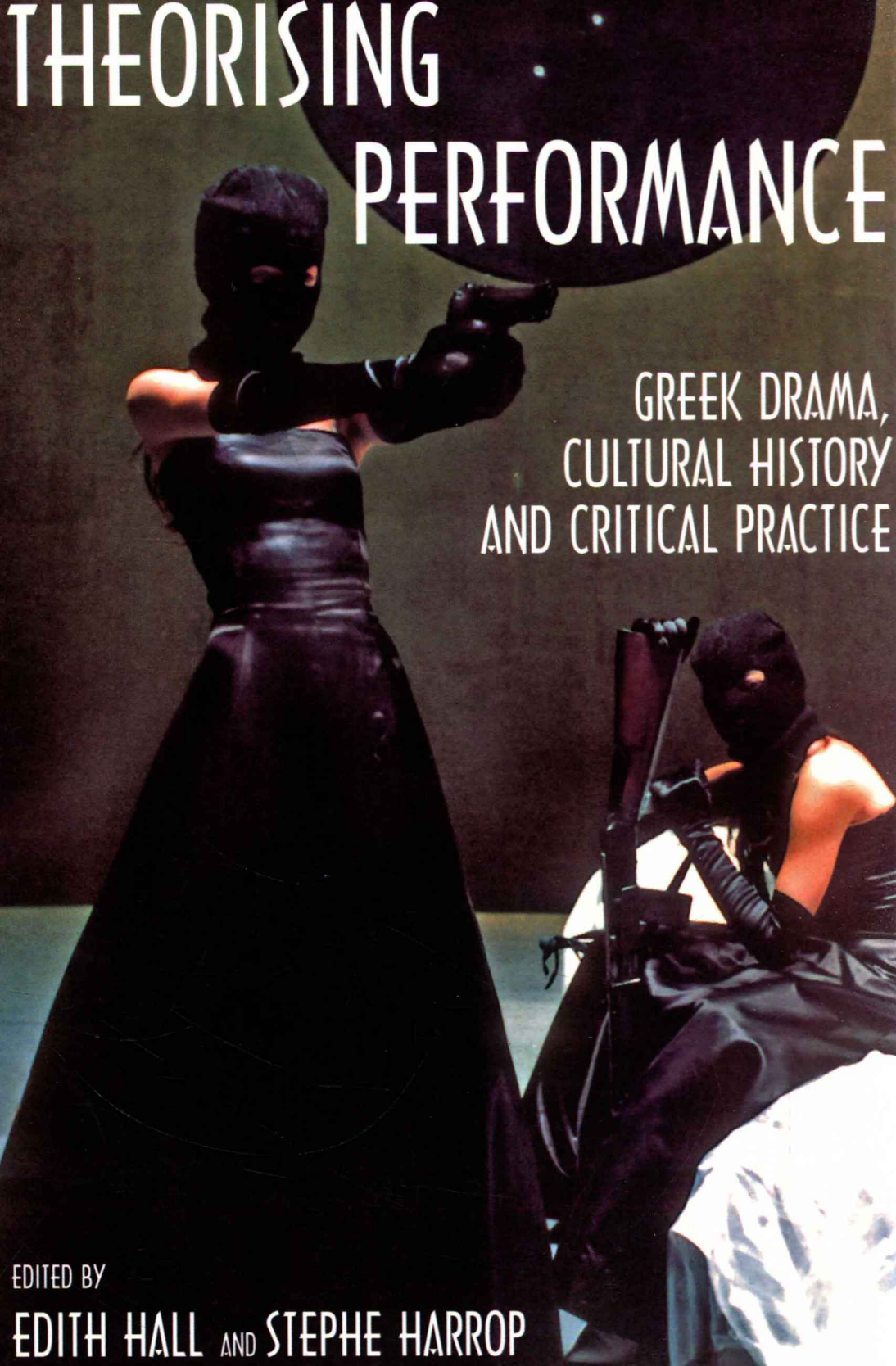


# THEORISING PERFORMANCE



GREEK DRAMA,  
CULTURAL HISTORY  
AND CRITICAL PRACTICE

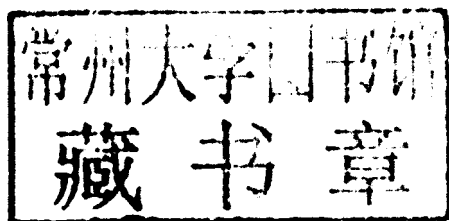
EDITED BY

EDITH HALL AND STEPHE HARROP

# THEORISING PERFORMANCE

*Greek Drama, Cultural History  
and Critical Practice*

Edited by  
Edith Hall & Stephe Harrop



Duckworth

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## Introduction

*Edith Hall and Stephe Harrop*

The aim of this volume is to explore one simple and fundamental question – is there anything distinctive about the intellectual framework that underlies scholarship on ancient Greek and Roman drama in post-Renaissance performance? The intention is not to provide a definitive answer, but to offer readers a variety of studies, by international specialists in the field, that will allow them to arrive at their own opinion rather better informed than hitherto. The study of the reception of ancient drama in performance, although still a new field, is now a fast-expanding and increasingly respected and influential one. A handful of courageous and enlightened individuals pioneered the field with what are now recognised as path-breaking contributions before and in the early 1980s.<sup>1</sup> By the early 1990s, the scale and global scope of the revival of Greek theatre in performance became acknowledged and analysed in a series of important books that set a new, international agenda.<sup>2</sup> Since the millennium the number of productions of ancient drama – and studies of its history and practice of performance – has mushroomed across the planet.<sup>3</sup>

Performance reception of Greek theatre is now studied internationally by thousands of scholars and students in departments not only of Classics and of Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies, and on interdisciplinary programmes, but also in Media Studies, Film Studies, Comparative Literature, Modern Languages, and Social and Intellectual History. It is drawn upon by numerous directors and other practitioners in both the professional and amateur theatre worldwide, and thus informs new productions in an unceasing process of cross-fertilisation between academy and performance space.

The volume's particular stimulus was an international conference, 'Theorising Performance', organised by the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama (APGRD) at Magdalen College, Oxford, in September 2007. The conference convenors were Edith Hall and Scott Scullion. The idea for the conference, and for the book, was one of the elements in the second research project (2004-2009) generously funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council at the APGRD. The idea arose in direct response to our experience as scholars at the APGRD, along with other researchers across the world who are working in the same field and with whom we are in regular contact. Several of us have been documenting

