mention, in ephemeral theatres, *vide* Pliny 34.36, on the three thousand statues erected by M. Scaurus on the stage of a temporary theatre^v. Not only statues, but also columns in excess were brought to adorn temporary theatres: for some decorations meant to last one single month, were imported three hundred and sixty columns (36,5)^{vi}. The most remarkable novelty regarding theatres is highlighted in connection to the same Marcus Scaurus (36,114-118): for only a few days, were executed works considered by Pliny “greatest ever been made by the hands of man”. The building of this incredible theatre consisted of three storeys, supported

upon the three hundred and sixty columns already mentioned: the ground-storey was of marble, the second of glass, and the highest of gilded wood. The three thousand brazen statues were placed between the eight-and-thirty feet high columns. Oversized arrangements extend to the public: accommodation for eighty thousand spectators, twice as the Theatre of Pompeius, already considered abundantly large. Ingenious devices made this theatre memorable: were erected, close together, two theatres built of wood, each turning on a pivot, corresponding to two distinct spectacles: games in the morning, with the theatres being turned back to back, and combats of gladiators in the afternoon, with the two theatres brought face to face, forming an amphitheatre.

in aedilitate hic sua fecit opus maximum omnium, non temporaria mora, uerum etiam aeternitatis destinatione. theatrum hoc fuit; scaena ei triplex in altitudinem CCCLX columnarum [...]. ima pars scaenae e marmore fuit, media e uitro, inaudito etiam postea genere luxuriae, summa e tabulis inauratis; columnae, ut diximus, imae duodequadragenum pedum. signa aerea inter columnas, ut indicauimus, fuerunt III numero; caeua ipse cepit hominum LXXX [...]. theatra iuxta duo fecit amplissima ligno, cardinum singulorum uersatili suspensa libramento, in quibus utrisque antemeridiano ludorum spectaculo edito inter sese auersis, ne inuicem obstreperent scaenae, repente circumactis — ut constat, post primos dies etiam sedentibus aliquis —, cornibus in se coeuntibus faciebat amphitheatrum gladiatorumque proelia edebat, ipsum magis auctoritatum populum Romanum circumferens.

Re-enacting ancient drama in modern times is more than a tribute to classical philology: it eventually turns into a strong statement regarding modern life, philosophy, literature, politics. In Romania of the early '90, the performance of “An Ancient Trilogy” was a huge event, not only for bringing back home a prominent personality of the Romanian exile – the theatre and opera director Andrei Serban – but also for offering the public a totally new perspective on acting, understanding the text, participating the drama mastered by actors that sometimes touched or even thwacked the spectators, chased them from the first hall to the second and finally to the third, in a reverse arrangement, with audience sitting on the stage.

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The history of this performance goes back to the early '70, when Andrei Serban (who left communist Romania in 1969, with a grant that took him to the experimental theatre La MaMa – ETC, *id est* Experimental Theater Club – in New York) directed the tragedy “Medea”, followed by “The Trojan Women” and “Electra”, that finally were assembled in “Fragments of a Greek Trilogy”. The innovative trait might be seen as a return *in spiritu* to the essence of the ancient tragedy, marked by the abandonment of contemporary approach. Leaving aside the language inadequacy, Andrei Serban decided to offer a spectacle that was to be understood not on a word basis, but on a phonetic basis. His “Ancient Trilogy” addressed mostly the senses of the auditorium, as was played in an incomprehensible mixed language (Greek and Latin words, Oriental sonorities). Contrary to modern enactment of ancient literature, this “Trilogy” was not intermediated by translations, nor even by a scrupulous reading of the text; the first indication of this personal approach were the author credentials: “Medea” by Euripides and Seneca. Mixing Latin and Greek text in front of a public that had no ability whatsoever to understand any of these ancient languages, the tragedy got closer to music, suggesting more than was telling. A hint might be found in “A biography”, where Andrei Serban frequently mentions Constantin Brancusi, the sculptor that was very close to his inner self: meditating on the flight motif in “Magic Bird” (1910), “Golden Bird” (1919), “Bird in the Air” (1923), Brancusi did not represent, but suggested the movement in the air. The result was much closer to reality than any other approach. The “Trilogy” touches directly the spirit, without passing through clearly defined words, revealing nevertheless perpetual contact of spoken realities. Renouncing the traditional space of theatre edifice, either ancient or “Italian stage”, Serban immersed even deeper in the ancient spirit. The millennia of familiarity with dramaturgical habits turned spectators into imperfect receptacles. Rejecting the theatrical space, with unambiguous and safe seats for the public, this spectacle revalorised the literary taste, becoming a possible turning point in understanding and participating the ancient drama.

