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Medea in mid-air: how Syracuse's Greek theatre keeps the classics alive

Playing in the vast ancient amphitheatre, imaginative new productions of Euripides and Aeschylus find fresh nuance even in this huge space

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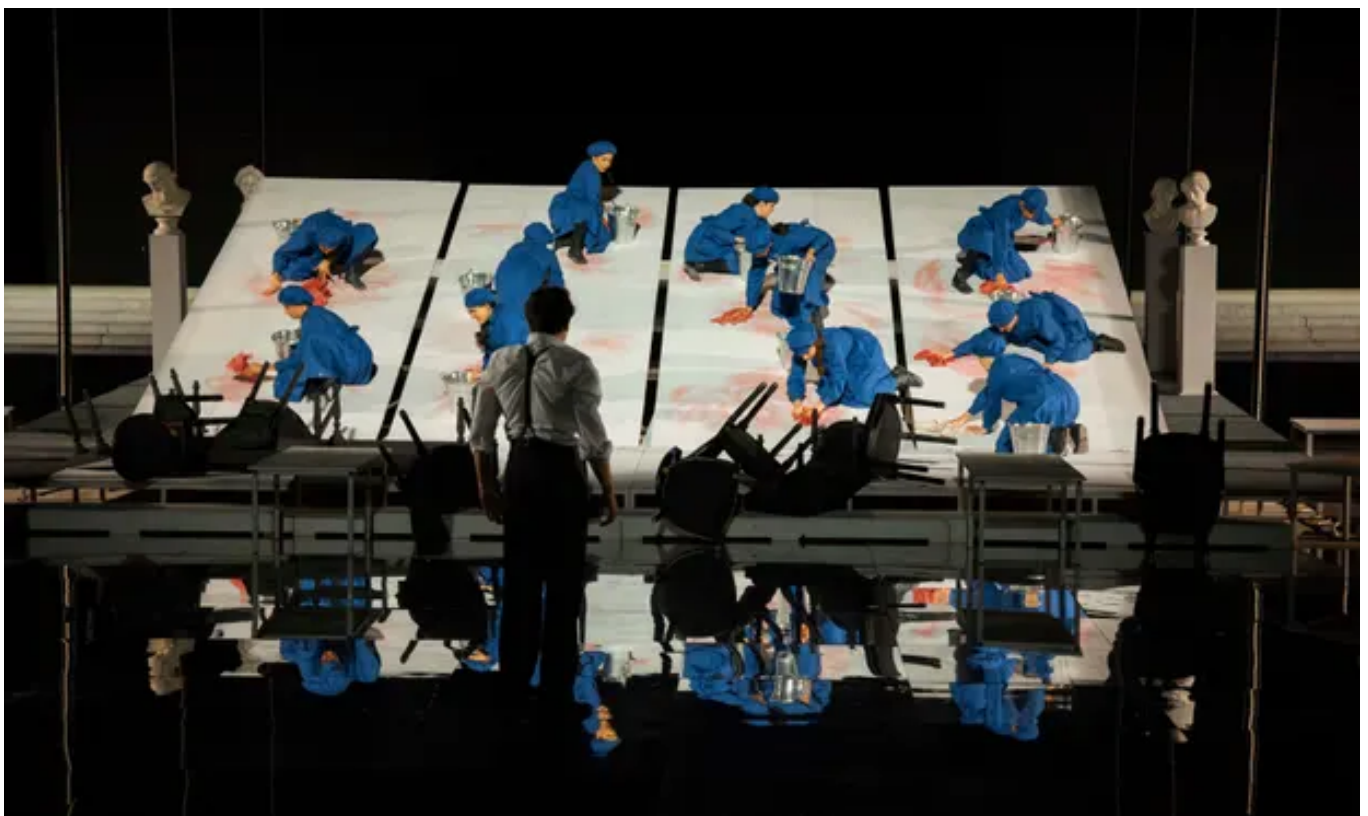
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How best to stage the great Greek classics? The fashion in Britain is for intimacy. But there are other alternatives, as I found on a visit to the ancient Greek theatre in Sicily's Syracuse where everything is on a massive scale. The auditorium, carved out of a hillside, seats 5,000. The stage is 27 metres wide and 44 deep; acting, direction and design are

correspondingly epic. Yet I discovered, in the two productions I saw, that psychological detail is still achievable even in this vast arena.

Seasons of the Greek classics began in Syracuse in 1914, continued spasmodically but only became annual events in this century. Scanning the records, you find that many famous directors, including [Peter Stein](#), [Luca Ronconi](#), [Yannis Kokkos](#) and [Irene Papas](#), have worked there. Among the translators, the name of Pier Paolo Pasolini stands out. Each eight-week season blends a well-known title with others less familiar. This year Medea and Aeschylus's Prometheus Bound kicked off the programme, with Peace by Aristophanes and a multi-media spectacle about Ulysses still to come. After July, selected productions will go on tour around Italy.

This is all the impressive work of the Istituto Nazionale Del Dramma Antico (National Institute of Ancient Drama) but I was relieved to find that a respect for the past was matched by a regard for the present. On a basic level, non-Italian speakers are offered an earpiece translation and a text in English. But my first discovery at Medea was a brilliant essay in the programme-book by the play's translator, Massimo Fusillo, which suggests that Euripides pioneered the use of the inner monologue allowing us to get inside the protagonist's head. Fusillo argues that this leads ultimately to Macbeth, Milton's Satan and modern TV series such as Breaking Bad and Gomorrah. The play's director, Federico Tiezzi, goes further by saying he sees Medea as "a clash between an archaic society and a post-industrial society" and compares Jason to the "great boisterous Ibsen titans from John Gabriel Borkman to Torvald Helmer in A Doll's House".