and analysing the performance history of ancient drama for a decade or two, and publishing books upon the subject independently and collectively, without necessarily feeling any pain at the absence of a defined body of theory. Yet paradigms emerge from an accumulated body of data and hermeneutic work upon it, and the field has begin to acquire its own 'canon' of pathbreaking productions – for example, 'Mendelssohn's' *Antigone*, Koun's *Birds*, Ninagawa's *Medea* or Mnouchkine's *Les Atrides* – to which discussion constantly returns. The work of particular translators – for example, Hölderlin, W.B. Yeats or Tony Harrison – has become identified as crucially influential. Certain directors – Suzuki, Stein, Mnouchkine, Sellars – stimulate endless reassessments because they seem to have selected Greek plays when attempting to make critical avant-garde statements about the social role of the practice of theatre.

Methods of archiving, documentation and analysis have emerged from engagement with the source material and actual performances; interpretative agendas have been established in accordance with individual scholars' backgrounds, temperaments and politics; questions have been formulated because they seemed intuitively important and pressing rather than because they were rendered obligatory by a master paradigm or theoretical agenda. But things have now moved on. Sometimes the avalanche of publications and conferences can begin to feel overwhelming: the terrain is vast (and grows every day, as new performances are mounted), but the analytical routes through have sometimes begun to feel to many of us as if they are too often discovered by accident or invented *ad hoc* without sufficient intellectual preparation.

Studying the performance of ancient Greek and Roman drama, however widespread it may now be in the Humanities, is an activity that was born at the meeting-place of two established academic disciplines, Classics and Theatre Studies. Subsequently, it has been enriched by contact with several other fields, including Philosophy, Musicology, Cognitive Psychology, Postcolonial Studies and Film Studies. Distinctive contributions have also been made by practitioners – actors and translators as well as directors – whose responses to their own experience of Greek plays expand the hermeneutic toolkit available to the analytical and theoretical researcher. The field discussed in this book has become a leading example within the Humanities of not only of *interdisciplinarity* but of exemplary *multidisciplinarity* (see Dunbar in this volume). It is a feature of this book (as it was of the conference) that it self-consciously aims to bring together contributors from different intellectual worlds in the hope of arriving at a richer picture of our activities and the intellectual paradigms that underlie them through dialogue and cross-fertilisation.

To ask our over-riding question – is there anything unique and distinctive about the theories that underpin the study of the performance of ancient plays? – is to address two complementary distinctions that are often made, but the legitimacy of which is seldom examined. The first

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distinction is one that primarily affects theatre historians, since it assumes a difference between scholarship on the performance history of ancient drama and scholarship on the performance history of other theatrical traditions (for example, Shakespeare or Ibsen). Do we need a different kind of theory to approach the performance history of a pagan 'classic' playscript that is two millennia old from the theory we need to shape our enquiries into a Renaissance Christian one?

