



La Scène
en Version
Originale



Julie Vatain-Corfdir (dir.)



The idea of a dialogue heard “in its original language” is usually applied to film. This book applies it to theatre, and explores the workings of untranslated shows, performed in all the foreignness of their original voices and gestures. The question of translating for the stage is currently giving rise to much academic discussion, but the stage and theatre research programme at Paris-Sorbonne (PRITEPS) has here chosen to focus on the reverse phenomenon, and to examine the performance of plays before audiences whose language is not that of the actors, putting this linguistic otherness forward as part of the aesthetic experience. From the travels of the Italian companies welcomed throughout the courts of Europe to those of the Chinese actors invited to the World’s Fairs, there is no dearth of examples, whose specificity, reception and influence call for in-depth study.

This interdisciplinary collection of articles brings together various approaches, cultures and languages, in a comparative perspective. Using a wide array of case studies – exotic or regional, historical or contemporary – the chapters investigate what comes across, beyond language, in the theatre. Do the spectators find themselves turned into discoverers, cultural elitists, or even voyeurs? Is their understanding of the show rooted in the music of the words, or the gesticulation of the bodies? The papers gathered in this volume explore the distinctive features of foreign-language shows and inquire into the institutions where they are performed, the sociology of their audiences and the question of surtitles. From one chapter to the next, they gradually define a theatrical experience that is as fertile as it is disconcerting – anchored in sensory perception, and concentrating the spectator’s attention entirely on powerful rhythms, delicate gestures, and echoing voices.

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AVANT-PROPOS

Julie Vatain-Corfdir

Si l'art théâtral est celui de la parole incarnée, qu'advient-il de cette parole en terre étrangère ? Comme en témoignage, dès le xvii^e siècle, la présence de comédiens italiens dans plusieurs capitales européennes, l'itinérance est inscrite dans l'histoire du théâtre mondial, dans la vie des troupes et la carrière des acteurs. Il convient donc de s'interroger sur le spectacle comme objet exporté, dans ses modalités changeantes comme dans sa réception. C'est ce qu'a souhaité faire ici, dans le cadre de ses travaux à la croisée des scènes, le Programme de recherches interdisciplinaires sur le théâtre et les pratiques scéniques de Paris-Sorbonne (PRITEPS). À l'heure où de nombreuses publications se penchent sur les difficultés et les bonheurs de la traduction théâtrale, ce volume choisit de se consacrer à l'expérience inverse : celle du théâtre en version originale, joué pour un public dont la langue n'est pas celle du spectacle, en revendiquant l'altérité linguistique comme part de l'expérience esthétique.

La création contemporaine abonde en mises en scènes multilingues et multiculturelles, affirmant l'« étrangéisation » du théâtre comme clé d'une perception renouvelée, mais l'histoire montre que ces pratiques s'appuient sur une tradition vieille de plusieurs siècles. Des comédiens français invités par Catherine de Russie aux acteurs anglais qu'accueille l'Odéon en 1827, des tournées de Sarah Bernhardt en Amérique du Nord à celles de Louis Jovet en Amérique du Sud, des applaudissements reçus par les comédiens-danseurs japonais à l'exposition universelle de 1900 aux succès en langue japonaise de Simon McBurney ou de Claude Régy, le théâtre aime à faire entendre la musique d'une autre langue, à explorer la transmission du spectacle au-delà des mots.

Une enquête sur ce phénomène exige de s'intéresser non seulement à la spécificité des spectacles qui voyagent, mais aussi aux institutions qui les accueillent, aux publics auxquels ils se destinent, et aux effets qu'ils produisent. Si les barrières langagières peuvent en effet provoquer la méfiance des spectateurs, incitant les artistes à les rassurer par la distribution de synopsis ou la mise en place de surtitres, elles permettent également de placer l'art théâtral sous une autre lumière. L'altérité linguistique concentre l'attention sur le langage scénique, sur l'expressivité du geste, sur le rythme et la musicalité de la déclamation, éduquant le public à une forme de réception ancrée dans le sensible plus que dans le discours. La question de l'équilibre entre sens et

sonorité suggère d'ailleurs une comparaison avec l'opéra, car la langue étrangère n'est pas perçue de la même manière par les spectateurs lorsqu'elle est parlée ou chantée. Les spectacles venus d'ailleurs enrichissent, enchantent ou déconcertent la réception, de même qu'ils influencent les pratiques de la scène « d'accueil », qui se renouvelle au contact de dictionnements inaccoutumés et de nouvelles cultures du geste. Faire entendre une pièce en version originale, c'est croiser à la fois les langues et les traditions théâtrales, et raviver l'art dramatique en le dépouillant du verbe pour mettre l'accent sur le corps et la voix.

