

PAPERS AND MONOGRAPHS OF THE FINNISH INSTITUTE AT ATHENS VOL. VIII

# GRAPTA POIKILA I

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HELSINKI 2003

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ISSN 1237-2684

ISBN 951-98806-1-5

Printed in Greece by D. Layias – E. Souvatzidakis S.A., Athens 2003

Cover: Aeschylus, *Hiketides* at the Delphic Festival in 1930.

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# Greek Tragedies in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Finland

Pirkko Koski

Live theatre is the art of time and space. A classical drama carries nuances associated with the society of the time of performance, either intentionally or unintentionally, often also when the actors only attempt to imitate faithfully the ancient performances. The original *mise-en-scène* of a classical play involved the whole community, and in spite of the changes in theatres and audiences, the plays still appeal to the spectators' views of morals and responsibilities and to the relationship between the individual and society. In this paper, I will survey the Finnish productions of ancient Greek tragedies from their first performances in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century until today. The association between the knowledge of ancient contexts and a strong emphasis on the present moment produced impressive performances and interpretations that have reformed the expression of contemporary theatre.

Finnish-language theatre as an institution was born in a period of nationalist fervour around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Until then, foreign theatre companies visited Finland from the west, south and east. The Swedish influence was ultimately the strongest, as the main Swedish-language theatre in Finland remained a kind of remote outpost for the theatres of Stockholm until 1916. The first professional theatre in Helsinki, the Finnish Theatre (Suomalainen Teatteri), founded in 1872, used the Finnish language and was closely linked with the nationalist movement. Finland had been a part of Sweden for centuries, but in 1809 became an autonomous part of the Russian Empire as Grand Duchy of Finland, and a Sovereign Republic in 1917.

For Finland, translations and performances of classical tragedies meant a connection with Western culture. The plays were national achievements, and at the same time an attempt to prove that Finland had the characteristics of a civilized country. The first director of the Finnish Theatre, Kaarlo Bergbom (1872-1905), published a programme in 1872 to legitimise this national institution. The classical repertoire played a considerable part because of the nationalist language policy, as the Finnish language “provides examples of poetical sublimity and natural inclination”, and is capable of “expressing profound, poetical sentiments”.<sup>1</sup> The repertoire comprised three parts: Finnish drama, classical repertoire and European contemporary drama;<sup>2</sup> the ancient drama represented the highest degree of Bergbom's theatrical policy.

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<sup>1</sup> Bergbom 1908, 350.

<sup>2</sup> Tiisanen 1969, 111.

Despite the young director's statement, the public had to wait three decades before ancient tragedies were performed.<sup>3</sup> Bergbom lacked models for the practical interpretation and staging of ancient drama. The admiration of the classical repertoire in the Finnish Theatre was acknowledged in other ways: when the theatre building, called Arcadia, was being decorated, the national and artistic purpose of the theatre was pursued. Later, when the building was repaired, names of poets were painted on the ceiling. The inner circle consisted of Finnish names, while the outer circle bore sixteen great dramatists of world literature, with Aristophanes, Aeschylus and Sophocles among them.<sup>4</sup>

It is hardly a coincidence that Sophocles, of all the great classical tragedians, was the first to be performed in Finland. His plays were easily translated as ideology, acquiring national and political significance in the times of crisis of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The interest in ancient dramas has changed character with time. Euripides' works have become by far the most popular of the Greek tragedies. Productions of the dramas of Aeschylus have always been rare events.

### The Years of Oppression

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Finnish Theatre had gained a firm institutional base and level of professionalism. Kaarlo Bergbom's long period as theatre director was coming to its end in an atmosphere of critical discussion about the Theatre's artistic innovations. Modern trends did not reach it in the way the younger generation expected. The political threat against the legal rights of the nation was reflected in theatre life as well, favouring national emphasis. The earliest performances of Greek tragedies in Finland occurred at this critical period. The Finnish Theatre performed Sophocles' *Antigone* in the aftermath of the November manifesto in 1901, as Finns reacted to the political oppression directed at the autonomous Grand Duchy by collecting names for a petition of citizens to be submitted to the ruler. At the same time, a joint effort was made to construct a new building for the theatre. When it was finished, the theatre was renamed the National Theatre of Finland (Suomen Kansallisteatteri), and *Antigone* was performed again in 1903.

