



Greek Theatre

Modern productions of Persians

Felix Budelmann

Landmark productions of Aeschylus' *Persians* over the past century have provided highly distinctive interpretations of the play. Oliver Taplin and Edith Hall discuss *Persians* in the modern theatre.

Oliver Taplin, University of Oxford

The history of the performances of Greek tragedies in modern times is very variable. It changes. It's very different from play to play. And I think it would be true to say that *Persians* is not one of the more performed Greek plays, at least in the first half of the twentieth century.

Edith Hall, Royal Holloway, University of London

Persians has not been performed very much compared with many of the other Greek tragedies. The big canonical plays about heroes like Sophocles' *Oedipus* or Euripides' *Medea*. However, it has come to the fore at one or two very crucial moments in history. It's a play that when it is performed tends to make a very considerable impact.

Oliver Taplin

Karolos Koun was a fascinating and a very important director. Started his work in theatre way back in the 30s, and he turned to *The Persians* in the mid 1960s.

And what he saw was the two keys to making this play powerful is, one, the fascination with the east, and the other is the centrality of the chorus.

What that production was famous for was its dancing, and its choral delivery. A lot of rehearsal, as in ancient Greece, and a chorus that really mattered, the chorus being really central to the whole unfolding of the drama. And Koun's production of *Persians* was produced, travelled throughout the world and made a very big impact in London in the late 1960s. And that perhaps more than any other spread *Persians* throughout the second half of the twentieth century.

Edith Hall

Koun's *Persians* first goes on just a year before the dictatorship took over in Greece. A dictatorship that lasted for seven years from 1967 to 1974 and was very right-wing, it was very authoritarian, it was militaristic and it was deeply suspicious of creative people, and theatre people, and the artistic avant-garde in general.

And in fact the production of Karolos Koun's *Persians*, which had travelled internationally, it had actually premiered in London at the Arts Festival in 1966, had helped to awaken people to the importance of supporting Greece and its creative endeavours. And so this *Persians* actually had an afterlife in people's memories that went beyond the importance of the original production.

One of the interesting things about Koun's production is the way that he altered the emphasis on the arrival of the King from outside. In almost all previous interpretations since the Renaissance of *Persians*, the character of – of the King had been seen very much as – as the king of the country, he's the patriot, he's the one that we have to defend.

In Koun's *Persians*, by placing such an emphasis on the point of view of the chorus and the collective, the king becomes the enemy. He's the one who has brought such terrible destruction and suffering on his own people and because Greece was about to suffer dictatorship, this meant that his production was extremely resonant when it came to the enemy within, the dictators who were sitting imposing their authoritarian rule from on top.

Xerxes is associated with the despot that comes from within.

Peter Sellars is a radical North American director and his production of Persians was the first internationally significant one since that of Karolos Koun.

In Peter Sellars' production what he did was pick up on his own experience of the Gulf War of early 1993 and used Persians actually to protest against what he perceived to be the very cruel bombing of Saddam Hussein's Baghdad earlier that year by his own government.

Although he used a lot of very beautiful music he only had one or two people moving around the stage most of the time. He had just one person dancing the role of – of the chorus and this tradition really goes back more to the East German, Brechtian, Bertolt Brechtian tradition of theatre.

For Peter Sellars, rather than relying on the big spectacular and melodic dance ensembles of Karolos Koun it was the sheer power of the language, the sheer rhetorical and expressive power of Aeschylean poetry and in fact this was really brought to its acme in the scene where Darius, the ghost of the dead Persian comes up because he actually uses a very important actor in America who is deaf and he signed, he deaf-signed the entire speech while a taped voice boomed this beautiful poetry around the theatre.

Now the effect of this was really overpowering. The hypnotic effect of Aeschylean poetry with the affective emotional effect of the signing. So I think here in fact Sellars had come somewhere very near to the power of ancient theatre which combines gesture with poetry to produce a particularly disturbing effect.

Prior to the Second World War there were several productions of Persians which were not at all critical of the regimes under which they were played. It is a play that is perfectly possible to see as a celebration either of the great monarchy of the Persians themselves, or of their victor's, the Greeks.

For example, on the eve of the Second World War we know that a translation by Gilbert Murray was actually broadcast on the Home Service in Britain to try and get people's spirits up for war.

In the late nineteenth century the King of Greece had it played at his own wedding in Athens. So it is the sort of play that can serve very much more jingoistic purposes than it has done since the 1960s.

Aeschylus' Persians has been peculiarly susceptible to different kinds of political interpretation. Now there are many reasons for this, but I think the most important is that it's incredibly simple. In fact very little happens. You have a community which hears some bad news and it weeps. And I think that particular simplicity of it has allowed an awful lot of different agendas to be superimposed upon it and a lot of different interpretations to have been elicited from it.