6 L'approche de ce volume consiste à mettre en regard des pratiques et des langues diverses, de manière à enrichir le questionnement théorique par la comparaison. Le vaste éventail d'exemples abordés par les articles a suggéré un ordre de présentation à la fois chronologique et thématique, selon les sections. La chronologie s'impose en effet pour étudier les origines européennes du phénomène, à savoir les pratiques voyageuses des comédiens italiens, ces précurseurs de l'exportation des spectacles et de la bigarrure linguistique. Le premier volet s'y consacre, avec trois articles qui étudient successivement la présence italienne sur les scènes parisiennes aux XVI^e, XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles. Il s'agit là d'analyser la saveur du bilinguisme franco-italien et son effet sur le public ([Charles Mazouer](#)), la place du geste et de l'agilité corporelle dans un théâtre improvisé fondé sur le jeu physique ([Charles Mazouer](#), [Alessia Gennari](#)), et plus généralement de mettre en doute l'idée de barrière linguistique conçue comme un obstacle. La question de l'institutionnalisation de ce théâtre et de sa perception dans les sources contemporaines mérite également d'être étudiée ([Sandrine Blondet](#), [Alessia Gennari](#)), ainsi que le statut des comédiens, indépendants ou placés sous le patronage des Grands ([Sandrine Blondet](#)).

Après cette mise en perspective des premières pratiques du genre, une deuxième section se tourne vers le surgissement de la langue « autre » comme principe de création théâtrale. C'est ici un regroupement thématique qui permet de mettre en regard des cas d'études variés, de la langue régionale à la langue exotique. Les scènes en occitan de *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac* et la pastorale languedocienne de Mondonville invitent ainsi à s'interroger sur le choix de la langue occitane : sa portée, son accessibilité, et sa valeur théâtrale ([Bénédictte Louvat-Molozay](#)). Le rapport du spectateur aux sonorités d'une autre langue est également analysé à travers *l'Électre* de Sophocle, retransmise en grec à la télévision britannique avec un succès inattendu qui souligne la suprématie de l'intensité émotive et de la musicalité du jeu ([Amanda Wrigley](#)). L'exemple des comédiens chinois sur la scène française permet ensuite d'apprécier la façon dont les spectacles éduquent le regard du public, sortant progressivement des confins d'un exotisme bizarre pour devenir un art apprécié ([Shih-Lung Lo](#)). Ces exemples divers

et révélateurs posent avec acuité la question de la déclamation autre, et présentent diverses facettes des dispositifs de compréhension mis en place pour le public.

Un troisième volet se consacre à la fortune de la langue française sur les scènes étrangères. La Russie en offre plusieurs exemples, qu'il s'agisse des proverbes dramatiques écrits en français par Catherine II et sa cour ([Valentina Ponzetto](#)) ou de troupes françaises invitées à Saint-Petersbourg au fil du XIX^e siècle ([Pascale Melani](#)). Les questions qui se posent alors ont trait non seulement aux textes joués en langue étrangère, mais aussi à tout l'univers culturel qu'ils véhiculent, aux modes françaises – qu'elles soient littéraires ou vestimentaires – et à la sociologie du public. Ce dernier point intéresse également le phénomène méconnu du « Théâtre français d'Amérique », troupe française implantée à New York avant même l'arrivée de Jacques Copeau, avec pour public privilégié une élite culturelle qui fait grand cas de ses affiliations européennes ([Mechele Leon](#)).

La dernière section du volume se tourne vers les pratiques linguistiques et les métissages de la scène contemporaine. Depuis la fin du XX^e siècle, les créations internationales, le travail sur le sur-titrage et les spectacles présentés en versions multiples sont particulièrement à l'honneur. La reconnaissance dont jouit actuellement le théâtre espagnol alternatif permet de s'interroger sur les modalités de sa réception, sur son influence et sur l'adaptation des spectacles aux lieux où ils sont présentés ([Béatrice Bottin](#)). Plus rare, la production d'une même mise en scène en plusieurs langues engage une réflexion sur la valeur et le fonctionnement de ce choix esthétique, et sur ses conséquences en termes de rapport au public et d'efficacité de la mise en scène ([Anaïs Bonnier](#)). L'exemple d'un metteur en scène proposant ses spectacles tantôt en traduction, tantôt en langue étrangère, invite enfin à une analyse du jeu de l'artiste avec sa réception, entre distanciation et connivence ([Suzanne Fernandez](#)). À travers cette mosaïque de cas d'études sous-tendus par une réflexion théorique, c'est donc un travail approfondi sur le spectacle de l'Autre, dans ses modalités linguistiques et sonores comme dans son exotisme gestuel, que propose ce volume.

