ORPHEUS – A NEW "GREEK" TRAGEDY

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In 1994 I worked with the director Nick Philippou on a production of Euripides' *Ion.* That play is based on a particularly incredible snippet of ancient myth. The god Apollo rapes an Athenian princess, whose son is then brought up as a foundling by the priestess at Apollo's oracle in Delphi. In due course the boy's mother goes to ask the oracle how she can have children, and mother and son are reunited after a series of misunderstandings during which each nearly kills the other. Out of this melodramatic scenario Euripides constructed a luminous play about identity, the nature of God, the bond between parents and children and, above all, the varieties of love. I was especially struck by the way the stylistic strategies of Greek tragedy – choruses, messenger's speech, *deus ex machina* – so far from hampering him, gave him freedom to explore all kinds of philosophical, emotional or lyrical corners without distracting from the play's onward narrative impulse. There was an ironical dislocation between "classical" form and turbulent, ever-changing "romantic" content, and it made the play.

The following year, Nick Philippou and I met and discussed possibilities for future work together, and I said that I was interested in writing a new, original play of my own, about the nature of religious belief: what it is like to irradiate one's life by faith in the supernatural, and what happens when circumstances snatch that faith away, when the believer feels betrayed by God or the gods. I was thinking of centring it on a young man who chooses, at the moment of the first blossoming of his social and sexual maturity, to abandon the world and enter a monastery – and on the reaction of his parents, fellow-villagers and the girl who had been hoping to marry him. I was also fascinated by Catullus' poem *Attis,* about the mingled ecstasy and panic of a young man who joins a mystery cult and castrates himself to achieve full union with Kybele, the dark and terrifying aspect of the ancient Mother Goddess.

During our first meeting, almost as a kind of intellectual game, Nick and I began wondering what sort of play Euripides might have made of all this material – which is, after all, not a million kilometres distant from some of the themes of *Ion,* or indeed *Bacchae* or *Herakles.* We thought that he might have kept the play in a single village location, made the boy's parents major characters articulating the emotions of uncomprehending, ordinary people faced with a choice far outside their experience, and used as a hinge-point the boy's return to the world and people he had abandoned for love of the God who then betrayed him. We went further. If

Euripides had written this play, which god would have spoken the prologue, and about what? What event would the messenger have described, and to whom? How many choruses would there have been, and what might have been their subjects? Would there have been a *deus ex machina* – and if so, what new spin would it have put on the attitudes and events already shown in the play?