The second distinction that needs to be examined is one that has more bearing on the subject-area understood by the term 'Classics': how does investigating the reception of an ancient Greek or Roman play in performance differ from investigating the reception of an ancient text in a non-performed medium such as the novel or statuary?

The probing of these distinctions in this book has made inevitable the fulfilling of our second aim, which is to identify the key intellectual models and theories of art and culture which have informed the practice of research into the post-Renaissance performance of ancient drama. The essays encompass discussion of a broad range of philosophical and critical-theoretical approaches, from Vico's New Science to Kantian Idealism and onwards to Marxist cultural materialism, Saussurean Semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Derridean deconstruction and Jauss' Konstanz School of *Rezeptionsästhetik*. The narrative discusses and indeed applies the theories and methods of theatre critics and practitioners from Aristotle to Artaud and Hans-Thies Lehmann's provocative *Postdramatisches Theater*. It covers texts from Humanist Latin 'cribs' of the Greek dramatists to Yorkshire dialect versions of Aristophanic obscenity in 2007. It adduces examples from performance media ranging from classical music to video installations. Its evidence ranges from performances of Greek plays in high Victorian 'authentic' revivals to playwrights whose works use Greek texts in heavily disguised manner and to the avant-garde practitioner Romeo Castellucci, in whose *Tragedia Endogonidia* the psychological repression reflected in the whole idea of theatre as a paradigm of human consciousness is referred back to the Greek tradition.

Most of the essays began life as papers delivered at the conference, although others have been specially commissioned or included in response to interventions during the discussions that took place at the conference itself. They fall into four sections, although there is considerable dialogue between individual contributions across the section boundaries. Section 1, 'Paradigms', marks out the terrain covered by the book and examines a series of paradigms, essential conceptual models and terminology, the meaning of which is constantly under negotiation within the field – 'performance', 'live performance', 'reception', 'classic', 'text', 'artwork', 'event', 'aesthetic experience'. Chapter 2, Hall's 'Towards a Theory of Performance Reception', is a revised version of an article originally published in *Arion* (2004), at the time the conference was at planning stage, in order to define some of the central issues, identify theoretical contribu-

tions that were already available, and stimulate debate. It is an attempt to pinpoint an intellectual ancestry for scholarship on performance reception, thereby to identify what it is about performance arts that makes the study of them, including their use of Greek and Roman antiquity, different from the study of non-performed arts. It surveys a range of schools of thought within philosophical and cultural theory that might offer concepts that could help us hone our analytical tools in studying ancient plays in performance. It advocates a fundamentally cultural materialist approach that is however radically qualified by an engagement with a consistent (and, paradoxically, idealist) philosophical line which can be traced from Vico's rediscovery of the sensually conveyed wisdom of pagan art, via Kant to Kierkegaard, Husserlian Phenomenology, Symbolism and French Existentialism. It concludes that no single paradigm or model can ever be sufficient to the complicated task of analysing performance, especially of 'classic' texts, and that different problems are susceptible to unravelling by different conceptual means. We should not be afraid to order our theory eclectically '*à la carte*'.

Erika Fischer-Lichte in Chapter 3 attacks the disputed concept of 'Reception' head-on in order to fuse the senses in which Classicists and Theatre specialists use it; this process produces her argument that participation in the performance of Greek drama *does* have a distinct and unique history in that it has often been related to an attempt to make spectators *aware* of their own aesthetic experience as a particular kind of liminal experience. Wiles' essay comes from another angle, to think about the conceptual paradigms inherent within post-war Shakespeare scholarship, especially the relationship between different understandings of the term 'reception', to ask if these can illuminate the current state of play in Classics, and the recent evolution in the documentation and historiography of the performance of ancient drama.

Fischer-Lichte's analysis of the concept of aesthetic experience, and Wiles' anatomy of the different meanings of 'reception' relative to the 'classic' plays of antiquity and Shakespeare respectively, lead directly into the next two chapters, 5 and 6, which articulate a major tension in Classics today. This concerns aesthetic evaluation and hierarchy and therefore the very meaning and appropriate field of Classical Reception. Simon Goldhill and Charles Martindale collide head-to-head on the degree to which the historical contextualisation of any text in reception, performed or otherwise, should or can take priority over the study of its literary 'stemma' – its relation to its ancient archetype(s). The argument returns inevitably to the validity of the concept of 'disinterestedness' in the contemplation of an art object, as defined in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790), and to the bifurcated tradition of cultural analysis that has followed or rejected the paradigm of the Kantian idea of beauty and the non-self-interested contemplation which is, to Kantians such as Stolnitz, the correct moral response to it.



