

Classical Studies and Ancient Drama Productions in Bulgaria: Between Literalism and Modernization

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There is an ongoing process of mutual enrichment, correction and renewal between texts and staging. In this contribution to the round table we shall confine to a small collection of examples that emphasize the dynamics of the cultural interaction between ancient and modern in the Bulgarian productions of ancient tragedy and we will consequently try to identify a few of the various means by which this particular interaction is set up. We consider the peculiar vacuum caused by the remoteness of the ancient text and the immediacy of contemporary performance's context as generating the very dynamics of ancient drama reception. Our point is that the specific tension between literalism (both in terms of translation practice and productions set and design) and modernization (exceptionally in set, design and acting) represents the very motor/engine for the vibrant intersections between antiquity and modernity. In this brief examination we hope the more or less significant role of classicists and classical scholarship will also emerge.

In the beginnings of ancient drama productions in Bulgaria the pseudo-historical stylizing of the set goes along with the pursuit of text literalism. However, in some cases set and design point the audience to draw analogues between ancient and modern situations. The aesthetic of some directors prompts to make correspondences with contemporary conditions through diverse instruments of theatre art.

1916 *Oedipus the King* in Stara Zagora directed by Geo Milev

The director Geo Milev (George Milev) – a multitalented intellectual, poet, painter and translator who returned from Germany to his hometown of Stara Zagora - focuses his production on experimental and expressionistic means, the rhythm of expression through speech and movement being his first preoccupation. He staged his *Oedipus* with very modest means, since it happened in the midst of First World War, from properties to illumination that consisted of electric torches. The text Geo Milev has used for this performance was the literal and prose translation of the already prominent scholar in Classics – Alexander Balabanov. Alexander Balabanov was the first translator to work professionally with the original text and to achieve academic precision in the art of translation, yet originally falling into the trap of aesthetically unconvincing presentation. By keeping as close as possible to the original, even noting on the translations' covers "translated literally from Ancient Greek", Balabanov was not primarily concerned with the reading ease of his texts.

We should examine in this production the peculiar interaction between the literal translation of Balabanov and the original director's vision about performance's set and design. The literalism of the text was in unusual and striking concordance with the set realized by Geo Milev according to his innovative and creative idea of simplicity: "A simple, white facade of

the palace, white stone stairs and Oedipus upon them – that is the whole simple appearance of the tragedy” (Geo Milev in his paper “Theatre Art” quoted by Antonia Karakostova, *A Century-old History of “Oedipus the King” in Bulgaria*, in “The Fate of Oedipus: Bulgarian Routes”, Plovdiv University Press, 2010, [in Bulgarian] p. 37). On the one hand, the bare working-out of the space and the lights apparently contrasted with the protagonist’s blindness, and on the other hand, it was paradoxically yet considerably concordant with the bookish denudate from any additional implications style of the translated text. It is exactly in the space between these denuded from extra inferences text and set that the inventive director’s preoccupation with the body movement and the rhythm came up. Geo Milev obviously has made some corrections of Balabanov’s translation with the purpose of achieving a specific pulse of actors’ speech and gestures. A peculiarity of Geo Milev’s alteration of the prose text is that it was made in order to provide the actors with the specific rhythm of the Bulgarian folklore dance of ratchenitsa for mastering their speech. The triple asymmetrical metre structure of this musical rhythm fits quite well into the structures of poetry metres that later Geo Milev would use in his translation. This gives us a reason to suggest that by the time he put on a show using the text of Balabanov’s version, he had already come up with the metric organization of his own text.

1929 *Medea* at the National Theatre in Sofia directed by Nikolay Massalitinov

Balabanov only once achieved what he hinted at in this preface with his second translation of *Medea*, staged at the National Theatre in 1929. This is one of the few cases in Bulgaria where the same translator has published two translations of the same work, the second translation being not merely a reworked or revised version of the first one, but an entirely new work (Euripides/Balabanov 1932). It was also the first instance in the history of reception of ancient drama in Bulgaria where theatre appeared as the initiator of a new product.

Massalitinov asked Alexander Balabanov to create a new version of the text, this time for the stage, and that is how the second versified translation was created. In the preface to its first printed edition Balabanov wrote:

“I made an entirely new and versified translation of the very same *Medea* by Euripides. And thus Euripides was at last respectfully presented on the Bulgarian stage, with the help of director N. Massalitinov whose advice proved very useful, and with the help of Mrs. Theodorina Stoycheva, who played that huge part in a very powerful and intelligent way and who, while learning her lines, made valuable suggestions for some changes, and I used them. There was also D. Panteleev, a young poet who worked for the theatre at the time and who advised me on many things.

