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PRODUCTIONS OF CLASSICAL DRAMA ON THE CZECH STAGE

1.

The attention paid to modern productions of ancient drama, which has brought a number of important publications,¹ reflects the fact that the relationship to the dramatic text has been changing in some respects in the past twenty years. The text is considered more often in the context of theatre than in the context of literature, as being only one of the components of the theatre production. A modern production then becomes an equally legitimate expression of the life of the Classical drama as its published translation. Unlike the translations, the productions were not included in bibliographies,² so an urgent need has arisen to collect and publish, first of all, the relevant data. Symposia and conferences all over the world are increasingly devoted to these problems. A very clear sign is also the foundation of the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama in Oxford and a project initiated by the University of Athens, - the Ancient Greek Drama Network. The Czech project **Productions of Classical Dramatists on the Czech stage (1889-2000)** has become one of its parts. It received a grant from the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic and the Ministry of Culture. The aim of the project is to digitalise the entire available documentation concerning the theatre productions, including not only conventional data (the place and date of a production, the director), but also theatre programmes, reviews of the productions, translations that were used but are not available any more, photographs from productions, stage designs and extracts from the video recordings. The presentation of the Czech database in Athens and a comparison of it with the English and Greek projects showed its advantages but also revealed certain problems of a methodological nature that will be treated in detail in the following comments.

2.1

The historical development in our geopolitical space is such that when speaking about Czech theatre productions between 1889 and 2000 we are speaking simultaneously, about theatre productions in various states (the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, the Czechoslovak Republic, the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Czechoslovakia, the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic, the Czech Republic). This space is multilingual. Up until 1918 German was the second provincial language; from 1918 to 1992 Slovak took its place. During the First Republic and the Protectorate German remained a living language of communication.

Theatre in this territory has been produced in the languages of the majority (Czech and Slovak theatre) and in the languages of the minorities (mainly German, and also Polish.³ The present limitation of our database to the theatre produced in the Czech language arises from the fact that the database was founded at the end of the 1960s when the understanding of what was meant by the term “Czech theatre” still stemmed from the conception formulated in the period of the National Revival. The roots of this conception can already be seen in Prokop Šedivý's renowned account *Krátké pojednání o užitku, které ustavičně stojící a dobře spořádané divadlo způsobiti může* (A Short Treatise on the Service That a Permanent and a Well-organised Theatre Can Perform), published in 1793. It is a free translation of Schiller's Mannheim lecture *Die Schaubühne als eine moralische Anstalt betrachtet* of 1784. Schiller's enlightened and democratic conception of a national theatre (i.e. a theatre for the whole nation, not for the privileged taste) was however deliberately twisted, in line with the

contemporary development of Czech society, to fit a narrower conception of a national theatre as a theatre in which a national language is used, i.e. in this case the Czech language.

2.2

If we want to study the productions of the Classical drama in the time-space mentioned above we must necessarily take into account, besides the Czech productions, those that appeared in the German theatres, whether they originated here or were imported from Austria or Germany. The German theatre already existed in this territory when the modern Czech professional theatre was only being formed and we can presume that part of the culturally aware public came into contact with Classical drama productions in the German language earlier than in the Czech language, and that Czech theatre managers were able to learn from their German colleagues before they began to produce the Classical drama on their own. The production of an ancient drama requires not only an accurate translation but also a sufficiently educated audience. Here in the Czech Republic this fact is usually considered a specifically Czech phenomenon. In reality it accompanies productions of Classical plays in other countries too, as was shown by Wolfgang Schadewald when quoting a statement of Ludwig Tieck's from 1851: "The general public must first get used to such great manifestations if they are to be able to appreciate them."⁴ A certain time lag in the Czech productions when compared to the German ones is natural but sometimes it is more than surprising. So for instance Silesian Opava saw a German production of *Antigone* in 1884 (five years before its Czech premiere in Prague's National theatre),⁵ but the first Czech production of the play in this region only came in 1987.⁶ Although the research so far does not show that we are concerned with a great number of productions or with productions of an exceptional quality, we have to take into account that in particular periods some titles were perhaps played only by German theatres.⁷