#### Sophocles' *Antigone*

The premiere of *Antigone* in 1901 was considered culturally significant. A theatre historian characterised the performance as brilliant, the play as exquisite, and the event as a milestone in the progress of the theatre. Furthermore, for a considerable part of the audience, the drama was an undreamt-of glimpse of the antique world of beauty, and rich

<sup>3</sup> Bergbom's theatrical travels were especially directed to Germany, and the realization of the repertoire can be seen in this context. Cf. Tiusanen 1969, 117. Although Goethe's repertoire at the Weimar court theatres and August Schlegel's lectures had given rise to an interest in antiquity as early as the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the 1841 *Antigone* in Potsdam raised questions on the political interpretation of drama, there were only a few theatrical realizations of this. Richard Wagner and the popularity of naturalism have been considered as factors that might have weakened interest. Bergbom perhaps knew of the series of three Theban dramas by Sophocles, produced by the famous Meiningen group, and the production of Aeschylus' *Libation-Bearers* in the late 1860s, but his personal contact with the group was of a much later date, thus applying to the rest of its repertoire. Cf. Macintosh 1997, 286, 289.

<sup>4</sup> Aspelin-Haapkylä 1909, 263.

in profound atmosphere. It was staged in discrete style and rehearsed with care, even accompanied by the beautiful music of Saint-Saëns. Its reception was enthusiastic. There were ten performances, a considerable number at the time. The educational, nationalist task of the drama was implemented by addressing the penultimate performance to school children, and the final show presumably to the general public, as the prices were reduced.<sup>5</sup>

A certain 'antiquarian' approach to the tragedy was taken for granted. Thus, it diverged from the Ibsenian realism so characteristic of performing theatre, and from a 'natural' performance on the whole. The performance of *Antigone* in 1901 was not based on star appearances. The promising young actress, Katri Rautio, was quite unspectacular in the title role, but "from the poem she got the wings needed to lift herself from the conventional acting, which so often ties her when she is supposed to rise upwards." She did not represent in this way 'the grand style' still typical in that period. Creon's role was played by one of the star actors, Axel Ahlberg. He had taken heroic roles ranging from Hamlet to Romeo and had "his good day, and some call it his best." The experienced character actor Oskari Leino was splendid as the blind Tiresias, the Soothsayer.<sup>6</sup> The interpretation of Tiresias seems to have been vital in reviews of Sophocles' plays at all times.

The criticisms of the papers of the time give a multi-faceted and richer picture of the event than the theatre history. A review in the Finnish cultural magazine of that time, *Valvoja* (*Warden*), saw *Antigone* as the most significant theatrical event of the year: "Seldom has the theatre offered more enjoyable evenings than in the performance of *Antigone*."<sup>7</sup> Ms Rautio in the title role was characterized as classically plastic, and she was praised for concentration and rehearsal. In the role of Haemon, Mr Kaarle Halme was criticized for reciting too naturally. He was one of the first native Finnish speakers in the Finnish Theatre. At that time the Fennoman educated classes and most of the actors and actresses were still often Swedish-speaking. Besides, being a native Finnish speaker was gradually becoming a particular cultural asset. *Valvoja* praised the chorus for performing the lovely stanzas passably but criticized one of the leaders for being quite un-poetical in voice control.<sup>8</sup>

The critique also refers to *Antigone*'s thematic significance in the contemporary world. *Valvoja* was aware of the performances of *Antigone* outside Finland, 'on the great stages of Europe', where it had been much admired. The review pointed out the authenticity that recalled the original Greek performances, characterised by lucidity and an emphasis on ideas of humanity. These ideas were epitomised by the actions of Antigone, who was seen as sacrificing herself for a sublime ideal. As a counterbalance, the abrupt and authoritarian Creon got his well-deserved punishment after having violated both divine and human laws with his high-handed rule.<sup>9</sup> This interpretation did not juxtapose the laws of individuals and communities, or gods and states; the state (i.e. Creon), however, did not respect the laws (i.e. Antigone). The Finnish manifesto to the Russian Emperor requested precisely such respect for law, rather than Russian governmental oppression.

<sup>5</sup> Aspelin-Haapkylä 1910, 145.

<sup>6</sup> See Aspelin-Haapkylä 1910, 145.

<sup>7</sup> O. A. K[allio], *Valvoja* 1901, 374.

<sup>8</sup> O. A. K[allio], *Valvoja* 1901, 373-374.

<sup>9</sup> O. A. K[allio], *Valvoja* 1901, 373.