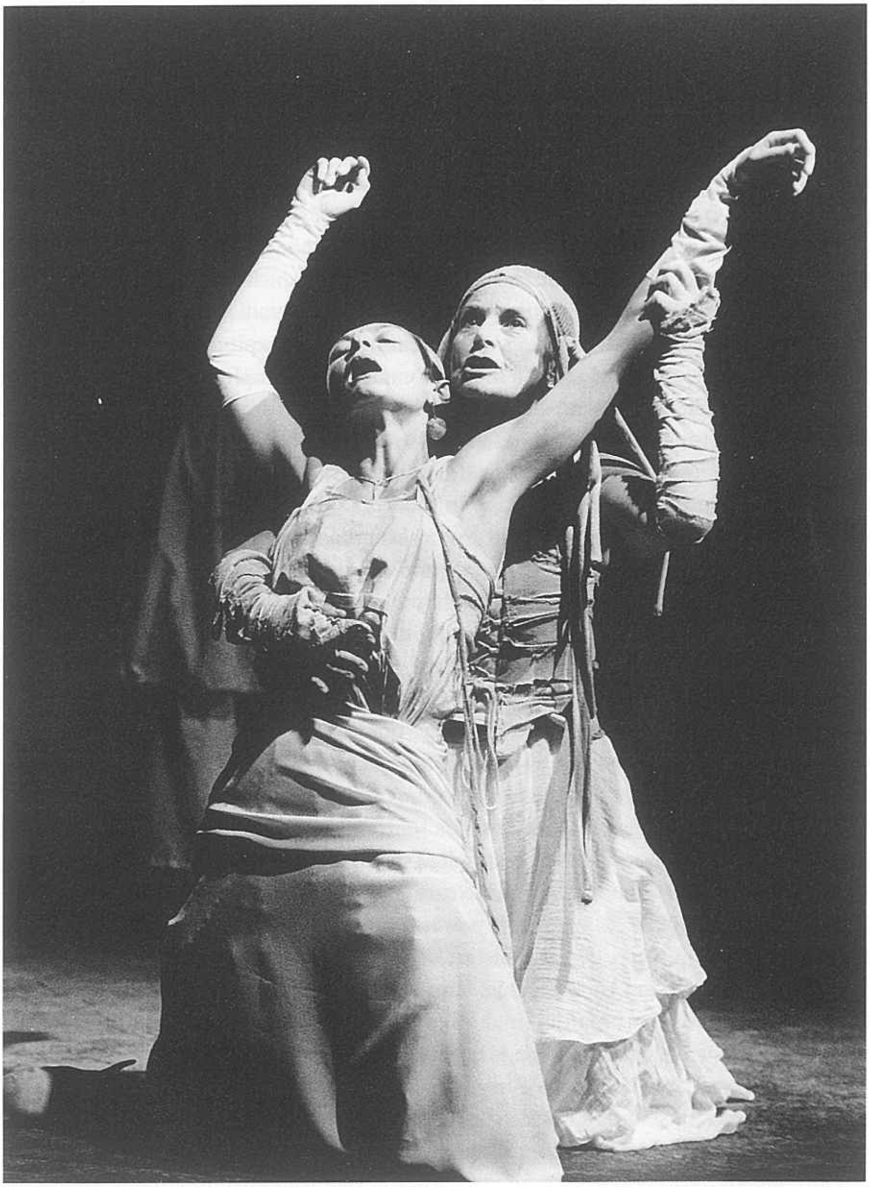
At this point, I wondered about using some Greek-tragic formal strategies, but keeping a more contemporary location – perhaps setting the play in a modern urban slum, and sending the boy to join a millennial cult obsessed with comets and alien abductions. Ancient myth-themes, for example those of the Attis story, could weave in and out of this narrative, adding resonance to the modern events. There was also the possibility of intercutting between three separate strands of material: a modern story of this kind, a medieval tale, set in a village in Northern Greece, about a boy who decides to become a monk on Mount Athos, and the Attis story from remotest antiquity. Developing this, Nick Philippou and I thought that two Greek myths might provide particularly fruitful overtones: those of Orpheus and Adonis.

Finally – and although by hindsight it may seem to be the obvious outcome of all this evolutionary process, it seemed to us a flash of sudden insight – we decided to reverse the whole structure of our planning, to make a play centred on an ancient myth and use the modern ideas, and the psychology behind them, to provide depth and layering. We were also keen to work again with Apostolos Vettas and Kostas Vomvolos, whose contribution to the look and sound of *Ion* had been so central – and, to cut it short, we decided to go all out for a "new" Greek tragedy. Throughout all this, and the two years' creative work which followed, our intention was not to write a mere pastiche of Euripides – the *Orpheus* he never wrote – but to see how the strategies and structures of ancient tragedy might still work to articulate a story with contemporary themes, contemporary psychology and contemporary resonance. A Greek-tragic setting, because of its remoteness from any particular contemporary religion, would also make it possible to generalise the issues and at the same time give them specific focus and identity. In Greek religion God is a single entity divided into many aspects. Each has a personal name and individual attributes – Apollo is the incarnation of rationality, Dionysos of the moment of change, and so on – but the processes of interaction between God and human, the issues of union and divorce between natural and supernatural, are materially the same as in any other faith-system.