SOPHOCLEAN TELEVISION:
ELECTRA WITHOUT SUBTITLES ON ITV IN 1962

Amanda Wrigley

At 9.45pm on Wednesday 28 November 1962, the domestic audience for Independent Television (ITV) in the UK witnessed an extraordinary programme – a production of Sophocles’ *Electra*, presented in Greek with no subtitles. This was, however, no antiquarian exercise in declaiming ancient Greek. Rather, the commercial television audience was witness to a television presentation of Dimitris Rondiris’ internationally touring stage production of the Sophoclean play by the Peiraïkon Theatron theatre company and, using Ioannis Gryparis’ translation, it was given in the living language of modern Greek. And so it was that an estimated 1,235,000 homes tuned in to the commercial ITV networks across the UK to watch a sixty-minute production of a Greek tragedy acted in Greek.¹ This was bold programming and, as many said immediately in advance of transmission, a potentially foolhardy experiment. In the event, it was a tremendous cultural success, despite (or, as will be argued below, perhaps because of) the language barrier, with many critics hailing it as a “courageous” or “brave” act.

This essay will explore the terms in which the production was considered to have been a success – namely, beauty, intensity and emotion. These qualities were attributed to the perceived expressivity of certain elements of the performance in combination with each other: the choreography, especially of the chorus; the beauty of the monumental set; and the evocative musicality of the Greek language. These qualities point to the attractive “otherness” of the production, which was of course very much foregrounded in the absence of the vernacular language. Yet, this “otherness” would have had some general cultural familiarity for a portion of audience owing to the increasingly strong tradition of Greek theatre companies taking their work, especially ancient drama, on extensive international tours which were liberally covered by the press. The essay

¹ 1,235,000 homes equated to around 2½ million people. The largest regional audience for the play was “in the Northern ITV areas, where it was seen by 459,000 ITV/BBC homes” (“*Electra* Watched in 1¼m Homes”, *Television Today*). A few regional companies, such as Westward which served Devon and Cornwall, did not show it for fear of displeasing their audience, some of whom as a result were left “profoundly angry at the whole thing, terribly cheated and bitterly disappointed” (quoted in Ion Trewin, “TV’s Future Poses Some Awkward Questions”, *The Independent*, [date unknown] 1962).

will also discuss the importance of other important, if more prosaic, communicative modes which were used to convey to the audience basic information about the play's characters and its action – for example, a spoken introduction, and printed synopses illustrated with images referring to key points in the drama.

56 Ancient Greek drama occupies a small place in the corpus of 3000+ individual productions of theatre plays which have been presented on British television from the first experimental transmissions of 1936 up to the very occasional productions of the present day. These productions include both those which were created especially for television and those which, as here, re-present an established stage production. The thirty or so productions of ancient Greek drama (almost all of which are tragedies rather than comedies) were given in English translation, bar the ITV *Electra* of 1962. The very first was Michael Elliott and Caspar Wrede's production of Euripides' *Trojan Women*, the harrowing tragedy that follows the fates of the women after Troy has been sacked and their husbands killed, which was transmitted by the BBC as part of the 1958 *World Theatre* season under the title *Women of Troy*. The set of this production was designed to look like a refugee camp, in order to set forth, as the *Radio Times* put it, "the contemporary view of the degradation and futility that spring as much from victory as from defeat" in war.² In fact, to underline this setting, the production's opening captions were preceded by extracts from films showing crowds of refugees, burning cities, and even the explosion of an atom bomb, which is incredibly suggestive of the perceived threat, or fear, of nuclear war at this time. *The Manchester Guardian's* "Television Critic" reported that watching this tragedy on the small screen had been "the most unsettling experience in his last half dozen years of theatre or television attendance".³ In the years immediately following *Women of Troy*, there were several daytime transmissions of abridged versions of Greek tragedy designed for school audiences which were given in translation as part of broader English literature or drama series, but the next full production of a Greek drama to be transmitted in the evening schedules was the ITV *Electra* of 1962.⁴

From the 1950s, a new and vigorous tradition of Greek theatre companies – such as Ethniko Theatro, Peiraikon Theatron and Theatro Technis – took productions of ancient Greek plays in *modern* Greek translations right across the world, including

2 "World Theatre", *Radio Times*, 10 January 1958, p. 5.