The daily papers paid impressive attention to the event. The nationalist *Uusi Suometar* wrote in advance of the play's premiere and in several respects linked it more to present day than to Sophocles' other works.<sup>10</sup> A later review in the same newspaper considered the Greek perception of fate as distanced from 'modern people', who believed in free will. Yet, Sophocles, and his *Antigone* in particular, came close to the contemporary view. The reason for Antigone's ruin was pure humanity and her own actions, with the consequence that she "breaks human laws and is subjected to the tyrant's wrath."<sup>11</sup> The liberal *Päivälehti* also wrote in advance of and reviewed the performance, reflecting on the relation between classical and modern drama. The critic, referring to the possibility that Antigone's actions were based on free will rather than duty, still doubted it and considered the naturalness and pure humanity as a modern feature of the character. Creon stands for power and greed for gain, with his sermon on governmental interest and everyday politics – a modern person in a way, despite ancient appearances. The critic did not accept interpretations (which gave the drama a modern explanation), according to which the tragedy was about the contradiction between official laws and sisterly love.<sup>12</sup>

In studying the reception of the *Antigone* in 1901, the press censorship and the impossibility of an open political debate should be taken into consideration. The critics wrote a considerable amount of the thematic material and the potential for ideological interpretation. Nothing contradicts the view that the performance touched the national sentiment in a particular way, basing its popularity precisely on that. The performance seems to have stimulated a profound response in the audience.<sup>13</sup> The occasional references to foreign performances may be regarded as a desire to follow theatrical trends and as a search for Western connections in general.

### Sophocles' *King Oedipus*

The National Theatre introduced *King Oedipus* into its repertoire in 1905, the year of a general strike with its widespread citizen activism consequently gaining relief in the dire political situation. The Finnish production was thus somewhat earlier than that by Max Reinhardt in 1910. He created this tragedy's modern international fame, but the Finnish production was not one of its reflections. It is uncertain how well the Finns knew the *mise-en-scènes* of the Théâtre française, the sensational performance of the protagonist by Jean Mounet-Sully in particular, or the English performances, and how much these could have influenced Finnish interest in the play.<sup>14</sup>

The theatre history by Aspelin-Haapkylä from 1910 discusses the performance only to a limited extent. He emphasizes the significance and success of the production. The staging and the acting met great demands. The number of performances was only four, suggesting that the interpretation did not live up to the esteem in which the play was held. Axel Ahlberg, who had previously played Creon in *Antigone*, was a dignified and impressive Oedipus. Katri Rautio, the distinguished Antigone, was now in the role of Iocasta. The part of Tiresias went to a star actor characterized as French: Adolf Lindfors

<sup>10</sup> R.A.P., *Uusi Suometar* 17.4.1901.

<sup>11</sup> R.A.P., *Uusi Suometar* 21.4.1901.

<sup>12</sup> O., *Päivälehti* 18.4.1901.

<sup>13</sup> O. A. K[allio], *Valvoja* 1901, 373.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Macintosh 1997, 289-290.



seemed to have shaped Tiresias exceptionally artistically. The chorus had been reduced to just two young ladies, who were nevertheless rated as particularly talented.<sup>15</sup> Another history of the National Theatre by Rafael Koskimies reveals that the production of *King Oedipus* was overshadowed by the conflicts over policies at the National Theatre, and was even used as an instrument in them.<sup>16</sup>

The accompanying debate is often either reflected in the reception of the theatrical performances, or theatre itself takes a stand in it by its performances. The *King Oedipus* of 1905, however, does not seem to have followed this pattern. It rather seems as though the performance did not attract the attention it deserved because the surrounding world was occupied with other matters. The political situation was unstable, and there was turmoil within the National Theatre because the ailing director Bergbom's 30-year long directorship was nearing its end, and a new influential person was sought after to fill this power vacuum. The crisis in the Theatre had a greater effect on the tragedy than the political situation.

The critic and poet Eino Leino, representing the voice of the young radicals,<sup>17</sup> expressed an opinion on the interpretation of Sophocles' play. He wanted the stage to turn back to an estrade with recital, based on beautiful and variable use of the spoken word.<sup>18</sup> There must have been obvious shortcomings in this sense. Leino was an advocate of the new school, favouring theatrical expression distanced from realism. He was not, however, interested in the overly natural presentation of the *Antigone* of a couple of years before, rather the opposite. The younger generation perhaps expected a certain kind of artistic expression, not social commitment.

The production took place in a period of stylistic transition at the National Theatre, but did not represent innovation. Its merits in performance did not suffice for popularity, even the first night apparently attracted only a small audience. Since the production emphasized style<sup>19</sup> rather than ideology, it should have appealed to the younger generation, but it was too conventional for that. *King Oedipus* did not inspire the daily papers to coverage comparable to that of *Antigone* either. There are no obvious political references in the reviews. Even the Social Democrat *Työmies* (*Workman*) published only a brief news item calling the performance a meritorious work.<sup>20</sup>

The reviews lacked current perspective, even though the surrounding world was all the more restless, with news about strikes, the war between Russia and Japan (1904-1905), and the conscientious objectors to military service. Finns' legitimate right to refuse service in the Russian army had been violated by the Russians. The Governor-General, N.I. Bobrikov, the representative of the Russian government in Finland, had been assassinated only a few months before. Yet, the unpopularity of the play was obviously a result of the fact that the interpretation did not succeed in connecting with its time of performance.<sup>21</sup> The people of a politically orientated time did not have the patience to concentrate on a conventional, non-political interpretation. The success of a great and

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Aspelin-Haapkylä 1910, 265.