I shall describe later how the Greek-tragedy strategy worked in practice. First, a brief word on the rest of our creative process. Soon after *Orpheus* was commissioned, for an English tour and a brief London run, we were offered the chance of working not only with Apostolos Vettas and Kostas Vomvolos in Greece, but also with a young Irish company who specialised in theatre dance and music, ArtsLab of Dublin. This was a heaven-sent opportunity for me to explore the possibilities of choral work, and to test every stage of the play as I wrote it, on live performers and in a three-dimensional setting. In the course of eighteen months, Nick and I went to workshops with ArtsLab in Dublin, and the play gradually evolved. First we experimented with the articulation of meaning by choral sound and movement, and with the physical nature of transformation—one of the themes which was becoming increasingly important. Then I began writing drafts of individual scenes and episodes, and ArtsLab worked on them and presented them at the workshops. By January 1997 the first substantial draft of the play was complete, and ArtsLab gave a work-in-progress presentation of the revised play in June and July 1997. The play (as now finished, performed and published) has drawn on all this experience and all this work. Normally when I write a play I sit down in my study, incommunicado, for a month and come out with a finished pile of paper. To be able to evolve it and experiment with it, live, as the work proceeds, is an experience as alarming as it is liberating. I can't express enough my gratitude for everyone else's patience as I wrote, rewrote and discarded, and for the enthusiasm with which they fell on each new idea, testing it to triumph or destruction.

The decision to write a play using ancient myth and exploring ancient dramatic strategies gave us, from the start, a series of explicit and simple options. If it was the Orpheus myth, the names and stories of at least some of the characters were determined—as Aristotle says in *Poetics*, no playwright worth his or her salt changes the main events of the actual story: Orestes must always kill Clytemnestra, Oedipus must always blind himself. Everything in the play, from the appearance of the god who speaks the prologue to the final ironical tag-line, must grow out of the central story in an organic and persuasive way—and if extraneous ideas are used, such as modern psychology or the Attis myth, they must be made inevitable and integral. And there was no point writing choruses, a messenger's speech and a *kommos* simply because they were in the Greek-tragedy recipe, as if ticking them off on some poetaster's list. If you can't do anything useful with a piece of material or a formal idea, don't do anything with it at all. At one point, as a kind of technical exercise, I wrote one of those Euripidean rhetorical arguments: two huge speeches presenting opposing points of view, rapid *stichomythia* and even choral interpolations like "You've spoken persuasively, but now it's time to hear the other side." That disappeared almost as soon as I saw how it pulled the play apart.

The story of Orpheus is one of the most culturally resonant of all Greek myths. A musician gifted with all but magic powers tries to use them to rescue his beloved from death, and fails not because his art deserts him but because of human nature: unable to resist looking back to make sure that she is following him to the world of life, he breaks God's prohibition and loses her forever. There have been thousands of treatments of the story, in fine art, music and literature—and most concentrate on Orpheus' attempt to rescue Eurydike, and on the harrowing of Hell. But the myth also raises fascinating questions about the nature and loss of religious belief, and these are far less frequently discussed. What was Orpheus' relationship with Apollo, the god who taught him music? How did that relationship impinge on his attitude to other gods, other aspects of the divine? What made him think that he might succeed in rescuing Eurydike from the Underworld, and what was his reaction when he failed? The myth ends when Orpheus is torn apart by ecstatic followers of Dionysus (in some accounts, led by Orpheus' own mother, the Muse Kalliope) and with the foundation in Orpheus' name of a mystery-cult devoted to cheating death—



Shelley King in Actors Touring Company's Orpheus. *Lyric Theatre, London, 1997. Dir. N. Philippou. Photograph by: Simon Annand.*

a cult which lasted for millennia, and whose scriptures were gibberish texts supposedly sung by Orpheus' dismembered head and revealing the secrets of the gods. What relevance has all this to the main story? There were also intriguing technical challenges: how to tell the story without physically showing Orpheus in the Underworld, and how to depict his music without a note of it ever being heard or played. Pondering on all these questions led me once again to ask, "What might Euripides have done?"—and from there to the development, indeed invention, of the characters of Kalliope, Dryas and Aristaios, as peripheral to the original myth as, say, Euadne is to the story of the *Seven Against Thebes* (though not to Euripides' *Suppliants*, based on it) or Theoklymenos and Theonoe are to the original myth of Helen of Sparta (though not to Euripides' *Helen*).

