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Czech attempts at the *Oresteia*

Modern productions of the *Oresteia* have always been preceded by productions of other Classical tragedies. Since the famous production of Orsatto Giustiniani's translation of *Oedipus the King* staged in the Teatro Olimpico in 1585, theatre managers have almost always tried their hands at *Antigone*, *Oedipus* or *Medea*, either as literary adaptations in the context of the times or later as translations into national languages. The *Oresteia* did not return to the stage until more or less the twentieth century. Attempts in the nineteenth century (mainly Rossmann's adaptation of the first two parts, staged by the Meiningen Theatre, Germany in 1868, and the production of *The Erinnyes* at the ancient Roman Theatre in Orange, France in 1873 showed right at the beginning that it would not be at all easy to deal successfully with this piece. At the same time they manifested the two possible ways of staging this trilogy: adaptation or division into the separate plays (or their linking in a variety of possible ways). In addition to all the problems connected with interpretation, translation and the transposition of the play into a different stage language there is the specific quality of Aeschylus' text – its length and static character, the grandeur of the choruses, the heterogeneity of the individual parts. The real discovery of the *Oresteia* commenced only in the twentieth century and it is necessary to point out that almost all the attempts to stage it have been accompanied by doubts.¹ A method proving successful for one production of a single play often turned out to be a failure for the production of the trilogy. For example, Karl Reinhardt's production of the *Oresteia* in 1911 bore witness to this also, since it never met with such a good response as his famous *Oedipus*. Within the territory of the Czech Republic, we tend to insist that ancient tragedies have seldom been performed, yet twelve productions of this trilogy have been recorded so far. To these we have to also add a brilliant radio production directed by Jiří Hořčíčka, which has been broadcast seven times since its premiere in 1966.² This, by itself, forms a significant chapter in the history of Czech efforts to appropriate classical tragedy.

The first Czech production of the *Oresteia* was directed by Jaroslav Kvapil on the stage of The National Theatre in Prague in 1907. This pioneer production was followed by attempts at the *Oresteia* by other directors, primarily those whose deep relationship to Greek and Roman drama was well known and demonstrated by many productions of classical tragedies – Rudolf Walter, Karel Dostal, and Milan Pásek. Two of these directors – Miloš Hynšt and Jaroslav Vostrý – even returned to the trilogy again. Miloš Hynšt's production on the stage of the Slovácko Theatre in Uherské Hradiště in 1980 was based on a different translation, adaptation, and interpretation. With a different team he thus created a fully distinct production from the famous rendering in the State Theatre Brno in 1962. We should not neglect the fact that the *Oresteia* was also staged in theatres lacking a large ensemble and stage – the Průcha Theatre in Kladno, East Bohemian Theatre in Pardubice

¹ See a book about staging *the Oresteia*

² The National Theatre PRAGUE 1907 (9x); Municipal Theatre On the City Walls BRNO 1929 (4x); The National Theatre PRAGUE 1947 (16x); People's University in the Large Hall of the Municipal People's Library PRAGUE 1958 (1x); State Theatre BRNO 1962 (19x); Slovácko Theatre UHERSKÉ HRADIŠTĚ 1980 (17x); The Průcha Theatre KLADNO 1981 (22x); The National Theatre PRAGUE 1981 (33x); The Mrštík Brothers Theatre BRNO 1985 (14x); East Bohemian Theatre PARDUBICE 1985 (16x); The Klicpera Theatre HRADEC KRÁLOVÉ 29 February 1992 (12x); The National Theatre PRAGUE 2002 (running) for details see Eva Stehlíková: "Productions of Greek and Roman Drama on the Czech Stage" In *Eirene* XXXVII, 2001, pgs. 71-160 and <http://www.clav.mon.cz>

and The Klicpera Theatre in Hradec Králové. Even though this drama could have been shielded by the authority of Karl Marx, whose favourite reading luckily included Aeschylus, by the absence of this play on the Czech stage we can notice those years during which the free development of the theatre was not possible, i.e. 1947-1962. Bearing this in mind, the modest staged reading of the *Oresteia* directed by František Štěpánek as a part of the Classical Plays Series organized by the Municipal People's Library in Prague in 1958 was all the more significant. Under the protective shield of an educational programme leading Prague actors successfully addressed a generation which had had no experience of Greek and Roman drama until that time.³