<sup>16</sup> Koskimies 1953, 108.

<sup>17</sup> Leino, *Välvoja* 1905a, 332.

<sup>18</sup> Leino, *Välvoja* 1905a, 332.

<sup>19</sup> The reverent and static attitude towards the drama appeared in the decor, with Greek statues, a Greek stage, plants shading the statues, laurels, etc. (F.H., *Uusi Suometar* 28.1.1905.)

<sup>20</sup> *Työmies* 28.1.1905.



acknowledged drama on a Finnish stage did not suffice to become a national event to be remembered. The audience soon discovered its own theatre on the streets, in the days of the General Strike.

### The First Decades of Independence

Having become independent sovereign country in 1917, national institutions, including theatre, were the foundation of the status of the new Finnish nation. Theatres were developed on a subsidized institutional basis, and Central European innovations were mirrored.

Finland, officially a bilingual country with a Swedish minority, already had a very prominent Swedish-language theatre, the Swedish Theatre in Helsinki (Svenska Teatern i Helsingfors). It had a long history and a building of its own, as well as unofficial status as a Swedish-language national theatre. The Swedish Theatre performed *Antigone* in January 1917, at a time of political turbulence and in the middle of internal changes: local Swedish-speaking actors conquered the stage in 1916 after half a century of hegemony of artists from Stockholm.

#### Sophocles' *Antigone*

The political atmosphere raised interest in the central themes of *Antigone*. Ivar A. Heikel, Professor of Greek Literature in the University of Helsinki (1888-1926), proposed that while ordinary spectators appreciated staging and acting skills, one should also consider the text and its message. In the tumultuous atmosphere of the spring of 1917 Creon became the main character of the play, his behaviour focused on the welfare of the state, while Antigone's decisions were made from the viewpoint of family, destiny and duty. For Heikel, ideology was central to the theatrical interpretation, in which modern characterizations and realism might cover the original forms and distance essential to this drama. Heikel called for an authentic approach to classical tragedy.<sup>22</sup>

Koskimies, in his history of the National Theatre, dismisses the *Antigone* performance of 1925 with just a brief mention, though considers it important: "*Antigone* by Sophocles is naturally a debt of honour to Antiquity and the supreme Muse for every artistic theatre." He perceives the protagonist, Lilli Tulenheimo's position differently from those of the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century, and concentrates on the way of acting: she interpreted Antigone true to style and living the part. She took the lead among the actors, particularly as a representative of the new trend in theatrical expression, a discretely psychological and lyrical realism. She was also admired for her considerable natural talent.<sup>23</sup>

*Antigone* now had a modern interpreter. The Theatre had welcomed a new generation, but times were particularly different after the Civil War in the spring of 1918. The reviews lacked all reference to the social context, and the performance was valued in the light of the classical tradition and the German directional reforms.<sup>24</sup> This was

<sup>21</sup> F.H., *Uusi Suometar* 28.1.1905.

<sup>22</sup> Heikel 1917, 192-194, 197, 203-204.

<sup>23</sup> Koskimies 1972, 180.

<sup>24</sup> The Finnish critics knew e.g. Max Reinhardt's solutions to big productions, and their criticism was thus directed at a chorus both monotonous and without nuance. Modernity touched only the main roles.

presumably also a way of building up the cultural identity of the new state. The reviews generally characterized the performance as solemn descriptions of the influence of the fates, with recital as a central means of expression. These characteristics had a stronger connection with the aims of national culture than with theatrical tradition. Even more generally, the artistic experiment was being overshadowed by normative considerations. The *Antigone* in 1925 did not take a sufficiently modern or interesting form to surpass the heated debates on Finnish dramatists going on at the same time. The director of the play, who was also the director of the Theatre, Eino Kalima, took an aversion to politics, and never manifested any social consciousness. The nationalist dignity matched his style badly.