2.3

The Slovak theatre as opposed to the German theatre of its time has not produced Classical dramas in Czech territory proper. Czech audiences took notice mainly of those productions that were imported as guest performances or were broadcast by the Czechoslovak television. The Slovak staging style was always a subject of interest for Czech professional critics. This was probably not due to any novel way of staging and adapting the plays. For a certain time the same mechanisms shaped the repertoire in the Czech lands and Slovakia and the production of Classical plays had a substitutionary role - they often compensated for titles that were not allowed by the censors for ideological reasons. Closer research will probably show that even in the realm of Classical play productions, Slovakia was far more independent. *Oedipus the King* and *Medea* were among the favourite titles and two productions of these could also be seen in Prague.⁸

In addition to these Slovak imports, which were never considered to be a foreign phenomenon in the Czech lands, we must necessarily include the guest performances of foreign companies. These have brought important new trends into the Czech environment. Especially when watching foreign performances, the Czech critics became aware of contemporary changes and the specific national characteristics of the staging style. The guest performances of the Greek theatre company Piraikon Theatron in the 1960s are the best example.⁹ Jaroslav Král's article *Piraikon Theatron in Prague*¹⁰ even brought a clear formulation of ideas on how to stage a modern production of an ancient play - a refusal of "antiquarian" reconstructions, an emphasis on transliteration, a revision of the play, which must naturally be based upon a real understanding of the work, a respect for the uniqueness of

the author and his play. The guest theatre companies also enriched an altogether poor Czech repertoire concentrated only on the most familiar titles¹¹ In this way Czech audiences could see relatively recently Sophocles' Philoctetes¹² and Aeschylus' The Persians.¹³ Guest performances are very important for theatre producers - years later they continue to mention the performances they saw and compare them with new ones.¹⁴ Coincidentally, some Czech directors also produced Classical plays abroad - Otomar Kreča directed Aeschylus' Suppliant Women (never produced or translated in the Czech lands) in Teatro Greco in Syracuse (in 1982) and Sophocles' Antigone in Paris (in 1992); Jiří Grosstman directed Oedipus the King in Zurich (in 1975). Czech audiences could not see these productions, nor could they even be informed about them at that time. In both cases this export was a means of escape for the directors, who were considered undesirable at home and could not address Czech audience with their work.

2.4

A distinctive chapter is made up of the productions of modern adaptations of Classical tragedies, which often replace the ancient classics. On the occasion of the premiere of Uhde's play *The Whore from the City of Thebes* in 1967 a critic sighed: "It is the fourth Antigone on the Prague stage since 1945 - and not one of them was by Sophocles."¹⁵ And indeed - the theme of Antigone is known to Czech audiences not only from Sophocles but also from this Czech play, from a Slovak play, *Antigone and the Others* written by Peter Karvaš, and from productions of Anouilh's *Antigone*, Brecht's *Antigone*, Hubalek's play *The Spa Season* and Glowacki's *Antigone* in New York,¹⁶ while the theme of Euripides' *Medea* found a strong echo in Anouilh's and Jeffers' versions.¹⁷ These plays (and many others, e.g. O' Neill's trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra* or Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* or the Czech opera *Antigone*, composed by Iša Krejčí) participate in the creation of the context in which the audience perceives antiquity. So far Czech scholarship has been indifferent to this phenomenon,¹⁸ though producers present clear evidence of a knowledge of the connections - the ancient plays are contaminated by modern ones (for the production of *Oedipus the King* a prologue was created from Cocteau's *Oedipus*,¹⁹ Sophocles' *Antigone* was played together with Hubalek's work,²⁰ *Oedipus the King* with Brecht's *Antigone*.²¹ The most recent production of *Medea* combined a translation of Euripides' play with a translation of Anouilh's *Medea*).²²

3.