As for my present translation, it is not for me to judge. My approach to Euripides’ language has been simple, taken from life, not from books, even rude at places, just as it is required for this drama that is so far from the drawing room plays and so far from bookish poetry.”

The translator generally rejected the idea that an ancient text should necessarily be translated in a lofty style; on the contrary, he expressed the opinion that Euripides' language was close to the spoken language and therefore should be translated accordingly. This led him to seek a natural way of expression, a language that he himself described in the *Razvigor* magazine (Al. Balabanov, *Razvigor Magazine*, 1929 [in Bulgarian]) in the following words: "And the translations into Bulgarian are free, accurate and fresh like the smell of freshly broken ground". Within the framework of a drama text, this natural sounding language added to the level of communication of the translation.

Here is what the philologist T. Borov (T. Borov, *Mir Journal*, year XXXV, issue No. 8630 of April 8th, 1929, p. 3 [in Bulgarian]) says in his review of the translation:

"...His language is rich, clear, simple and substantial, deep Bulgarian that affects us irresistibly, with the power of Euripides, "the most tragic of poets". Balabanov has relived and recreated *Medea* in Bulgarian not by means of the conventional language used for the translation of classics that smells of rot and would constantly remind us that *Medea* is the dead offspring of a dead culture, but using a natural, fresh, clear Bulgarian."

In the quotation mentioned above Todor Borov actually expresses a common opinion about Balabanov's poetic translations of ancient drama as a whole as far as similar reviews attest the high ground of his translation of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* as well. In this occasion it is the text itself that is conceived as linking ancient and contemporary world. Despite being seen as rotted dead offspring classical antiquity could be revitalized in the receiving culture by linguistic means, by domestication and nationalizing of the text language structure. And that is perhaps the only case in which it is the text that serves to create the more modern and communicative response, while the set attempts to stay in the original cultural design format.

The translator classicist worked in close partnership and constant dialogue with the director, the actress playing the role of Medea, and a poet. Balabanov gave explanations to the actors as an expert in ancient Greek literature in order to help them to understand and interpret the drama. It is by his influence that the young actresses have realized and acquired the knowledge of the strange interconnection between the sorrow and the grief and their physical and bodily expressions in antiquity. By courtesy of classical philologist's mediation some of the chorus participants were prompted to take initiative and use gestures and tones of voice to express not only terror, but also protest against the injustice of Zeus, who gave people the ability to recognize gold but not human heart (A. Karakostova, An Attempt to write N. O. Massalitinov's 1929 show *Medea* by Euripides into the history of Ivan Vasov National Theatre; In: *What Is Medea To Us?*; Plovdiv, 2009, pp. 46-117 [in Bulgarian] p. 67).

Massalitinov also included new text wherever he found necessary: for instance, he added an extra paragraph to Medea's appeal to Aegeus in which she pleaded with Hermes to protect

him and praised him for his deed; this added paragraph is close to the spirit of Euripides, but it is not part of the original text.

While the critics were unanimous about the appropriateness of Balabanov's translation the acting was more controversial. And this is the point where a peculiar strain between the text and the performance arises. Some critical reviews (especially spokesmen of the ruling party) direct to the impotence of Bulgarian actors to render Euripides' characters and to the early and immature producing of ancient drama in Bulgaria.

This production has been seen particularly by critics as an attempt to commensurate Bulgarian practitioners' experience with contemporary worldwide theatrical traditions for ancient drama staging was always conceived a high standard for theatric. Little has changed should we say nowadays in this idea of producing ancient drama. We should remember at this point our last seminar in the project framework held in April 2011 and dedicated to the reception of ancient drama on Bulgarian stage. One of the questions that the director invited had to answer to was: why have you chosen and produced ancient drama. And the answer was astonishing attuned with the vision we have just mentioned above (which let us remind has been characteristic for some critics view for staging in the 1920s): because every director has to stage an ancient drama in order to find out his level of commensuring with the highest theatre requirements par excellence. In the last decades of 20th century ancient drama producing in Bulgaria is still a means of reaching or trying to reach the high theatrical standards.