#### Sophocles' *King Oedipus*

After the 1905 production at the National Theatre, *King Oedipus* was performed a couple of times in the Swedish theatres in Helsinki and Turku<sup>25</sup> and then again in Finnish at the National Theatre in 1936 (Fig. 3). The actor playing the title role of Oedipus was praised as handsome and good, whereas the actress playing Iocasta was criticized for being too youthful and conventional. Obviously the role depended too much on a psychological interpretation.<sup>26</sup> Her figure was sensual and strong and her former roles mostly modern. Creon was good, Tiresias a powerful creation. Although the production as a whole was a success, the overall impression is interesting: "The piece does not, however, make any deeper impression. For what reason?" This reserved attitude could reflect the dispute regarding the position of the National Theatre in 1925.<sup>27</sup> Other sources, too, support the critique explaining some of the problems associated with the performances of classical tragedies in general in Finland.<sup>28</sup>



Fig. 3. *King Oedipus* at the National Theatre in 1936.

<sup>25</sup> Aarne Orjatsalo tour 1911-12, Svenska Teatern 1917, Åbo Svenska Teater 1928.

<sup>26</sup> K.S.Laurila Collections, Finnish National Archives.

<sup>27</sup> See Kalima 1968, 206.

<sup>28</sup> Koskimies 1953, 364-366.

The performance was accompanied by the Finnish composer, Leevi Madetoja's music, intending to suggest Greekness. The chorus recital was well received almost without exception. The review was positive in other respects as well, characterizing the performance as impressive and solemn. Despite the positive criticism, the director Eino Kalima, was unhappy with the choreography of the chorus. The chorus was comprised almost exclusively of women instead of old men, and thus seemingly destroyed the festive atmosphere. The choreographer, Maggie Gripenberg, was a pioneer of modern dance in the style of Isadora Duncan, and her view of antiquity did not perhaps conform to the male orientation in the cultural spirit of the time. The lack of dynamic power seemed to have created a problem. The classical had become sublime and decorative, but distanced from the audience at the same time. The lack of spectators was probably due to the need for expertise in understanding the play. Apparently it can also be considered as lack of theatricality, or an 'academic' distanced attitude.

### The Greek Tragedians after the Second World War

The Second World War began in Finland in the autumn of 1939 as the Winter War and continued after a year's interim peace until the autumn of 1944. The period until a final peace was stressful in Finland. Theatre returned to pre-war routines in an atmosphere in which audiences were especially active, and appreciated live performance and theatre as art, rather than as open political messages. The 1950s was the period of the second modernism in Finland, the first having been at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Sophocles

Jean Anouilh's version of *Antigone* in 1946 at the National Theatre found the means of challenging the audience through a theatrical expression that focused on the ethical aspect of the story. The production was linked to the post-war search for a new form. The performance of the title role by the young and fragile Eeva-Kaarina Volanen, rapidly advancing into the vanguard of the actors, was a brilliant piece of work.<sup>29</sup>

Neither the theatre historians nor the critics discuss the actuality of the play. Connections with the political situation in France were known, however, also in Finland. It would probably not have been wise to refer to Finland in the 'years of danger', while the Control Commission of the Allied Forces still remained in the country before the conclusion of the peace. The only feature referring to contemporary events was the military uniforms of the actors. Antigone wore black, the guards had painted droopy moustaches.<sup>30</sup>

*King Oedipus* was produced at the Swedish Theatre in Helsinki in 1948 (Fig. 4). The well-known British director, Tyrone Guthrie's interpretation attracted much attention because it adapted classical style to modern theatre. The reviews contained reservations only sporadically and repeated the term 'expressive', obviously because of the power of the expression, the impressive masks and costumes. Oedipus wore purple and grey, and the lighting was also unusual. The strong chorus was actively present. The performance lacked the solemnity verging on static, so usual for the Finnish interpretations of classical drama.

<sup>29</sup> Koskimies 1972, 180.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. picture in *Helsingin Sanomat* 27.2.1946 in association with the Eino Palola critique. Reviews after 1923 are in the Archive of the Theatre Museum if not mentioned otherwise.



Fig. 4. *King Oedipus* at the Swedish Theatre in 1948.

The performance at the Swedish Theatre was a prelude to post-war interpretations of Greek drama, with individuality in a more prominent role and Euripides about to supersede Sophocles. The debate about modernism from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century reappeared. *King Oedipus* found some response. The intense gloom in Guthrie's interpretation presumably reflected sentiments, such as "the shocking proof of the cruel providence of the gods, the uncertainty of human destiny, and individual helplessness before the caprices of life"<sup>31</sup>. His visit to Helsinki was a glimpse of the world beyond the fronts of war.

#### Aeschylus

In Finland Aeschylus is the least played of the Greek tragedians. Before the Second World War, only *Agamemnon* was performed at the Swedish Theatre, in 1935. The interpretation was almost overlooked, probably because the tragedy was played at the Concert Hall, the theatre itself being under repair. It was perhaps the location that led the reviews to pay special attention to the chorus, though the visiting Swedish director, Helge Wahlgren, also seemed to have emphasized its importance. The right-wing newspaper *Uusi Suomi* compared the accentuation of the chorus with the German tradition, and in particular the chorus from the University of Berlin.<sup>32</sup> There might indeed have been similarities, but this trend does not seem to have taken root in the Finnish theatre.