3 "*Women of Troy: Euripides up to Date – and Without Poetry*", *The Manchester Guardian*, 13 January 1958, p. 5.

4 On this see Amanda Wrigley, "Greek Tragedy in the BBC and ITV Schools Television Curricula in the 1950s and 1960s", in Fiona Hobden and Amanda Wrigley (eds.), *Ancient Greece on British Television*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh UP, 2017.

Britain. Indeed, as early as 1939, Ethniko Theatro (the national theatre company of Greece) brought Dimitris Rondiris' production of Sophocles' *Electra*, in Ioannis Gryparis' translation, to stages in London and Oxford. With Katina Paxinou in the title role, this was considered by the critics to have been a stunning theatrical event.⁵ After the war, in 1959, Rondiris directed *Electra* again, but this time for the Peiraikon Theatron company. This was one of several productions of Greek tragedy by the company to go on an extensive international tour across Europe, Africa, and both North and South America, and it reached London in the summer of 1961: Rondiris' *Electra*, alongside productions of Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* and *Eumenides*, was staged at London's Scala Theatre, under the auspices of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. "There is one foreign performance now in London the like of which we have not seen since Olivier's Oedipus", wrote Irving Wardle in *The Observer*: "even if you don't understand a word they will break your heart".⁶ The presentation of *Electra* on television in the following year meant that a much more geographically and culturally diverse audience were able to experience this play and this company in performance.

The fact that Associated-Rediffusion, the British Independent Television contractor for London, should bring Rondiris' stage production to the small screen must be related to its established international profile and the recent London run, but it certainly also demonstrates a willingness to experiment, and even take risks. The television director Joan Kemp-Welch, who was responsible for adapting and directing *Electra* for television, is quoted as saying that when she had seen the production performed in an open-air theatre in Pompeii, it had left 20,000 Italians in tears.⁷ When asked in a press conference "whether this did not seem an unusual production for Associated-Rediffusion in that it is apparently indifferent to the likely number of viewers", she replied "I do a show for myself and never look at the ratings".⁸ Many newspaper critics hailed *Electra* as a "brave" or "courageous" gesture, but the satirical magazine *Private Eye* took a more cynical view in a cartoon which joked "It's Greek to the viewers but it'll look great in the annual report".⁹ In its final panel, the cartoon spelled out in Greek letters the words "Now, for that shit Pilkington", referring to the Pilkington Report which had, just a few months earlier in June 1962, strongly criticized ITV's programming. The suggestion here seems to be that *Electra*, as rather

5 For more on the Oxford performance and its critical reception, see Amanda Wrigley, *Performing Greek Drama in Oxford and on Tour with the Balliol Players*, Exeter, Exeter UP, 2011, pp. 113 and 253.

6 Irving Wardle, "Blood and Stone". *The Observer*, 18 June 1961, p. 27.

7 "Electra Plugged and Performed", *Southern Evening Echo*, (unknown date) 1962.

8 "How's your Greek?", *The Guardian*, 21 September 1962, p. 12.

9 "Every Night H.M.S. Rediffusion Programmes are Chosen by Captain Bullshine", *Private Eye*, 30 November 1962, p. 15.

“highbrow” material, was transmitted primarily as a response to the criticisms of Pilkington, an opinion shared by some writers in mainstream newspapers, too.¹⁰

Kemp-Welch was one of the first women directors to work in television in the 1950s and one of the most accomplished commercial television directors of her generation. She had begun her career as an actor on stage and film, before a decade-long spell as theatre director. Her television career began with the 1955 establishment of Associated-Rediffusion for whom she directed a variety of entertainment programmes before marrying her evident skills as a television director with her rich experience of theatre work in a number of important television plays – some from the established stage repertoire and others written for television. Her output, as one obituary noted, was “prodigious and incredibly varied”, but her particular strength was the adaptation of theatre plays for the small screen.¹¹

