

Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen* on Bulgarian Stage: Modern Production and Hypothetical Original

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Staging a play, which is too distant from our time, is always filled with difficulties and risks. They could be of different extent, depending on the play's genre, nature and age. But when a number of such difficulties is present, the director's job proves practically impossible, and it is necessary to introduce certain changes. The final result might be an adaptation (a kind of simplification) of the play towards the modern audience, or it could be a shift of the centre – the sense of the play.

When we talk about a classical playwright, another problem is added to the above-mentioned, which unlike them remains chiefly unnoticed – by the director, as well as audience. This is the overly respectful approach to the authors of classical Antiquity, which frequently misleads modern people and makes them misinterpret these texts. In the case of Marius Kurkinsky's production of *The Assemblywomen* from December 2009 this unconscious over-respect greatly influenced the audience's expectations, and people were inclined to ascribe the indecent parts of the play to the director.

We encounter yet another problem, particularly with Aristophanes. Comedy is to a great extent based on topical jokes. If tragedy in general is perceived and staged with a stress on its universal and intransient meaning, we couldn't possibly say the same about comedy. The comical element is in a way historical, it couldn't be automatically transferred from one culture to another because it contains actuals, relevant to the culture, for which it was intended.

We should take into account that in Antiquity a comedy is being put up in festive context, which consolidates its social nature even more. Within the framework of the festival, people enter a specific space of distinguishing from everyday life, where they are allowed certain things, otherwise intolerable. In

this framework appears a certain freedom of speech, which abolishes the inhibitions of everyday life. This makes the role of theatre very different from the one we are familiar with now. In V century Greece, theatre is an instrument of social effect, political criticism and ideological speaking; it concerns itself with all aspects of public life and it is not in the least just for entertainment. Modern theatre, be it political, is far from this social significance.

The presence of festive freedom of speech gives a possibility to use the forbidden, which creates a certain image of welfare in comedy, usually achieved in a miraculous way and through the intervention of social reformism of a utopian nature. The problem is generally solved half way through the play, and the remaining scenes till the end are festively-farcical.

Aristophanes does precisely this in *The Assemblywomen*. Praxagora achieves a political change through the amusing disguising of the women as men and occupying the assembly. The chorus wants to understand how the new regime works and she lays out an extremely radical government plan and social order, which leads the reformation seeking democracy and the pursuit of absolute equality of rights to reduction to the absurd. But this is not the end of it. Praxagora adds that she actually doesn't want anything new, and the point is to restore the traditions of the old times. The idea that extreme reformism is in fact extreme conservatism, appears several times throughout the text. The utopia, leading back to nature, is transformed into the worst kind of totalitarian regime. The comedy ends with a farcical scene, which is an illustration of the imaginary welfare, in its essence absurd.

In a classical comedy laughter ensues from several things. On the one hand, the order in the world is turned upside-down, although it seems accurate and regular, and this causes laughter. On the other hand, we have a comic character, in itself a caricature, who sets about to rectify all the faults of the existing order. Thirdly, the character's means are so fantastic and impossible,

that they produce a third kind of laughter. The obscene language adds to all this, and causes humor on a lexical level as well.

Marius Kurkinski constructs an entirely different meaning. First, Praxagora is presented as a lovely and smart woman, and Aristophanes' characters are caricatures on principle. The ridiculous character is part of the entertainment. In the modern production Praxagora is interpreted completely seriously as a great reformer. In general, the director adheres strictly to the text, perhaps even too literally. He does not proceed to easy political analogies, which the text certainly allows and offers; the analogies are left to the spectator, if he manages to find his way through the overflowing information of names of Athenian politicians and biting remarks against them.

In Marius Kurkinski's interpretation there is no trace of the fantastic-entertaining. In the centre of the play he places the tragedy of a failed utopian project. In his own words, he endeavoured to walk away from the political aspect as much as possible. Moving the focus, he changes the meaning and makes the play into an expression of the disastrous effects of social experiments on people's private existence. The audience doesn't understand this until the final scene, which turns from a farcical variety show into a deeply dramatic and tragic exodus.

