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"Elektra" by Sophocles (Adapted by John Barton and Kenneth Cavander)

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Importance of the Project

Although the techniques of ancient Greek theatre are taught in the B.F.A. Acting program at the University of Windsor, an independent student production of a full Greek play has never been staged at the Jackman Dramatic Art Centre. We hope to close this gap between our training and the initiative that students take in approaching this type of classical text. Our goal is to implement the tools we are taught in school, but also, through research and discovery, to learn how to deepen our understanding of Greek drama and prepare ourselves for life after school. For each of us, this experience will give us new knowledge about how to approach an original interpretation of an existing work on a scale we have not attempted before. Through this process we will, we hope, further develop our own individual methods of researching, preparing, and playing a role. Beyond adding to the UW’s pool of knowledge, the adaptation of the play by John Barton and Kenneth Cavander we chose has never been approached using the methodology of collective creation and Viewpoints, a subject that will be touched on later.

Existing State of Knowledge

We were first introduced to the historical background of ancient Greek theatre in the course Theatre History I, taught by Professor Simon du Toit. Knowledge of the space in which the ancient Greeks performed, the ritual surrounding the live event, and the roots of this style of theatre have greatly affected our approach to this project. In the second-year course Movement for the Actor III, taught by Professor Gina Lori Riley, we were introduced to the techniques of Greek mask, choral work, Greek gesture, and compositional skills. Many of these skills come from the work of Anne Bogart and her method called "Viewpoints." Also, we have been training in how to support classical text through the course Voice for the Actor, taught by Professor Michael Keating.

Research Question

How can we create an original piece of theatre, using the text of Sophocles’ Electra, that will play to a modern audience and contribute new knowledge to approaching ancient Greek theatre in our modern world?

Methodology

We began by compiling and assimilating information relating to ancient Greece, including background (social, political, economic, religious, and major events); cultural attitudes; customs and manners; movement and mask; clothing, shoes, and furniture (with notations specific to actors’ needs); theatre, the play, the playwright, and other poetry and literature; the arts (dance, visual, music, and architecture); and additional research related to our artistic vision of the play. We call this compilation a “Period Notebook.” From this process we found inspiration for the staging of our play, which is being done in the round, echoing the shape of the Greek
orchestra, or “dancing place.” There are four runways that connect to the main
playing area which harken back to the *parados*, which is where the chorus would
enter. We also found in our research that women who were in public must be veiled.
(In fact, on the stage women’s parts were played by men.) As in all ancient Greek
tragedies, the world of *Electra* lives in the tension between what is public and what
is private. Throughout our production characters are unveiled, literally and
figuratively, in the pubic eye.

The methodology by which we are creating this production mainly consists of the
concepts of collective creation and “Viewpoints.” Collective creation refers to the act
of creating of piece of theatre as a group. The members of our collective cannot be
defined as actors, directors, or designers, but as creators. Anne Bogart and Tina
Landau’s *The Viewpoints Book* (2005) describes “Viewpoints” as “a philosophy
translated into a technique for (1) training performers; (2) building ensemble; and
(3) creating movement for the stage” (7). There are nine physical Viewpoints
(Spatial Relationship, Kinesthetic Response, Shape, Gesture, Repetition,
Architecture, Tempo, Duration, and Topography) and five vocal Viewpoints (Pitch,
Dynamic, Acceleration/Deceleration, Silence, and Timbre). These terms give
creators a language in which they can communicate and heighten the performers’
awareness of their actions.

Early in our rehearsal period we experimented with the Viewpoints technique in
improvised explorations. In this way we developed a stronger sense of ensemble,
experimented with different ways of expressing an idea, and opened our
imaginations to the possibilities of what the medium of theatre could offer. We then
began creating on “our feet.” This approach means that creators start with a blank
slate, and instead of sitting down and planning out the staging of the performance,
they discover it while playing in the space.

**Our Findings**

Working in a collective has been difficult. We have discovered that, even though
each person has a say in the process, there needs to be some sort of hierarchy.
Otherwise it takes too long to make decisions. Every member must be clear in their
own responsibilities and other responsibilities. As in politics, pure democracy does
not work.

Creatively, we discovered fairly early on that, although many of the issues are
contemporary, the traditional style of Greek theatre cannot altogether abandoned.
These characters live in a larger-than-life world of high emotion, high stakes, and
high pressure. We found that this state of being had to be embraced; otherwise we
were not doing the text justice. What these characters were saying and portraying
would not have matched up. Therefore this process has challenged and taught us all
to take risks as performers and creators, trust in the theatricality, and be completely
vulnerable.
Further, we have found that, by approaching this play through the contemporary techniques we chose, the text is decentred and the focus is placed on the expression of the actor's body as language. Originally, no aspect of the human body would have been seen, but we have exposed the actor's body. We believe this approach will allow the audience to connect with these characters on a more human level. We have strived to reflect the argument of each character not only in the words that they are speaking but in their body language as well.

Although our societal beliefs have changed over the last 2,000 years, we have found that the basic human issues this play addresses still speak to us. Issues of trust in Gods, guilt, revenge, family feuds, women's rights, justice, and many more are still in the forefront of our lives. This discovery has strengthened our belief that ancient Greek theatre is still relevant and should continue to be performed. The fact that we can still relate to these characters demonstrates that these plays address the very core of what it is to be human.