The first Czech production of the trilogy was staged at the National Theatre in Prague and only after the theatre had first put on *Antigone* and *Oedipus* (with mixed success). Recognizing the significance of its mission, the management of the National Theatre invited Professor Josef Král, the greatest Classical theatre scholar in the country at the time, to cooperate on the production in 1907. A new staging was devised by the above-mentioned Josef Král, the author of the translation, Gustav Schmoranz, the Director of the National Theatre, and Karel Boromejský Mádl, reviewer and art historian. Great attention was paid to the stage set, costumes, and props; some of these were ordered from the prominent company of Verch und Flothow from Berlin, Germany. The cast was full of stars, outstanding National Theatre members, as we can see in the programme brochure. In the production, which was notable for the monumental suggestiveness of the stage design, colour symbolism, and strict sculptural stylization, Jaroslav Kvapil dared to refuse efforts at reconstructing the chorus's songs and dances. Instead, he reduced its part and let the individual actors recite its original lines. By contrast, the *Oresteia* directed by a great Classical drama admirer, Rudolf Walter,⁴ put on in the Municipal Theatre (On the City Walls) in Brno in 1929, was an almost complete failure. It seems that this time Rudolf Walter made several mistakes that proved fatal: he crossed out too many lines of the text and turned the tragedy into the mere story of the murder of Agamemnon and Orestes' guilt. His great effort to achieve a "marble precision" that would correspond to the spirit of Aeschylus' tragedy was not successful.

As early as these first productions a great danger surfaced, resulting from the fact that the trilogy has to be abridged if it is not to last nine hours. The distinct tendency to turn the production into an all-day event, which happened in the famous productions of Peter Stein and Adriane Mnouchkine, has not been followed in the Czech lands. Rather, the opposite tendency has prevailed: there can hardly be a shorter adaptation than the one done by Jaroslav Vostrý for the East Bohemian Theatre – it took a mere two hours. Milan Pásek also carried out a radical abridgement by joining the second and third parts of the trilogy; moreover the third part was adapted into the shape of Orestes' feverish vision. Adaptation of the text performed by a literary manager, which often leads to a radical transformation of the original work and permits the uncovering of the structure and enriching of the topic with new layers of meaning, has been very rare here. More often Classical drama adaptations pursue no more than communication objectives – they limit themselves to attempts to bring the dated translations back to life (reduction of archaisms), cut down on the redundant mythological apparatus until the essential minimum

³ The series included, in addition to the *Oresteia*, Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, Euripides' *Medea*, and Plautus' *Pseudolus*.

⁴ In addition to Euripides' *Hippolytus* (1921) Rudolf Walter staged the large collage *Oidipodeia*, combining successfully *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone* (1926).

necessary to grasp the text remains, or perhaps achieve a certain condensation of chorus passages and monologues. In the case of the *Oresteia* there are several newer translations available to the directors – by Fráňa Šrámek (first staged in 1947), by Ferdinand Stiebitz (first staged in 1962), and by Václav Renč (first staged in 1985) – so they can at least choose according to their intentions, if they of course do not try to acquire a completely new translation as was done by the National Theatre in Prague in 2002. The text of the translation (by Matyáš Havrda and Petr Borkovec) was published in the theatre programme brochure.

The underlying interpretation is frequently derived from the traditional generally accepted concept regarding the *Oresteia* as a conflict between matriarchy and patriarchy, a struggle between the old and the new gods. This basically affirmative outlook dominated for almost three-quarters of the twentieth century (one of the best pieces of evidence was the famous production directed by Peter Hall), and occasionally it acquired a slightly Marxist taste, in which the freeing of Orestes was interpreted as a proof that democracy triumphs over tyranny. In this way the affirmative outlook on the transformation of society evolving from primitive beginnings to a higher level of civilization could be emphasized. In this part of the world this interpretation was derived from George Thomson's book *Aeschylus and Athens* (1941), which was the only accessible study of Greek theatre published here since František Groh's *Řecké divadlo (Greek Theatre)* in 1906. However we were not the only country bewitched by this interpretation. It was similarly successful in Italy, where Thomson's book was translated as well, and the famous production directed by Vittorio Gasmann and Luciano Lucigniani was associated with it. It is rather amusing to see that the book was also referred to by those who formulated concepts entirely opposed to harmonious and optimistic visions, for Thomson's Marxist viewpoint found mercy in the eyes of the censorship. Evald Schorm's production in 1981, which lacked completely any sort of catharsis, was in this way also protected: Schorm did not understand the struggle of divine powers as a merciless clash but as an absurd succession of two principles identically hostile to humans that brutally and irrationally interfere with their lives. Even though Orestes was purified from the murder, properly acquitted by the court, he was forsaken by the gods and rejected by people, remained alone, at the end of his tether. This interpretation was not radically new. In his second production of the trilogy, Miloš Hynšt showed Orestes on the stage of the Slovácko Theatre in 1980 in the end completely exhausted and wrecked, as a helpless freak in the hands of the gods. It was as though both of these productions were marked by the grimmest years of Soviet occupation, when the theatre director Hynšt was expelled from his home theatre and the film director Schorm driven out from the film industry. However, Hynšt supported his interpretation by deletion of the text: he eliminated the closing metamorphosis of the Erinnyes into the Eumenides. He had done this in his first production of the trilogy in the State Theatre Brno in 1962 as well, yet then he was driven to this drastic text alteration by a different motive: at that time he considered Aeschylus' ending inorganic and thought that it was a result of his concession to the taste of the time. Nevertheless, at the end of Hynšt's first production, the hymn celebrating the happy future of mankind was sung. Since the 1960s these essentially pessimist interpretations have been spreading and Luca Ronconi's production of 1972 is considered to be the most representative of the kind.