Over the centuries, a vast amount of nonsense has been talked about the Chorus in Greek tragedy by professors with no experience of, or interest in, the plays in performance. These effusions have inspired—if that's the word—on the one hand a style of stiff, undramatic realisations in performance, and on the other a pathological fear of the Chorus in contemporary writers interested in renewing Greek drama, many of whom go to extraordinary lengths to avoid tackling at all what they see as "the Chorus problem." My own experience of classical tragedy, both as a translator and commentator and in dozens of productions, is that the Chorus does not, as professors have claimed, punctuate the action, contrast with it or comment on it but acts throughout as a giver of dramatic energy. The choruses are the matrix, the continuum from which the specific drama of the named characters arises, and their constant presence in the action, symbolised by their physical presence in the theatre, is crucial to the whole experience and meaning of the play. This was something I wanted to explore and develop in *Orpheus.* Once my Chorus is onstage, it stays there, and all characters arise from it and return to it. The emotional narrative of the play, and many of its changes of pace and energy, are in the hands of the Chorus—in particular, they describe, enact and control the delineation of the Dionysian aspects of the story, the way in which mortals, experiencing and accepting the presence in them of the supernatural are transformed, when, in Kalliope's words,

> We enter eternity,
> Lose what we are,
> A-la-la-EE, we're gods,
> In the dance, in the moment of eternity,
> We tear them apart, our children,
> We do anything we like.

The theme of transformation permeates the Chorus' thought. They don't understand what it is, they nag away at it, try to define it and come to terms with it—and it happens to them as they speak. One of their set-pieces is about the way the coming of God transforms what humans take to be tranquillity into the storm of death and rebirth. Another re-enacts the myth of Dionysus and the pirates he transformed into dolphins. In contrast to Kalliope and Orpheus, they know from the start that the universe is not fixed but shifting and constantly changing, that creation is

Gary Turner in Actors Touring Company's production of Orpheus. *Dir. N. Philippou. Lyric Theatre, London, 1997. Photograph by: Simon Annand.*

not a single event but an endless series of experiments in which everything but the gods is impermanent and anything at all is possible; their presence guarantees the presence of this idea throughout the action, which shows the main characters working towards the same idea and experiencing its effects, benign or disastrous, in the particular lives and story they are living before our eyes.

In one way, using a Chorus confirmed my decision that the play should be in verse, not prose. I felt that it was presumptuous to try to invent actual music for Orpheus, to show him actually charming rocks, trees or Furies. (In any case, his supernatural powers, in this play, lie almost entirely in his own mind.) Instead, I wanted the idea of music—the music of creation, the Apollonian harmony of the spheres and the savage, transforming music of Dionysian energy—to vibrate in the play itself, and verse gave the opportunity for this. The play is full of set-pieces: the calm-to-storm chorus, the dolphin chorus, the ceremony of mourning for Eurydike, Dryas' recountings of the myths of Demeter at Elefsis and the creation of human beings by Prometheus, Kalliope's dream of her son's castration, and others. In my own work I have always favoured what I can only call the elliptic bluntness of ancient Greek poetry—and of some modern Greek poetry, for example that of Seferis. It says what it wants to say, bluntly and without fuss, and moves on fast. The most extraordinary ideas, the most surreal of images, are put before us in language whose simplicity is a main component of its beauty. Human beings, in Sophocles' *Antigone*, furrow the cheeks of Mother Earth with their ploughing. Patroklos' horses weep for their dead master in Homer's *Iliad*. The Chorus of Euripides' *Iphigeneia in Tauris* transform themselves to seagulls, flocking on a shore and longing to fly free across the sea. Wherever Seferis goes, Greece keeps wounding him. This all fitted my view, in *Orpheus*, that nothing was what it seemed, that everything was impermanent, shifting and prismatic. In my play fish scream, seals nest in trees, grass weeps, the sky is a meadow flowered with stars, mud sings and dances. To quote Kalliope again, "Ours is the theatre of the world," in which dream is reality, reality dream and anything is possible.