📷 Pioneering inner monologue ... a scene from Medea at Syracuse. Photograph: Aliffi/PR

All this is heady stuff but how does it work in practice? Tiezzi goes out of his way to stress the symbolic nature of the conflict in which Medea is told that she will be forced to leave Corinth never to see Jason or her children again. Medea initially sports a fearsome bird-like headpiece, her children wear fluffy rabbit-heads and Creon, the king of Corinth, a crocodile-mask. The female chorus, meanwhile, are blue-clad skivvies with pails and scrubbing-brushes. But the great revelation comes in the relationship between Medea and Jason.

I've seen many fine British productions, including those starring Fiona Shaw, Helen McCrory and Sophie Okonedo, in which you feel Medea is driven to violence by a brutal male power structure. But in the performances of Laura Marinoni as Medea and Alessandro Averone as Jason I saw something I had never quite grasped before: that the two characters are still passionately in love. There is an extraordinary scene where Jason argues that his impending marriage to Creon's daughter is purely political. As he says this, he sensuously caresses Medea. Her response is to angrily bite his hand, call him a "bastardo" and then give him a feverishly prolonged kiss. This lends the tragedy a new complexity and suggest there is a love-hate intensity to the Medea-Jason relationship that brings to mind Strindberg's *A Dance of Death* or even Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*?

The production still has an operatic quality. Marinoni delivers her great monologues with blazing ferocity and Sandra Toffolatti as the Messenger who brings the news of Medea's child-murder shows a similar rhetorical power. There is also one last moment of jaw-dropping spectacle. At the climax we see Medea in an airborne chariot with her dead sons beside her: not since a famous 1987 production by [Yukio Ninagawa](#) have I seen Medea take to the skies. But I shall remember this version less for its spectacle than for its stark realisation that revenge and love are two sides of the same coin.



📷 Alessandro Albertin as Prometheus

Prometheus Bound is a more problematic piece. It deals with the punishment of Prometheus by Zeus for having stolen fire from Olympus and given it to the human race. But, since the hero is throughout chained to a rock, the play is unavoidably static and seems more like a dramatic poem akin to Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. It is also part of a trilogy of which two thirds is lost. There are even arguments as to whether the play really is by Aeschylus. Yet it had a strong influence on Shelley, Byron and Goethe and possibly even on Beckett in that there are parallels between its enchained hero and the earthbound Winnie in *Happy Days*.

The big question is how to make it work theatrically. Leo Muscato's production starts with the advantage of a massive set by Federica Parolini: one that suggests a decaying industrial landscape filled with rusting pipes, railway tracks, ancient tunnels and even a giant chimney-stack to which Prometheus is permanently bound. Even if the protagonist is going nowhere, he is surrounded elsewhere by movement: the chorus roams ceaselessly, Hermes makes his entrance on a piece of rolling-stock and Io, changed into a cow by Zeus for failing to respond to his advances, arrives and departs scrambling up and down the theatre aisles on all fours.

Everything is done to give the play a physical dynamism. Monotony is also kept at bay by the performance of Alessandro Albertin as Prometheus. He conveys the pride of Prometheus in giving to humanity art, technology, logic and sentiment: "I sowed

blind hope in their hearts,” he boasts. But there is also anger, defiance and a fierce resentment of injustice in his performance. Prometheus directs his rage towards Zeus but he becomes, in Albertin’s performance, a living symbol of resistance to oppression reminding one that the character was once dubbed “the patron saint of the proletariat”.

While I found a contemporary resonance in both Medea and Prometheus, how does an institution like Syracuse’s Greek Theatre renew itself? It has no single artistic director but a complex structure in which a managing director and a superintendent, currently both women, make recommendations to a five-strong board. But although the superintendent, Valeria Told, has only been in office a few weeks, she is bursting with ideas for the future. “I believe,” she said, “we need to have a three-year-plan taking us up to 2026. I’d like to have co-productions with other theatres whereby we tour scaled-down versions of our work in the style of Welsh National Opera. I’d also like to bring in more foreign directors, especially from the world of opera, take our productions to Greece, Spain and France which have comparable amphitheatres, attract a more international audience and extend our season beyond eight weeks.”



📷 The Greek theatre in Syracuse. Photograph: Gaspare Urso

Told is nothing if not bold but she has the pragmatic idealism that you often find in artistic enterprises. She has inherited a stable organisation with a budget of €8.5m, 70% of which comes from box-office and donations, 30% from state and local funding. She also emphasises that ticket prices are modest, ranging from €15 to €70,

and that it is estimated that the theatre generates seven times its budget in terms of spending on hotels, restaurants and, she intriguingly adds, “hairdressers”.

There is no doubt Syracuse’s Greek theatre is a vibrant concern. Attendance there has the quality of ritual. The productions clearly satisfy our hunger for spectacle. But I would suggest that its future, given that it has an available repertory of 90 works, depends on its ability to find new meanings in old plays. “Every generation fashions the classics for itself,” a great critic, AB Walkley, once wrote; and that is as true of Syracuse as it is of Stratford-upon-Avon.

The Greek theatre’s [summer programme](#) runs until 2 July in Syracuse. Michael Billington’s trip to Syracuse was provided by the National Institute of Ancient Drama.

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