A Finnish interpretation of Aeschylus was seen only as late as in 1961, when the National Theatre produced *Agamemnon*. It was directed by Arvi Kivimaa, the director of the theatre, a writer and leading personality in the field of culture, for whom the original text was more important than theatrical experiments. The reviews were generally

<sup>31</sup> T. H-u, *Helsingin Sanomat* 25.2.1948.

<sup>32</sup> Jalkanen, *Uusi Suomi* 8.12.1935.

positive,<sup>33</sup> but evasive at the same time. The direction was regarded as unconstrained, and “the poem came across”, but the casting was not satisfactory in all respects, and the chorus did not work dynamically enough. The mention that “there has been a will to serve the contemplative, melancholic poem” is indicative of the tone in the critique.<sup>34</sup> The first Finnish performance of Aeschylus was recognized as a cultural achievement, not a theatrical one.

### Euripides

The post-war years made Euripides the most popular of the Greek tragedians in Finland. The most frequently performed work is *Medea*, first produced in 1949, both at the National Theatre in Helsinki (Fig. 5) and at the Theatre of Tampere (Tampereen Teatteri), one of the largest cities outside Helsinki. A new translation was made for the National Theatre, and a star actress, Ella Eronen,<sup>35</sup> was chosen for the title role. Iason was played by the popular Joel Rinne, known for his talented interpretation of roles, from operettas and comedies to classical heroes.



Fig. 5. *Medea* at the National Theatre in 1949.

<sup>33</sup> The intensity is perhaps to be attributed to Ella Eronen, characterized as a great tragedienne, playing Clytemnestra, to judge from the pre-eminence of her figure.

<sup>34</sup> [Aarne] L[auri]la, *Suomen sosialidemokraatti* 19.11.1961.

<sup>35</sup> Eronen had risen to a significant position in the 1940s, and become a national icon after her recital of the words of the national anthem at the Stockholm Stadium during the Finnish Winter War. This in a politically neutral Sweden, sympathetic to Finland. The choice of her for the title role was a part of the interpretation, creating a spirit of star theatre. The reviews mentioned a visiting Swedish production at Swedish Theatre in the 1930s as a parallel, with the famous Swede Tora Teije.



The previous theatrical season with *King Oedipus* and its modernism at the Swedish Theatre in Helsinki gave a natural point for comparison. The previous decade had emphasized the mythical and divine about the play, while the key to *Medea* was humanity. The chorus had an important position, and the choreography was given particular recognition.<sup>36</sup>

A few years later, in 1956 the National Theatre performed *Iphigenia in Aulis* under the direction and new management of Arvi Kivimaa.<sup>37</sup> Kivimaa's production was refined and "true to style", sparse and successful rhythmically, the expression was as a whole both strong and poetical.<sup>38</sup> The production was acclaimed, and taken to Copenhagen and Vienna. "There was no cultural barrier, and the language barrier was overcome and Finnish turned into classical Greek with musical qualities."<sup>39</sup>

The *Bacchae* of the mid-1960s by the Intimate Theatre (Intimi-teatteri), established in the post-war wave of small theatre launches, shows how suitable Euripides was for the most radical theatrical experiments. The startling interpretation was early in relation to international interest in this play. The production was most likely meant as a provocation, and a demonstration of what the institutionalised National Theatre was incapable of doing and had not the courage to do.

The interpretation of *Bacchae* was, however, more significant as an event than as a theatrical performance. For the director, Mauno Manninen, antiquity was familiar and important. As the son of the renowned poet and translator of classical dramas, Otto Manninen, he presumably knew from early age the Finnish translations of *King Oedipus* and *Medea* by his father; the *Bacchae* he translated himself.<sup>40</sup> The actors and actresses praised the translation, but director's wild ideas of interpretation caused amazement and provoked unintended hilarity. The *Bacchae* was a remarkable experiment in crossing boundaries, but less successful as a practical work of art.<sup>41</sup>

## The Greek Tragedians in Recent Decades

In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Finnish theatre was undergoing many changes. New structures and many experimental groups were born in Helsinki as well as in some smaller cities. National drama was strong, but at the same time international movements were accepted even more actively than before. Ancient tragedies were experienced rather as theatre events than cultural achievements.

<sup>36</sup> Koskimies 1972, 545-546.