1967 *Oedipus the King* in Russe directed by Jarko Pavlovich

A peculiarity of this performance is the fact that it is produced in the context of the cold war. The 1960s are also a specific period for Classical Studies for they have been once again included in Sofia University curricula after a decade of eradication and marginalization in the 1950s. The director was preparing himself for the stage with more or less studying the classical scholarship and research and especially the work of the prominent classicist Alexander Balabanov, whose words about Sophocles as "the most affectionate tragic" poet he cites. Nevertheless, the performance is staged using the relatively new (edited in 1956) poetic yet literal translation by an already widely recognized scholar in Classics (Alexander Nichev). The result of director's concept for the staging and the text which it has been based on is the arising of a particular tension between the literal translation and director's own vision of Oedipus' character as over emotional, but less tragic and less dramatic. Despite the literalism of the text, it is the acting that achieves the demythologizing of the character and its more poetic image. Thus the semantic translation (if we use Peter Newmarks' typology) remains firmly in the original culture with its literalism, while the actors endeavor to a more communicative and closer to their contemporary audience performance with no pathos (for pathos was not up-to-date), within a strong symmetrical and almost geometric set. It is worth noticing that despite the recognized and common inclination at avoiding emotion and pathos in theatrical performances in the period, this vision of Sophocles' tragedy was not

well accepted by Bulgarian theatrical criticism pointing out the lack of heroism and pathos and stressing at the tragic aspect of Oedipus character as strongly connected to its heroic aspect as well, so that we can observe a singular opposition between the formal aesthetic attitudes towards ancient drama and the director's vision of it. Finally, the overall meaning of critical reviews turns around the conclusion that this performance was but a useful and conscientious attempt to rethink and revive an ancient Greek theater's work.

1986 *Oedipus* in Blagoevgrad directed by Stavri Karamfilov

This production is unique in the context of the Bulgarian staging of ancient drama in the way that it was based both on Sophocles' and Seneca's texts dealing with Oedipus' myth. We should also take into consideration the fact that it was produced a couple of years before the disintegration of the Soviet-bloc and the beginning of the perestroika. There were not new translation editions of Seneca's and Sophocles' texts at that time and it is quite probable that the director has made use of the same translation of Alexander Nichev mentioned above and his translation of Seneca's *Oedipus* both equal in meter structure and as far as possible literal in semantics. At the same time this is particularly the period of the renaissance of the interest in antiquity and we should make connection with the philosophical theoretical books published in the 1980s, thinking of a completely different attitude toward the presence of antiquity. The tradition of antiquity has been approached as a kind of typology of a conception of the world, of a universal understanding of time, world, and man (as pointed by Miglena Nikolchina in our discussion about Bulgarian literary reception of ancient drama at the seminar in the framework of our project in December 2010). An interesting point of evidence for this particular trend is provided by the fact that the word "catharsis" is in vogue both in critical reviews and in director's thoughts. It is in the ways of achieving this catharsis that critics and director disagree – in critics' opinion, the ancient classical work is attributed with an inner harmony that has been deconstructed and that has restrained audience's cathartic feeling and experience, and in director's opinion, the archaism, the elemental reactions, the cruelty of action and emotion would call for catharsis and for spectators' endeavoring for rethinking the world around. In director's own words his version of the text to be performed had to be compiled in order to bring into focus socio-political themes, yet not disregarding Oedipus' existential dilemma (Antonia Karakostova, *A Century-old History of "Oedipus the King" in Bulgaria*, in "The Destiny of Oedipus: Bulgarian Routes", Plovdiv University Press, 2010, [in Bulgarian] p. 133).

1998 *Medea* on the stage of the National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts directed by Nadejda Seykova

This production proved to be in some way highly representative of the peculiar hybrid and strongly polarized perceiving of ancient drama staging in Bulgaria. It presents a schizophrenic fragmentation of the character of Medea, a black comedy pull out from the real life and the numerous examples of mothers having killed their children. The director Nadejda Seykova splits the production in two pieces – the one making every endeavor to stick to the classical

set and the original textual implications, and the other one rushing headlong into the modern by actualizing dramas of everyday life drawn out of news items of women who have killed their children.

1998 *Antigone* at Sfumato stage and the *Myths* program: between ancient, modern and post-modern

Sfumato production of *Antigone* provided a second instance of collaboration between a translator (the classicist Nikolay Gochev) who has created an interlinear translation of the text (a unique example in the history of ancient drama translations in Bulgaria), the poet and playwright Kiril Merjanski and the director. This text does not pretend to be perfectly correspondent to the text by Sophocles but rather an interim stage of work which functions exactly in its capacity of an interim phase.