58 That Kemp-Welch first saw *Electra* performed in an open-air theatre in Italy is thought-provoking. It implies, first, that any settings, beyond the ancient monument itself, may have been minimal (since the only significant object in the play is a funerary urn) and, secondly, that the fabric of the stone theatre may have influenced her discussions with designer Michael Yates over the visual style of the television production.¹² Certainly, the archival recording of this production testifies that the abstract set has strong classical resonances, with long shafts of light and shadow, created by the extremely tall, square columns, contributing to the horizontal plane which is defined, in other shots, by the steps leading up to the palace door; the zig-zag angles created by set and lighting design suggest depth, breadth and a visual energy which is absent in the more static classical symmetry of traditional stage productions of Greek drama of the time.¹³ These design elements cleverly create an impressive sense of space, but the single, central acting space before the palace (named the *orchestra* in the Greek theatre) is not, in the television studio, particularly spacious.

In the fifth century BC, *Electra* would have been staged in an outdoor theatre with an *orchestra* set before a stage building representing a palace. Accordingly, in the 1950s and 1960s, stage productions of Greek tragedy conventionally involved a palace front before which action was performed and, following ancient convention, off-stage action

10 See, for example, Martin Jackson, “ITV Hits Back with a Play in Greek”, *Daily Express*, 19 September 1962, p. 7.

11 Sally Nesbit, “Obituary: Joan Kemp-Welch”, *The Independent*, 30 July 1999.

12 I have been unable to source images of Kleovoulos Klonis’ design for the Peiraïkon Theatron production but it would be useful to see the extent to which Yates’ drew on it in his set design for the television studio.

13 The 1962 Associated-Rediffusion *Electra* is accessible via the British Film Institute’s research viewing facility.

was reported or shown to the audience either in big speeches or by bringing onto the stage, for example, Clytemnestra's corpse. Kemp-Welch, too, respects these basic tenets of ancient performance, which doubtless were upheld in Rondiris' Peiraïkon Theatron production, but with subtle twists. The opening shot introduces part of the acting space from on high. Within seconds, characters enter from the illuminated doorway at the far end of the set and approach the place where the camera is located, which – we soon discover as we appreciate the geography of the set from different camera locations – happens to be the palace front which is soon shown from the more conventional viewpoint at the bottom of the steps. It is a bold and unusual choice to begin with the view *from* the palace, rather than with the more passive view *of* the palace, especially in a production which adheres in broad terms to the formal performance spaces and dramatic conventions of antiquity, but it is characteristic of Kemp-Welch's directorial confidence to give the viewer of this ancient play privileged perspectives which encourage a more dynamic engagement with the action of the play.

What is more, the traditional view of the front of the palace features for a comparatively small fraction of time in this production. Many shots are taken from the top of the steps, looking both out onto the main acting space and in towards the palace; furthermore, shots are taken of characters entering the palace from high up above the doorway and from within the main acting space. Throughout, in fact, Kemp-Welch frees the viewer from the static, fourth-wall position traditionally occupied by the theatre-goer. Camera shots are changed frequently, sometimes even in rhythm with line-by-line stichomythia dialogue between characters (and it is worth mentioning that, no doubt because of the language barrier, the faces of speaking characters are kept fully frontally in shot, so that the viewer's grasp of who-is-speaking is not lost); and cameras work hard to offer series of beautiful and effective tableaux in which the fluid, unison movements of the chorus women contrast eloquently with the hard lines of the abstract set (and occasionally making this viewer feel as if she were observing the action from on-high in an ancient theatre). Such stylized camera work (which thinks nothing of "breaking the line" to achieve artistic effect, for example) affords the viewer opportunities to observe character and action from a variety of interesting vantage points which continually add interest and, importantly, work against viewer disengagement in this foreign-language production.

A sequence which demonstrates the director's simultaneous respect for theatrical convention and her interest in maximizing the impact of the play via televisual language is when the freshly murdered corpse of Queen Clytemnestra is (according to ancient performance convention) brought out of the palace to the door to be witnessed by her lover Aegisthus, who knows at this point that he too will be murdered.

Instead of having a static camera at the bottom of the flight of steps to represent the conventional theatre audience's perspective on this scene, Kemp-Welch orchestrates a variety of camera shots in quick succession to emphasize the impact of Clytemnestra's dead body on Aegisthus, including effective use of close-up, a simple but effective televisual technique which is all the more powerful for being impossible to achieve on the 1960s stage.