<sup>37</sup> Other productions of *Medea* at Finnish theatres: Theatre of Tampere 1948-49, Swedish Theatre in Helsinki 1980, Theatre of Varkaus 1998, The Furious Roses 1999. Productions of *Trojan Women*: The Workers' Theatre in Tampere 1970, Municipal Theatre in Vaasa 1983 (adapted by Sartre). The production of *Iphigenia in Aulis*: Finnish National Theatre 1956-57. The production of *Hippolytus*: Finnish National Theatre 1974. The production of *Hercules*: Municipal Theatre in Turku 1961-62. The productions of *Bacchae*: Intimate Theatre 1966-67; Municipal Theatre in Rovaniemi 1991. The production of *Cyclops*: Student Theatre in Helsinki 1966-67.

<sup>38</sup> Mehto 1999, 233.

<sup>39</sup> Mehto 1999, 248.

<sup>40</sup> See Riikonen 1998, 249, 253.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Lounela & Tainio 1988, 246-253.



### Euripides

The *Medea* in the latter half of the century correlated strongly with the time of performance. *Medea's children*, an adaptation for children by the Swedes Per Lysander and Suzanne Osten, drew attention in 1982 both at a small puppet theatre, Green Apple (Vihreä Omena), in Helsinki, and as an interpretation by the children's theatre group Little Finland (Pieni Suomi) in 1994. Anxiety caused by divorce and death as the theme of a children's play provoked negative comments from adults, and the ensemble itself disagreed about the suitability of the play for children.<sup>42</sup> The group Furious Roses (Raivoisat Ruusut),<sup>43</sup> established by female artists in the late 1980s, often produced plays with a strong social message, and in the case of *Medea* took part in the controversy over refugees in 1999. In 2002, *Medea goes karaoke* by the Theatre and Drama students of the Theatre Academy in Helsinki set the tragedy in a suburban pub in an ordinary neighbourhood. The students built their stage in a former industrial district in a suburb of Helsinki.

In the early 1980s the *Trojan women* was a part of the further training at the Theatre Academy in Helsinki. It was probably chosen because of its many female roles, as the students were mostly women. It is also possible that the anti-war themes of the play made the politically conscious director, Kalle Holmberg, choose the text. The play's anti-war themes had been launched in Finnish theatre with the production of the Workers' Theatre in Tampere (Tampereen Työväen Teatteri) in 1970. True to contemporaneous references, machine guns were brought on stage, but the female perspective on war was still very impressive. The main cause for a war would be trade policy, and women were more clearly reduced to victims of power games than in earlier interpretations.<sup>44</sup>

The nature of training actors in the Theatre Academy pushed the production of the *Trojan women* towards analysing the acting and physical expression. At the same time, it was also influenced by the general emphasis on visual aspects of theatrical expression. Furthermore, Kalle Holmberg himself emphasized the role of music and physical exercise, thus aiming at variable images of the scenes. The production also attempted to make a statement on theatre policy, and wanted to be seen as an association between eastern and western cultures. This aim, in association with Finland's geographical position, also suggests the ambition of authenticity.<sup>45</sup>

### Aeschylus' *Oresteia*

The whole *Oresteia* was first performed by the Furious Roses in Helsinki in 1991. It was quite an event, as all of the roles were interpreted by women on a bare stage covered in sand. The specific character of the performance, the cultural weight of a classical trilogy, the unusually extensive publicity, and finally, the intensity of the interpretation also, resulted in a success. Indirectly it also effected the survival of the group for a whole decade. The director, Ritva Siikala, presented two points of departure: adopting a large machine

<sup>42</sup> Mustonen 1997, 82–83.

<sup>43</sup> The Furious Roses had started its activities some years earlier with an adaptation of some of Shakespeare's *Henry*-dramas, called *The War of the Roses*, which further supplied the name for the group.

<sup>44</sup> Rajala 2001, 164–165.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Juha Häkkänen *Teatteri* 1982/7, 17–18. It is an interesting coincidence that an interpretation of the *Trojan women* in Tel Aviv in the 1980s shook Israeli society so strongly that the national government resigned. It was laden with messages associated with Jewish culture and Israel's political position. It also referred to the concept of the wandering Jew as well as the constant presence of weapons.

workshop as a theatrical space, and female actors coping both with this masculine space and with the classical text. The choice of a classical tragedy for a performance was a conscious act, channelling the common needs for the actresses' abilities. The project was associated with the words 'courage', 'opportunity' and 'competence'.<sup>46</sup> The time of the performance, with the significant political changes in Europe and in the Persian Gulf, affected the atmosphere of the play and influenced its final choice also.<sup>47</sup>

The *Oresteia* had 33 actresses, and 8,295 spectators attended the twenty performances. Finnish national television recorded the production, and the preparations for the drama were made into a television documentary. For the Furious Roses a support group was formed, with invited celebrity members, influential women, and even some men. A national bank sponsored the event, thus honouring its mainly female staff. The performances became the cultural meeting point for female associations.