Marius Kurkinski focuses on the young man and the girl, whose love he represents as destroyed by the madness of the new regime. He comes to the conclusion, that the experiment is an aggressive and disastrous incursion into people's living space. What is more – the second old woman, who fights for the young man's attention, is Death itself; the third old woman's features are hideously hypertrophied. The dissolution of the living space leads the scene into the tragic. The play's ending is completely changed. It turns out that the third old woman is Praxagora herself, and the show ends with her desperate outcry and wail. Then comes the conclusion that utopia destroys its own creators. The

whole comedy becomes an attempt to protect the private from the aggression of the political.

We see a completely changed Aristophanes here. Old comedy is as derisive, as it is affirmative of democracy. A problem is put forward and it is solved by magical means, but in the end it all comes to one thing – democracy is hardly the best governance, but it's the best one we've got for now. However, nowadays political life is generally regarded as something one could only jest with; something one cannot affect with critic or a suggestion and only ridicule remains.

The differences in a modern staging of a classical play are not only historical, and ideological. They are also purely technical. The actors in a classical comedy are three, four at the most, but there are quite a few in the modern production. Naturally, this allows the modern version to be much more dynamic and expressive, which to a certain extent gives the play that otherwise inevitably lost festive and social context.

Furthermore, the modern cast includes women, as well as men. In Antiquity, however, only men performed. In this particular comedy one of the levels of entertainment comes precisely from the double transvestism – on stage there are men, disguised as women, who are disguised as men. What is more, these actors are not generally professionals, but ordinary citizens, who come forward in this peculiar appearance in front of their fellow-citizens. The levels of entertainment are becoming multiplied and complicated.

We should make note of the actor's declamatory technique. First it needs to be mentioned that the modern production adheres to the Bulgarian translation nearly to the letter, which to a certain extent perplexes the spectator, who doesn't have footnotes in front of him. On the other hand though, this creates a certain authenticity of the situation, it constructs a real world with its faults, characters and jokes, or at least it creates the idea of such a world.

However, what strikes us is the fact that the modern actors do not so much recite, as rather shout on stage. It is particularly alarming that they approach both formal and obscene language with the exact same intonation and manner. These distinctions do not exist for the audience's hearing, and the result is a leveled text made of unclearly reasoned formal speaking and amusing, but somehow incoherent obscene remarks. In order to preserve the different types of speech and their different presentation, in some parts of the world classical plays are staged successfully as musicals¹. This theatrical genre provides the possibility to alternate declamation with singing and under singing, which for its part could be accompanied by music, or not; another advantage to this type of staging is the preservation of the chorus, generally excluded from modern productions.

The chorus in classical plays is the mediator between the audience and the actors, and it directs the spectator's reaction towards the action which is being performed on stage. The chorus plainly shows the collective nature of Greek literature. It plays the role of the community and for its part models the response of the audience, which actually is the community. It is something like a theatre in the theatre.

In modern productions this cannot happen for a number of reasons. The audience is not a community, it doesn't perceive collectively to such an extent, and it is not used to having a mediator between itself and the actors. But what is to be done with the chorus' text? The director figures out a substitute – something to remind of a chorus, to deliver its lines, but not exactly a chorus and not addressing the audience directly. In our case, Marius Kurkinski quite successfully reduces the chorus to three Athenian women, who at the same time play the roles of the women, exercising their rhetorical skills in front of Praxagora. This way, they combine the individualism of the separate character,

¹ This is done mainly in Anglo-Saxon stage culture.

be it a secondary one, and the collectivity of the women's community after the change of the regime. The compensation for the lost chorus could also be seen in the dynamic movements round the stage, as well as in some decisions in the theatre design.