60 The mobility of perspective offered to the viewer by Kemp-Welch's camera choreography in this production works cleverly with stylized aspects such as the frequency of shot-changes, abstract set design and the synchronized movements of the chorus to bring a certain energy and dynamism to this un-subtitled, foreign-language drama in a way that was so different from the more conventional, fully-frontal approaches to Greek tragedy on the stage, with the continually varied and interesting perspectives offered to the viewer sometimes seeming to act as a form of translation.

[*Electra*] had had so much advance publicity as to plot and purpose that, even without comprehension of the dramatically spoken words, it was easy to follow the story, the outline of which was firmly fixed in the minds of the least scholarly viewers.¹⁴

Associated-Rediffusion also went to great lengths to “translate” – in the literal meaning of “carry across” – vital information about the play, such as the plot, to the potential viewing audience in advance of the television transmission. A crucial gesture towards audience comprehension was a two-minute introductory talk given immediately before the production which, helpfully in the context of a Greek-language production, offers a simple synopsis of the Sophoclean play. The opening lines emphasize a sense of continuity between the present moment and the ancient past:

You cannot fly back across the centuries but you can fly to modern Athens where at least one precious fragment of a vanished world survives unchanged. In the great stone amphitheatre open to the sky the drama of long ago still lives on the lips of men, action for action, word for word. The plays that once held Athens spellbound, centuries before the birth of Christ, may still be seen, and still they work their spell. And listen, there's no need to dream of flying across Europe in search of adventure. Tonight the players of Athens are here. They bring it to you, into your very home, the ancient tale of murder and revenge – Elektra.¹⁵

14 C. H., “What Was That About Trivial Television?”, *Lancashire Evening Post*, (unknown date) 1962.

15 British Film Institute Library, script no. 2680.

On the day following transmission, a writer in the *Daily Mirror* was moved to ask the reader directly “What did you think of the play by Sophocles on ITV last night? How did you react to the idea of a play in modern Greek?”, an interrogative approach that continued a dialogue with the reader-viewer which had begun with extensive pre-show press publicity.¹⁶ Associated-Rediffusion had published a page-length illustrated set of “programme notes” in a wide range of broadsheet and tabloid newspapers on the day of transmission, designed to be “helpful to viewers throughout tonight’s television production”,¹⁷ and the advance issue of the listings magazine *TV Times*, dated 23 November 1962, offered an even more elaborate level of preparation. It featured a striking image from the production on the cover and devoted a heavily illustrated two-page spread to it within. This article declares that *Electra* “Leaps the Language Barrier”, addressing the issue of language repeatedly from the first sentence: “Probably you will not understand one word of it – but it will not matter. Stay with ITV’s presentation of *Electra* on Wednesday for the first few minutes, and you will be enthralled by its flow and rhythm”.¹⁸ It goes on to showcase the fact that the stage production has already “thrilled” theatre audiences all over the world who did not understand the language but who were said to have been “completely captivated by the spectacle, the expression and emotion”. Having firmly argued for the production’s ability to be understood and appreciated, the article then – paradoxically, but sensibly – offers some background information on Agamemnon’s absence, return and murder. The rest of the two-page spread is given over to explaining what happens in twelve significant moments in the plot with a few words of description and an image from the production, thus providing some crucial anchor points for the audience’s comprehension of the action. That this kind of introductory and background material was useful to at least some viewers is supported by some letters from viewers which were published in the *TV Times*:

I had my *TV Times* in front of me and followed it all with rapt enthusiasm. The play in Greek made no difference to me. It was wonderful.

W.E. ASKHAM, LONDON

¹⁶ Richard Sear, “The Midnight Critics: Triumph for ITV”, *Daily Mirror*, (unknown date) 1962. So, too, Erica Shorter: “Well, how did you get on? Was it still all Greek to you even with the synopsis on your lap...?” (“A Superb TV *Electra* in Greek”, *The Daily Telegraph*, [unknown date] 1962).

¹⁷ For example, *The Times*, 28 November 1962, p. 9.

¹⁸ *TV Times*, 23 November 1962, pp. 14-15.

All in my family enjoyed *Electra* from start to finish, and were thrilled by the depth and sincerity of the acting. Although we do not understand Greek, the action was easy to follow after having read the plot in the *TV Times*.