It is of interest that the individual interpretations are connected quite firmly with the Classical drama interpretations written by scholars of the time – after all the patron of the Karl Reinhardt's production was Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff;

in the Czech environment Josef Král stood at Jaroslav Kvapil's side; Peter Hall was supported by the great boom of books on Greek tragedy published in Great Britain and the United States in the 1960s; in the work of Adriane Mnouchkine we can trace the influence of the contemporary search for connections between Greek and Oriental theatre, gender studies etc.; Luca Ranconi's work was dominated by structuralists and poststructuralists (from Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet to Jacques Derrida). Our interpretations are actually from this point of view very tame, but surely we do not have to regret not having witnessed any of the really postmodern productions of the *Oresteia*, such as the one directed by Romeo Castellucci characterized as "una comedia organica," in which intertextual playfulness celebrated its triumph: *Oresteia* was linked to *Moby Dick* and *Alice in Wonderland*. Czech productions are usually neither original nor extravagant. As a matter of fact the most personal interpretation was the *Oresteia* directed by Karel Dostal and staged shortly after World War II, at a time when the rage of the war Erinnyes had died away and when they had been transformed into merciful goddesses of peace. Dostal went even further and believed that "the people's tribunal on Ares' mound where the gods themselves were physically present became in such a way an astonishing trial over the old concept of justice in the pre-Christian world and announced prophetically the coming of the new law.... If the cup of sorrow shows just one drop more of the holy sacrificial blood than the blood shed by the culprit – and it is the Eumenides who guard the scales – the world goes on and lives and takes part in the divinely pardoned moral and spiritual renewal in men."⁵ In reviews, by the way, could already be heard a threatening tone of voice, in 1947 still fresh: a Marxist critique pointed out sharply that "an Idealistic worldview is a real obstruction for the correct interpretation of a work of art."⁶

It would certainly be foolish to revive Classical tragedy on the modern stage. Yet it is striking that occasionally there are efforts at employing at least the morphology of the classical theatre. Miloš Hynšt did so surprisingly but in harmony with his conception as director in the State Theatre Brno in 1962 and transformed the *Oresteia* into a grand oratorio comprising the consistent combination of music, song, the spoken word against a musical background, and movement. Their effect was enhanced by the employment of masks and costumes supplemented by buskins.⁷ Most of the productions tend to civil simplicity. The production directed by Evald Schorm could be characterized in this way. The stage designer Josef Svoboda created an impressive, simple monumental design with a short staircase running across the whole breadth of the stage with an elevated playing area and an architectonic element representing the gate of Agamemnon's palace in the first two parts of the tragedy. From the programme announcement written by the literary manager Jaroslav Král it is obvious where the authors laid their emphasis: "The main weight of the production is upon the actors' shoulders. Nothing that one knows from the textbooks on Classical theatre are of any assistance here. Each performer must invest his whole personality into the play, evoke emotions that are suppressed in the civilized world and bind them in a perfect form. The actors have had to stop fearing big gestures and put the maximum of expression into verse; the word is the master here."

It has seldom happened so far that the trilogy has culminated in the third part. Perhaps it happened in the production directed by Karel Dostal, where the solemn

⁵ Karel Dostal in his word of introduction in the National Theatre programme brochure.

⁶ Hana Budínová: *Kulturní politika [Cultural Politics]* 1946/47, No.23, p.7.

⁷ See Pavel Klein (contribution)

ending with the trial and reconciliation reached the level of catharsis. Heavy and massive blocks with a red sky in the background in the first two tragedies grew into a wide staircase in the end, above which there were two Greek columns pointing to a clear blue sky to support the positive ending of the tragedy. Reviews described this production as powerful and impressive as well as academically boring, carefully developed and following one style, full of external purity with unwanted comic flamboyance, rarely balanced, harmonized into postures resembling statues and stylised tableaux with austere stage movements and gestures. They went on to criticize the play as full of hollow pathos that squeaked in the archaic mechanism – in short, it was the culmination of the season and at the same time a perfect failure. These words reflect not only the quality of the particular production but also the contradictory views that have accompanied every single production of Greek tragedy so far.