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“Fragments of a Greek Trilogy” were highly praised from its triennial birth (1972, “Medea”, New York; 1973, “Electra”, Paris; 1974, “The Trojan Women”, as part of the trilogy hosted by La MaMa Theater). In the first months of 1990, Andrei Serban was invited to come back to Romania, more than twenty years after he emigrated to United States. He returned home bringing what he considered to be the best gift, the “Trilogy”. The premises were glorious. He was warmly welcomed in a country that seemed to be finally awoken, after long decades of human and, nevertheless, artistic rigidity. Head of the National Theatre in Bucharest, he tried to completely renew the repertoire and actors troupe. Auditions for the Trilogy were organised immediately and the success was immense. Rehearsals had huge impact in the cultural media and even more. History transformed this dramaturgical event into an emblematic episode. The very square in front of the theatre happened to be, for many weeks, an open stage for political demands. It was a sublime harmony between the work of the actors inside the theatre and the civic, peaceful protests in the square. The political demands ended tragically in June 1990, when miners (with their dark clothes and mining tools) invaded Bucharest and brutally entered the theatre and the university that was right across the square – both considered emblems of the free spirit. The troupe of actors was in real danger, becoming suspect with their strange and foreign words resembling some treacherous codes. One of the actresses faced them fiercely, reciting the final part of the chorus in “Electra”, on Orestes killing his mother. Pure sound was more effective than any word: the intruders stepped back. In September, the Trilogy was ready for the public: the effect was intense, multiplied by the reality outside the theatre, with convulses resulting in words and acts, less serene, more brutal and vindictive. “An Ancient Trilogy” performed in 1990 was a mirror of the real world of the city, in the perfect garment of the ancient drama^{vii}.

Notes:

ⁱ“The Architecture” of Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, translated into English by Joseph Gwilt: <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Vitruvius/home.html>

ⁱⁱThe English translation of Pliny’s *Naturalis historia* belongs to John Bostock and H. T. Riley: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text>.

ⁱⁱⁱPliny couldn’t pass up a moralising note on the subject: „At a still later period, and upon the occasion of no public games, Marcellus, the son of Octavia, sister of Augustus, during his ædileship, and in the eleventh consulship of his uncle [...] covered in the Forum with awnings, his object being to consult the health of those assembled there for the purposes of litigation – a vast change, indeed, from the manners prevalent in the days of Cato the Censor, who expressed a wish that the Forum was paved with nothing else but sharp pointed stones.”

^{iv}Pliny also includes some general considerations on voice, not without relevance when considering the dramaturgical performance: „The voice, in man, contributes in a great degree to form his physiognomy, for we form a knowledge of a man before we see him by hearing his voice, just as well as if we had seen him with our eyes. There are as many kinds of voices, too, as there are individuals in existence, and each man has his own peculiar voice, just as much as his own peculiar physiognomy. [...] it is the voice that serves to express our sentiments.”

^v*M. Scauri aedilitate signorum MMM in scaena tantum fuere temporario theatro.*

^{vi}*CCCLX columnas M. Scauri aedilitate ad scaenam theatri temporari et uix mense uno futuri in usu uiderunt portari silentio legum.*

^{vii}Andrei Serban resigned in 1993 and went back to United States, being (since 1992) professor of Theatre at the Columbia University School of the Arts. He tried once again to come back to Romania: in 1995 he directed “Oedipe”, the opera of George Enescu, as his international career was already developing successfully in opera field, mostly in an unconventional approach. He created a familiar ambient for the public that until recently lived in ideological restraint and was experiencing the turbulences of transitory epoch. Though music could have been more explicit than words, the spectacle was not successful and its director left the very next day. “An Ancient Trilogy” remained unsurpassed.

Bibliography

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