The exclusive concentration of the Czech database on productions played in the Czech language has proved to be limiting. If we want to examine the phenomenon of Classical drama production in all its complexity, no doubt we will have to include in our consideration a number of other productions we have treated in the preceding paragraphs. Only in this way can it contribute to an understanding of the more profound context for the reception of antiquity in this country. A certain inspiration could be provided by the publication of a team of Portuguese scholars led by Maria de Fátima Sousa e Silva *Representações de Teatro Clássico no Portugal Contemporâneo* (Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Coimbra, 1998), they included in their collection, covering²³ productions of Classical drama in the last fifty years, really all that could concern antiquity.

¹A relatively comprehensive bibliography is provided by Fiona Macintosh, *Tragedy in Performance, Nineteenth- and Twentieth - Century Productions*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 284-323. The recent hectic interest was preceded by the much older study of Wolfgang Schadewaldt's, *Antike Tragödie auf der modernen Bühne*, in: *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften 1955-6*, 622-650 (for the English translation see R. D. Dawe, ed., *Sophocles, The Classical Heritage*. New York and London 1996, 283-308).

²The bibliography of Czechoslovak Studies on Antiquity (*Bibliografie řeckých a latinských studií v Československu/Bibliographia studiorum Graecorum et Latinorum in Bohemoslovenia*) only records information about texts published in the modern media since 1981.

³Since 1951 the theatre in Český Těšín has had, besides its Czech company, a Polish one.

⁴Wolfgang Schadewaldt, *Ancient Tragedy on the Modern Stage*, in: R. D. Dawe, ed., *The Classical Heritage*. New York and London 1996, 289.

⁵See Miloš Zbavitel, *Kalendárium dějin divadla v Opavě [An Almanac of Opava Theatre History]*. Opava, Matice slezská 1995.

⁶The premiere in the Silesian Theatre in Opava took place on 17 May 1987. The play was directed by Alexander Postler and Václav Renč's translation was used.

⁷Between the first Czech production of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, which took place in the National Theatre in Prague on 19 November 1889 (dir. J. Seifert), and the famous Hilar production, with its premiere on 4 April 1932, Prague witnessed an experimental production by J. Frejka in the Theatre Dada Na Slupi (the premiere on 11 April 1928). The two later productions (7 May 1914, dir.: V. Novák; 25 January 1928, dir. and adaptation: V. Horák) met with no special response from the critics. But *Oedipus the King* was in the repertoire of the Prague German theatre from 1920–22.

⁸*Medea* was first put on Malá sečna (Minor stage) of the Slovak National Theatre on 13 and 15 December 1985 and it was directed by Lubomír Vajdička. *Oedipus the King* had been first staged in the Slovak National Theatre on 27 March 1965 and it was directed by Jozef Budský. It is indicative of the then close cooperation between the two communities that the stage design and costumes were the work of a Czech designer Zbyněk Kolář. Czechs played a crucial role in the first Slovak productions of Classical plays. The first modern Slovak productions (Plautus' *Pseudolus*, 1925 and Sophocles' *Electra*, 1928) were played in Czech translations and there were a number of Czechs among the theatre managers.

⁹*Piraiikon* theatre gave a guest performance at the Smetana Theatre in Prague; on 11 April 1965 they put on Sophocles' *Electra*, on 12 April 1965 Euripides' *Medea*. The director in both cases was D. Rondiris, with Aspasia Papathanassiou starring in the title roles. *Piraiikon* theatre also visited Bratislava at the same time.

¹⁰Jaroslav Král, *Piraiikon Theatron v Praze [Piraiikon Theatron in Prague]*. In: *Divadlo*, No. 2, 71–4.