This atmosphere is vital for the presentation of one of the main events of the Orpheus myth, his journey to the Underworld. In my play, he undertakes this less for love of Eurydike than from outrage at the way Apollo has treated him: choosing him and lavishing magic gifts on him, then betraying him. In the Underworld Orpheus loses not only Eurydike but also God; he returns bereft of his music and is forced to reinvent himself, to find a new emotional and psychological reality in which faith in the supernatural plays no part. This inner journey, entering the mirror of himself and confronting the demons of his dream, is more important than the physical journey to the Underworld which is its symbol, and it was essential to get the Underworld out of the way as compactly and self-containedly as possible. At the same time, for anyone writing an *Orpheus*, the Underworld journey is a challenge which cannot be evaded. My decision was to make it the subject of a messenger's speech, to give it to the equivocal character Aristaios (another representative, in Orpheus' Apollo-centred world, of the alternative reality proposed by Dionysus), and to make it a set-piece, hedging it around with literary and dramatic artifice. It is prefaced by irony—Dryas is so concerned with Kalliope's grief and madness that she is reluctant to hear any accounts of any kind, but realises that the time for the messenger's speech has arrived and it must be heard—and it is, in a sense, no more than a preface, a prologue, to Orpheus' own return from the Underworld, destroyed and dumb. I decided to formalise it even further by putting it into the second person throughout—"You cross the river Styx. You confront the judges of the Dead. You sing. You turn to see Eurydike, and lose her." One effect of this is to isolate the Underworld journey from everything else in the action, which is immediate, realistic and urgent. Another is to leave resonant in the air the questions about whether Orpheus ever went to the Underworld at all, whether he ever had magic powers, or if Aristaios' whole narrative is a metaphor for a psychological and emotional journey, in my hero, of a very different kind.

Aristaios' messenger's speech is one of the three formal pillars of my play, reinterpreting a Euripidean strategy in terms of modern themes and preoccupations. The other two are the prologue and *deus ex machina* scene. In the prologue, Demeter appears, telling us about the creation of the world, the rape of Kore, her own motherly grief, and her conviction that everything passes and returns, that one of the secrets gods know is that existence is a cycle and a patern. Dionysus then appears and confronts this view, saying that change is the true permanency, that when mortals understand this they will be happy, and announcing that the events to follow (which he outlines in detail) will demonstrate this view. The prologue frames what might be called the philosophical action of the play, sets up the poetic and ironical style which is important for the later action, and introduces such main recurring themes as the love of parents for their children, the conflict between universal harmony and the need for change, and the idea that everything is not merely itself but also its own mirror-image. The *deus ex machina* is God, in all his or her aspects, speaking through the Sibyl of Apollo's shrine. The play's action until now has brought Kalliope and Orpheus on a collision course: the world is not the way either of them imagines it, and there seems to be no possibility of accommodation between them. The Sibyl appears and says that neither of them understands the true nature of existence or of God, and that only living out their gory story to its conclusion (in which Kalliope will tear Orpheus to pieces in a maenad frenzy) will show them, and us, what that true reality is. Even then it will remain a mystery. The harmony of the universe will be vouchsafed to mortals who find Orpheus' dismembered head nailed to his lyre and floating in a box—it will sing them the secrets of the universe, its change which is no-change, and their eyes will open. Finally, in a resolution which is no resolution—I am an adherent of Euripides, whose tragedies end not with Sophoclean closure but with a quizzical raised eyebrow, leaving interpretation to the audience—Dryas speaks the ironical, throwaway tag which I have stolen from my mentor, which rounds off the theatrical experience of *Orpheus,* if not its meaning, and which also ends this account of how, and why, the play was made the way it was:

> It's myth. Myth's all there is.
> Welcome the unexpected. It's up to you.