The stage is divided into two parts – upstage and downstage. The upstage is formed as a frieze, with statues and caryatids. It is evidently classical, it gives the action a historical background, and it is also motionless. In the course of the play though, it turns out that it is not so motionless, because the places of the caryatids are taken by different characters – men, as well as women. This clearly suggests the idea of the instability of democracy. The downstage is organized like the classical orchestra, where most of the action is carried out. This is the dynamic part of the stage, which turns into a street, a house, a rostrum etc.

A good attempt at modernizing the play is the painting of the blank space in the frieze with graffiti – a kind of turning the ancient Greek urban space into a modern one. Respectively, the washing off of the graffiti at the end of the performance clearly symbolizes the slow and painful return to the natural order of the state.

The actors' costumes do not comply with the characteristic colouring of ancient set-design, on the contrary – almost everything is white. In order to produce a stronger effect from the exchanged clothing of women and men, the designers used exaggeration – the men's corsets and skirts are deliberately small and tight. The high-heeled shoes give the effect not only of women's shoes on men's feet, but after Praxagora herself appears in such, it is more likely that this was an allusion of the buskins, which leads us to the parody of tragedy.

The Greek audience at the beginning of the IV century BC is obviously very different from the modern one. In Greece it is a community – theoretically the whole polis attends the show. All are men, and all know each other. Quite a

few of the jokes are aimed at certain people in the audience, and often some of the actors' masks are caricature portraits of prominent politicians, philosophers and poets. The audience is an active element of the production, the jokes are addressed directly at its members and do not depend on associations and analogy. A substantial factor is also that typical for Antiquity collective understanding, which is hard for us to comprehend and impossible to recreate.

The modern audience consists of both men and women, strangers – they are not a community in the true sense of the word. In this staging of the play there are frequent attempts to involve the audience in the action – an example here is the descent of some actors in the house for the scene of the first assembly after the change of regime. But in actual fact, the audience cannot take part in the performance. Modern spectators understand collectively only the farcical scenes, the obscene lines and gestures; the profound idea of comedy, be it Aristophanes' or Kurkinski's, remains incomprehensible on a community level.

Laughter is caused by the same things which cause sorrow. It is provoked by the imperfect, by the internal controversies of the world – even the ideal world, which comedy constructs. Precisely this is the meaning of the festive and colourful phantasmagoria of comedy. The political regime and social order are subject to severe critic and ridicule, but it's within the framework of the carnival and exactly that is what supports them.

In the modern play a different focus is brought forward. It is undoubtedly an attempt at political theatre, even though the director claims to have tried to pull it apart from everything political. This strive adds a significant amount of dramatic tension, which is nowhere to be seen in Aristophanes. But perhaps the modern spectator needs some dramatic tension, some emphasis, in order to draw a line between the farcical and the serious. In view of this, the tragic implements and the changed ending are justifiable. This, however, does not change the fact, that the center of the comedy is shifted and completely different. The political

element is so carefully dealt with, that it nearly disappears. In some paper reviews the play was even called “an innocent tale”, which certainly couldn’t be applied to the original.

As we can see, the problems in the staging of a classical comedy are heavy and numerous. It is evident, that in order to put up such a play nowadays, it is necessary to make certain changes. One way is what Marius Kurkinski has done – to adhere to the text almost to the letter, to use set-design as a compensation for missing classical elements, to achieve actuality with a shift of the centre and focus of the comedy. An external context is being deposited onto the text, and it makes it harmless and to a great extent painless for digesting by the audience.

There is another way as well – the careful search and use of analogies from the modern political and social life. This method is rarely used in Bulgaria though in other countries it is well-known and quite effective. For example, in 2004 “The Frogs” was successfully put up on Broadway as a musical, and instead of Aeschylus and Euripides the two fighting playwrights were Shakespeare and Bernard Shaw. However, this type of experiments are typical mainly for the Anglo-Saxon culture, and it is rather difficult for us to observe and analyze them.