Sfumato turns the highlights in the making of ancient theater upside down but they do this not only through their approach to the plays but also through the secondary texts they always equip their primary text with, the performance itself. There is an entire Sfumato bulletin accompanying the staging of *Antigone* – part of the *Myths* program. One of the key things happening with these programs of Sfumato is this thinking in groups of threes, sometimes in couples, depending on the amenability of the material. This type of programs making each individual stage production a part of a bigger whole, a festival so to speak, irrespective of the temporal rhythm of actual presentation of these productions, is much more related to the concept of ancient theater and is not due simply to the fact that we have tetralogies but to the fact that every single theatrical text belongs to a bigger whole which is somewhat festive. The contemporary revision of this feast is created by the stage performances themselves. The expanded frameworks, naturally, put each of these performances in a totally different context – much more festive and somehow more concordant with the ancient.

2002 *Oedipus the King* on the stage of the National Theatre in Sofia directed by Andreas Pantzis

The main preoccupation of the director was the text itself which has to be followed very closely as in ancient Greek dramaturgy. It has to be heard, and director's duty is to serve the author and his ideas. The translation is again the same – the literal translation of Alexander Nichev, but with some corrections made by the playwright on director's instructions. The close reading and following of the text is the very way of seeking the truth according to Andreas Pantzis, but once more it is the choice of the actors that provides the connection between ancient and modern – the role of Oedipus has been played by a very popular and beloved comedy actor. Another special effect intertwining ancient and modern is the musical performance synthesizing Orthodox Church intonations and Bulgarian folklore rhythms. This vision of the musical background reflects director's search for unified and united Balkans (Antonia Karakostova, *A Century-old History of "Oedipus the King" in*

Bulgaria, in “The Destiny of Oedipus: Bulgarian Routes”, Plovdiv University Press, 2010, [in Bulgarian] p. 94) and is characteristic for his quest for regional identity. The costumes of the chorus also played a significant role in this particular harmony of antiquity and modernity resembling in Antonia Karakostova’s words hippy garments and teenagers’ favourite black skin clothes.

2006 *Medea* directed and played by Diana Dobрева

It is commonly recognized that post-modern plays often represent a collage of texts (not surprising in the context of postmodernism, which is a priori patterned on collage). One of the reasons for such reinterpretations is explicitly expressed by Dobрева’s production pointing at a particular inherent insufficiency of ancient dramatic texts for providing the deeper, patchy anxieties of postmodern men. Diana Dobрева searches for the roots of betrayal she could not find in Euripides’ text alone and she is forced to surmount this particular insufficiency by references to other texts ancient and modern, epic and dramatic.

In the first three decades of 20th century, the translators’ motive to break away from the structures of the official prosaic translation was the continuing life of the text on the stage. The productions were still oriented toward representation of the external characteristics of antiquity in set and costumes; however, in the translations inspired by theatre, there were noticeable changes in characters’ speech: there was much more emotion and pathos than in the original texts, and it was closer to the living language, to everyday speech.

The next stage took place in the second half of 20th century. The period of socialism in ancient drama reception was marked mostly by attributing topical significance to characters’ psychological qualities, which also affected the staging of tragedies. Emotion and pathos were considered anachronistic and out-of-date. A greater priority was given to Sophocles’ *Antigone* performances conceived in terms of political resistance against tyranny and ethical conflicts, and reflecting the particular sensitivity of both directors and society to linguistic and ideological strands.

The last one began in 1990s; it has been a period of meeting of ancient drama texts with modern readings of mythology, of ambitions to both uncover the most archaic layers of ancient Greek tragedy and present versions (predominantly of staging and sets) in tune with modern development in ancient drama productions.

Although, what is missing to the Bulgarian rethinking and remake of ancient drama compared to some general trends in its reception worldwide is perhaps the more broad-spectrum vision and reference to global themes like world’s changes resulting from war, terrorism, refugee and emigration problems, the role of women (a lack that I have to say our colleague’s Dorothea directing debut will hopefully make amends for to some extent and that has been to some extent made amends for in Massalitinov’s production in 1929 of *Medea*, but then the emigration focus has been presented by director’s own emigration from the Soviet Bolshevik rule).