H. E. MASCALL, SURREY¹⁹

Electra was something of a surprise success, both amongst critics and by the wider public. It received much more critical attention in the press than the average play on television: first because it was such a curiosity, and secondly, because its apparent success led to a reflective critical discourse about ITV's potential to engage its audience with heavyweight cultural fare. The critical reception does seem to have been overwhelmingly positive. Maurice Richardson, writing in *The Observer*, declares that the production was "a smash hit", albeit an unexpected one:

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We were all set for one of those occasional cultural gestures which the companies make once in a while and never let you forget. We don't expect them to come off because they are seldom really suited to the medium. Indeed, it would have seemed odds-on that Dimitrios Rondiris's production of Sophocles's sex-switched *Hamlet* for the Piraikon company, with its emphasis on the opera and ballet aspect, would suffer grievously. However [...] it was a triumphant success. Everything came across beautifully, including all the most vulnerable parts like the chorus work, the grouping and kneeling, the swan-like hand movements and the rhythmic swaying and the intoning to modern folk-song cadences. The huge set with the steps and the menacing cleft-like doorway into the palace [...] kept its impressiveness. And for once the cameras seemed to have solved the problem of switching distances without any of that unnatural jerkiness. The contrast between the superb tragic close-ups of Aspasia Papathanassiou as *Electra* and the perfectly co-ordinated gestures of the chorus was smooth and natural.

Richardson concludes: "I'm not sure what the lesson of it all is: perhaps simply that nothing is too difficult to put over on TV if it is well enough done, though it may take Greeks to do it".²⁰ The review in *The Times* agrees in large part with Richardson, concluding that Kemp-Welch and Rondiris were "working in their different fields towards the same end: that of making classical tragedy immediate and alive to modern audiences whose grasp of classical Greek is at best (with theatregoers) hazy and at worst (with most of a British television audience) totally non-existent".²¹

¹⁹ *TV Times*, 14 December 1962, p. 2.

²⁰ Maurice Richardson, "Electra Rocks the Box", *The Observer*, 2 December 1962.

²¹ "A Great Tragic Actress in *Electra*", *The Times*, 29 November 1962, p. 16.

It is interesting to survey the terms in which both critics in the press and domestic viewers couched their perception of the production's success. The critical response acknowledged the usefulness of the pre-transmission aids to comprehension of plot and character, but they focused far more attention on what we may think of as non-linguistic languages of communication within the production itself. For "Cathode", writing in the *Bolton Evening News*, the production "transcended the restrictive bonds of language".²² *The Guardian* noted the powerful visual effects created by the movement of the chorus and the framing of actors against the massive set.²³ The *Daily Mail* considered that the words of the actors were experienced as "word music": "the effect was clear and indescribable, like one's individual response to music".²⁴ Similarly, *The Sunday Times* noted the choreography and perceived that the modern Greek language had "operatic" qualities.²⁵ The *Daily Mirror* sums up the press response: its critic attests that the language barrier broke down and the intense emotion of the production communicated without words.²⁶ This echoes, whether intentionally or not, Kemp-Welch's statement in the September 1962 press conference which declared that the production would appeal to viewers because "it is not an intellectual show but an emotional one. [...] Language is no barrier. The pure emotion of what they have to say comes through in the sound of their voices". This maps on to that of Rondiris himself, who believed that "The audience will cry, as our audiences all over Europe have cried. They have not understood a word, but they have cried".²⁷

What of the ordinary viewer? It is known that something in the region of 2½ million people in 1,235,000 homes watched this televised tragedy. Almost all the evidence points to an extremely positive response. Viewers praised the introductory talk and the notes published in advance. They appreciated the emotional atmosphere created, the evocative sounds, the superb acting, the beauty and the power of the thing. One said that subtitles would have spoiled the effect! In letters written directly to the director, teachers reported that they *and* their students had been vitally affected by the production: for example, Peter from Chichester wrote that "We were emotionally ravished – visually too – so were many of my students ranging in ages from 15 to 21". Another, one Mary Teresa Haylan of the Ursuline Convent School, Wimbledon, enclosed with her letter a petition from sixty-three of her fifth and sixth form pupils