Most of the leading roles had been divided among several actresses. Clytemnestra, for instance, was performed as a group, the members of which represented different aspects of the figure. This, in some critics' opinions, fragmented the performance and did not always reveal the director's motivations.<sup>48</sup> Initially the most sensational element was the casting, but in the end the event itself, and the setting for the story proved most impressive.<sup>49</sup>

### Sophocles

The production of *Oedipus* in 1981 in a city outside Helsinki, at the Municipal Theatre of Lahti (Lahden Kaupunginteatteri), and a renamed *Oedipus*, called *King Thickfoot* (*Kuningas Paksujalka*) at the Group Theatre (Ryhmäteatteri) in Helsinki in 1990, represent the perspective of a new generation on tragedy. The *Oedipus* in Lahti contained an extra prologue, relating the events prior to this drama by Sophocles, and an extra act, The Blind Oedipus, based in various sources. The production as a whole remained incoherent, but was otherwise successful.

The Group Theatre made use of a new translation in 1990, formulated for its own ensemble, and translated the name into *Thickfoot*, in order to avoid Freudian associations. The theatrical idea of the time was shown in the visual appearance: Thebes was cellar-like, with water, mist and sewage pipes, a rattling door, iron stairs and a fire bursting out from time to time. The costumes were dirty and shapeless. The events had been removed to a new time and place, which the viewers were supposed to interpret as a metaphor of their own society.

The small Q-Theatre (Q-teatteri) in Helsinki is, to date, the only Finnish theatre that has produced *Oedipus at Colonus*, in 1994. The director, Esa Kirkkopelto, was well-versed in the text, had studied the essence of tragedy and linked it to his own play about the Russian revolution.<sup>50</sup> He introduced the tragic rather than a tragedy, which can only be 'told and sung', and 'worshipped and honoured'. The accompanying gypsy

<sup>46</sup> Mykkänen 1996, 57.

<sup>47</sup> The translator, Kirsti Simonsuuri described her impressions at the time in the shadow of war. The play was strikingly real, and the similarity between the scenarios spine-chilling. Simonsuuri 1991, 128.

<sup>48</sup> See Mykkänen 1996, 68-70.

<sup>49</sup> The Municipal Theatre in Helsinki (Helsingin Kaupunginteatteri) performed an adaptation of *Prometheus* in the mid-1980s.

<sup>50</sup> Koski 1996, 38.

music dealt with homelessness, exile and vagrancy, and thus the human suffering was appealed to through music and dance. Antiquity was approached through the Balkans, not through two thousand years of Western culture, as used to be the case in Finland and especially in connection with classical drama and its cultural significance. There were tangential points between the Q-Theatre's interpretation and the internationally-known spectacle, *Oedipus at Colonnus*, by the American Lee Breuer, who made use of African-American music and ecclesiastical traditions. This view of the tragedy was far removed from the first Finnish production of Greek tragedy, *Antigone*, in 1901, but both shared the idea of encapsulating the spirit of the time.

## Conclusions

The popularity of the Greek tragedies has fluctuated in Finland, each period having chosen to perform the plays that were felt to best characterize it. The Finnish National Theatre has accomplished its national and cultural mission by performing them. The number of performances has been limited if compared with, for instance, Germany. The adaptations, often in municipal or experimental theatres, started at a late date, but the productions have mostly been momentous events. A special characteristic in Sophocles' plays is the association of success with the contemporary world. The productions have been valued, but it is their association with contemporary events that has ultimately determined their popularity. This has been discovered in various ways in different times and the perspectives of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the 1990s naturally differ significantly. Finns have only recently established a contact with Aeschylus' dramas, which have created sensations, but as cultural events rather than as touching drama. The post-war rise in the popularity of Euripides' plays is easy to understand. The more psychological approach of their predecessors better suited a generation that had lost faith in humanity. The simultaneous increase in the number and popularity of small theatres and stages encouraged over-ambitious experiments and risk-taking also on the big stages. The physical and the visual could be combined with the world stripped of festivity.

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Fig. 2. Maria Rosaria Taglè, *Spettacoli a Paestum dalle rappresentazioni classiche degli anni trenta a oggi*, Università degli Studi di Salerno, supplemento, Quaderni del dipartimento di scienze dell'antichità 16. Serie storia antica e archeologia II, Napoli 1995, Fig. 1. Courtesy of Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Antichità, Università degli Studi di Salerno.

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