¹¹Among the most frequently produced plays in the Czech lands are Sophocles' tragedies *Oedipus the King*, *Antigone*, and *Electra*, Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, and Euripides' *Medea*. *Iphigenia in Aulis* only appeared in 1982, *Orestes* in 1991. Euripides' *Trojan Women* first appeared on the Czech stage only in 1980, whereas Sartre's adaptation of this drama was produced already in the 1960s (1965, 1968). A number of Greek tragedies have not been put on at all (Aeschylus' *Persians* and *Suppliant Women*, Sophocles' *Ajax*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Philoctetes* and *Trachiniae*, Euripides' *Alcestis*, *Electra*, *Phoenician Women*, *Helen*, *Madness of Heracles*, *Suppliant Women*). Of the comedies of Aristophanes, the most popular is *Lysistrata* (moreover staged in several modern adaptations); the comedies *The Acharnians*, *Clouds*, and *Wasps* have never been produced. Of the comedies of Menander have been put on *The Epitrepontes* and *Dyskolos*. Of the comedies of Plautus, only six are usually staged, in order of popularity - *Pseudolus*, *The Miles gloriosus*, *The Menaechmi*, *The Mostellaria*, *The Mercator*, and *Amphitruo*. Throughout the whole period, only one tragedy of Seneca's has been produced (*Phaedra*).

¹²*Cheek by Jowl* played *Philoctetes* in the National Theatre on 15 March 1989 (dir. D. Donnellan).

¹³Münchener Kammerspiele played *The Persians* in the Vinohrady Theatre on 27 September 1996 (dir. D. Dorn).

¹⁴See Vladimír Šrámek, *Oedipus vladař na libereckém jevišti [Oedipus tyrannus on the stage in Liberec]*. In: *Divadlo* 1955, No. 11, 907-910. Šrámek recalls Reinhardt's production of *Oedipus the King*; Aloys Skoumal, *Sofokles se vrací na jeviště (Sophocles returns to the stage)*. In: *Divadlo* 1956, No. 9. Skoumal recalls a performance of the Moscow theatre in Prague.

¹⁵Jindřich Černý, *Antigona v Národním divadle [Anti-Antigone on the stage of the National Theatre]*. In: *Literární noviny* 12 April 1967.

¹⁶Peter Karvaš, *Antigona a ti druzí [Antigone and the Others]*: 1962 (seven times). Milan Uhde, *Děvka z města Théby [The Whore of the City of Thebes]*: 1967 (twice). Bertold Brecht, *Antigone*: 1984.

Jean Anouilh, *Antigone*: 1946 (twice), 1964, 1969, 1970, 1978, 1979 (twice), 1985, 1988, 1990, 1992.

Claus Hubalek, *Lázeňská sezóna [The Spa Season]* (also under the titles: *Hrdinové v Thébách nežijí [Heroes do not live in Thebes]*, *Hodina Antigony [A Lesson of Antigone]*): 1962 (twice), 1963, 1964, 1991.

Janusz Glowacki, *Antigona v Novém Yorku [Antigone in New York]*: 1994 (twice). Robinson Jeffers, *Medea*: 1962, 1972, 1973, 1977, 1980, 1983.

Jean Anouilh, *Medea*: 1962, 1972, 1973 (twice), 1974, 1978, 1980, 1981, 1983.

¹⁸It is of interest that in the study *Naša antika [Our antiquity]: - Hic sunt leones* written by Ladislav Čavojský for Javisko, the bulletin of the Slovak National Theatre, on the occasion of the premiere of *Medea* in 1985, the Classical drama and their modern editions are, on the contrary, quite naturally mentioned side by side.

¹⁹Theatre Dada (Prague), dir. J. Frejka, 11 April 1928.

²⁰Státní divadlo [The State Theatre] (Brno), dir. Alois Hajda, 25 May 1984.

²¹Divadlo Vítězného Února [The Theatre of Victorious February] (Hradec Králové), dir. Milan Pásek, 19 January 1963.

²²Theatre In flagranti (Brno), dir. J. M. Richter, 29 February 1999.

²³To be fair, we have to admit that actual productions of Classical plays are in a minority here - for instance, the entry on Sophocles's *Antigone* includes Sophocles (7 times), a collage of Sophocles-Brecht, Anouilh (8 times), Brecht (3 times) and 11 other adaptations of which the most frequent is António Pedro's *Antigone*. In the Czech lands in the same period we had 14 productions of Sophocles and 29 productions of other adaptations, excluding opera.