22 Cathode, "Televuepoint: An Outstanding Television Occasion", *Bolton Evening News*, (unknown date) 1962.

23 Mary Crozier, "Electra on Television", *The Guardian*, 29 November 1962, p. 7.

24 Peter Black, "Electra Makes It a Night to Remember", *Daily Mail*, (unknown date) 1962.

25 Maurice Wiggin, "Television: That Was Their Week", *The Sunday Times*, (unknown date) 1962.

26 Richard Sear, "The Midnight Critics: Triumph for ITV", *Daily Mirror*, (unknown date) 1962.

27 Quoted in "How's your Greek?", *The Guardian*, 21 September 1962, p. 12.

seeking a repeat transmission, because “Wednesday evening’s *Electra* gave a degree and kind of pleasure they had not experienced before, though many have seen Greek plays, in translation”: “The Greek, and modernised at that, seems to have bothered them very little; they accepted it as an orchestral accompaniment to the tragedy and enjoyed it as they enjoy music”.²⁸

64 In 2012, I curated a season of screenings of television productions of Greek tragedies at the British Film Institute in London. The Associated-Rediffusion *Electra* featured in the programme, of course, and the discussion afterwards (both at the BFI and online) brought up a really interesting point. Whereas the enjoyment of one in the audience who speaks modern Greek was hindered somehow by her critical response to its delivery, to the extent that she tried instead to concentrate her attention on choreography of the camerawork, the design etc., another viewer who didn’t understand modern Greek responded in precisely the same way as other non-Greek speakers in the original television audience responded – although the critical distance of fifty years allowed him to be more reflective about why he responded in this way. He suggested that it may have had something to do with the absence of linguistic comprehension – the musical quality of hearing sound with emotion without having to engage with the meaning of the spoken and sung words. He also hinted at the difference between Greek vocal and expressive range on the stage and the familiar British examples of this period, noting the attractiveness of the former.

The terms in which the production was considered to be a success, then, relate to some key qualities, namely beauty, intensity and emotion. These qualities were attributed to the perceived expressivity of certain elements in combination with each other: the choreography, especially of the chorus; the beauty of the monumental set; and the evocative musicality of the Greek language. In other words, the performance itself became a kind of language. Of course, it is important to bear in mind the sheer contrast that this Greek company’s performance provided with the typically British style of acting for serious theatre at this time. Perhaps it offered another way of imagining the ancient plays in performance – a more vivid, emotional and powerful experience? But that idea only works for those viewers already familiar with Greek tragedy in English translation on British stages or on the page (and the basic comprehension of those unfamiliar with the play, of course, was served by introductory and background material in several media). More generally, perhaps, *Electra* performed what was clearly for the audience an attractive cultural “otherness”, one that was very specific to a particular style of Greek theatre performance at the time but which also offered the

television viewer a particularly potent and attractive experience of a great play in performance through the energetic interplay of large-scale emotions and the formal restraint of aspects such as the stylised choreography of the chorus, as captured in the television frame.

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Abstract: In 1962, the commercial television networks in the UK transmitted a studio presentation of Dimitris Rondiris' internationally touring stage production of Sophocles' *Electra*, performed by the Peiraïkon Theatron in modern Greek and without subtitles. It was, unexpectedly, an extraordinary success. This essay explores some of the terms in which *Electra* was considered to have been such a huge success amongst both the 2½ million viewers and numerous critics writing in the press, in light of the obvious language barrier for most of the audience. Qualities such as beauty, intensity and emotion were, for example, cited as emerging from the perceived expressivity of performative elements such as choreography and the musicality of spoken and sung Greek. The essay also discusses the crucial importance of other, more prosaic, communicative modes to convey to the potential audience basic information about the play's characters and its action.

Keywords: Greek (ancient and modern); television; theatre; tragedy; translation; Sophocles.

Résumé: En 1962, la chaîne de télévision commerciale du Royaume-Uni diffusait, en grec moderne et sans sous-titres, une version filmée en studio de l'*Électre* de Sophocle, mise en scène par Dimitris Rondiris et interprétée en tournée internationale par le Peiraïkon Theatron. Contre toute attente, ce fut un succès retentissant. Cet article explore les modalités de ce succès, à la fois parmi les 2,5 millions de téléspectateurs et auprès des critiques de presse, à la lumière d'une question cruciale : celle de la barrière linguistique. On s'intéressera notamment à la beauté, à l'intensité, à l'émotion perçues comme émergeant de l'expressivité des chorégraphies, et de la musicalité du grec chanté et parlé. Cette étude aborde également l'importance décisive des autres modes de communication, plus prosaïques, utilisés pour transmettre au public quelques informations essentielles sur les personnages et l'action de la pièce.

Mots-clés : grec (ancien et moderne) ; télévision ; théâtre ; tragédie ; traduction ; Sophocle.

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