## 1. Introduction

The debate between Goldhill and Martindale ranges over a wide variety of genres and media, from painting to poetry and opera. In debating the very nature of what constitutes 'Classics', the question of boundaries between disciplines is inevitably raised, along with the established academic model of 'interdisciplinarity'. In Chapter 7, Zachary Dunbar explores the status of the study of ancient plays in performance in the evolution of critical practice from reliance on the paradigm of interdisciplinarity to a more flexible and inclusive model of multidisciplinary. Dunbar is himself an instantiation of multidisciplinary in practice, as a classical pianist with a degree in drama history and performance who now both writes and directs. But multidisciplinary still needs its research resources, and the question of the recording and documentation of performance forms the central question explored in Chapter 8, 'Archiving Events, Performing Documents: On the Seductions and Challenges of Performance Archives', by Pantelis Michelakis, a Classicist with a long-standing interest in the murky theoretical interstices between Greek and Roman texts, theatre performance, and cinema. Here he thinks about the implications of the 'archive' model of research that has been the scholarly response to the ephemeral and highly dispersed social activity of ancient drama performance, by comparing the Derridean and Foucauldian accounts of the ideological work done by agglomerative and centralised archival institutions.

The second section tackles the complex relationship between the performed representation of the human mind in action, the biological and socially constructed human body, and tragedy. On a basic biological and neurological level, neither the body nor the brain has changed much over the last two and a half millennia, the period during which tragedy has intermittently flourished as a prestige art form. But the understanding of the relationship between mind, body, and the human suffering that is represented in tragedy has of course been transformed almost beyond recognition. This section therefore investigates that relationship from three different perspectives, and in doing so encompasses some of the major theoretical models and disciplines offering concepts and methods that may be able to illuminate the remarkable cultural longevity of Greek drama. In Chapter 9, Budelmann looks at Cognitive Science and the intercultural recognition of neurological markers for pain. Decreus on the other hand draws on the tradition of French post-structuralism, especially Deleuze, to infer a theoretical model with which to approach Romeo Castellucci's *Tragedia Endogonia*, a major work of art on the relationship between history, representation and the body that was created over a period of three years (2002-4, still in performance in 2007). Foley's essay (Chapter 11) draws on the history of genre theory that stretches back beyond Bakhtin to the great Renaissance drama theorists such as Ludovico Castelvetro in order to argue that studies of the reception of Greek tragedy on the stage must account more fully for the generic

expectations that audiences, directors and playwrights bring to the theatre in different eras. The theorisation of tragedy, the tragic, the comic and the tragicomic is culturally conditioned and returns repeatedly to questions of tone, bodily representation, and intellectual stance on the subject-matter, core components of the increasingly burlesque and flip-pant idiom of some recent productions of tragedy, which have imported laughter and deconstructed traditional generic boundaries.

The third, central section discusses the challenges of transcultural and transhistorical 'translation' – not only of texts but of the entire multi-medial performances that constituted ancient drama. Mary-Kay Gamel (Chapter 12) discovers a rich seam of theoretical ideas in scholarship on the 'authentic' performance of classical music, ideas with which to approach the question of authenticity in transferring ancient scripts to modern performance contexts. In Chapter 13, Rosie Wyles addresses the 'translation' of the socialised theatrical body through costume. Utilising theories developed in Linguistics and Semiotics, she proposes a set of distinctions between the different functions of costume in relation to some recent performances of ancient theatre-scripts that have appropriated or rigorously resisted longstanding costuming strategies. It is the thorny issue of the status of the transmitted texts of ancient drama in the form taken by their publication in modern-language translations, relative to the status of their performances, however, that Simon Perris tackles in Chapter 14. He argues that the important point is less whether one is more *important* than the other than that they are simply distinct. Spectating and reading are different modes of aesthetic experience, and therefore performance reception and literary reception through published translations and adaptations require different modes of analysis. He presses the (in Theatre Studies currently unfashionable) case that Classicists and cultural historians simply cannot take the history of literary translation and reading out of the history of performance, any more than classical scholarship was ever justified in marginalising the experience of contemporary performance.

Lorna Hardwick's attention is focused on the actual procedures involved in translation for performance, and through a series of case-studies in Chapter 15 she argues that the traditional polarities between source and target languages, and between concepts of 'translation' and 'rewriting', need to be reviewed. Translation and adaptation for the stage involves a considerable number of contributory agents (designers, musicians, actors and choreographers), but it also reflects back on the work of future scholars and translators in a continuous and dialectically evolving process. Eleftheria Ioannidou concludes this section in an essay (Chapter 16) that tackles the troublesome distinction between adaptation and translation of ancient plays – which are after all in languages spoken by nobody alive and portray a religion practised nowhere today – with the help of Nietzsche, Benjamin and Barthes (and, in an unexpected but