

COLEÇÃO AUTORES GREGOS E LATINOS
SÉRIE ENSAIOS

Maria de Fátima Silva
Susana Hora Marques (eds.)

TRAGIC HEROINES
ON ANCIENT
AND MODERN STAGE



IMPRESA DA UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA
COIMBRA UNIVERSITY PRESS

SENECA'S *PHAEDRA* - AN OVER PASSIONATE HEROINE:
ANALYSIS OF HANA BURESOVÁ'S *FAIDRA*

Eliška Poláčková
(Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic)

Performances of Seneca's plays are rarely seen on the Czech stages – the only staging of a play written by this ancient author before Burešová's performance was *Phaedra* in 1977 in the Theatre at the Periphery¹, which was rather an adaptation, though². The idea prevails among (not only) Czech classical philologists that Seneca's plays were not meant to be performed, so that they are extremely difficult – if not impossible – to be staged. At the same time, it would be naïve to presume Czech directors, having virtually no tradition of staging Seneca to fall back on, would be eager to search for interesting unknown ancient plays and put them on the stage. Without a close cooperation of both theatre-makers and classical philologists – which is the case in Burešová's performance – the false idea of impossibility to stage this author can never be changed in the Czech Republic.

It would be instructive to find out the roots of this 'superstition' concerning (im)possibility of staging Seneca as its effects can be seen not only in the Czech

¹ Seneca, ...*aneb Faidra (...or Phaedra)*. Translation: Zdena Hadrboľcová a Josef Kostohryz. First staging: 28th June 1977. Director: Ewald Schorm.

² This, however, is true only with respect to modern staging of Seneca's plays. There is evidence about his plays being staged by Jesuits during 17th century in several monastic and public schools.

Republic but almost in the whole Central and Eastern Europe³. It is a fact that almost no evidence exists for Seneca's plays being staged in antiquity. However, almost no evidence for any other tragedy being staged in Seneca's times and later exists either. As a consequence, the period of *Principate*, *Dominate* and the crisis of Roman Empire is seen in the history of the theatre as an epoch without drama. It means that in those times theatre performances were not primarily based on dramatic texts. On the contrary, theatre forms based on improvisation, music and movement flourished, such as *mimos*, *pantomimos* or *farce*⁴.

Obviously, tragedy and comedy did not totally disappear, only they were hardly ever staged in the theatre buildings or performed in full. Yet they existed in various forms and were performed at many, more or less private, occasions – during symposia in palaces or private houses by hired actors, in bathhouses (*balneae*) by the author himself and his friends, or at some special private or public occasion. In all these cases, rarely was the whole piece performed. Only selected parts from the play were either performed, recited or sung. Certainly, it does not mean that drama – or Seneca's tragedies to be more specific – was not staged at all at the end of antiquity. Historians and other writers only did not consider these theatrical forms worthy of recording, hence the idea that Roman tragedy (of which Seneca is the only preserved author) was impossible to stage.

³ In France, Italy, Spain and Portugal, on the contrary, a staging of Seneca's plays has an indispensable tradition.

⁴ McDonald, M., Walton, J. M. 2007: 365.

This opinion only took root as late as in the 17th century with the period of classicism. Before then there were no doubts whether these plays were or were not 'stagable' in the present or staged in the past, and these doubts have never been raised in France⁵ at all because of the long-lasting tradition of staging Seneca there.

Apart from this, there is another possible reason for Seneca's non-presence on the European stages. It is the misunderstanding of the differences between Greek and Roman tragedy, of their distinctive features, structure and esthetic criteria applied to this genre in both cultures. From the scarce remnants of Roman tragic texts, the basic characteristics of Roman tragedy⁶ in opposition to the Greek one can be deduced. First, the dramatic structure of the former is loosened and more epic in comparison with the latter, as the genre became primarily a literary one only with the inherent possibility of staging. As a consequence, the structure of the tragic text was assimilated to the structure of written text that is meant to be read (and re-read) rather than viewed. Next, the esthetic criteria applied on these texts were, therefore, different as well. The more refined, stylistically elaborate and embellished with poetic words the text was, the better it fulfilled the expectations of its recipients. Greek tragedy, on the contrary, employed the literary devices primarily according to their suitability for the dramatic impact. Finally, the audience of the 1st

⁵ The tradition comes from the reputation Racine gained for Seneca by the adaptations of his plays.

⁶ It would be more appropriate, though, to speak about Seneca's tragedy as the only preserved texts are those of Seneca.

century A. D. – consisting of the citizens of the most powerful and developed empire in the world at that time – expected different emotions from tragedy than the 5th-century Athenians, thus the shocking and brutal scenes in the preserved Roman tragedies in comparison with the well-balanced austerity of the Greek ones. These differences coming from historical and cultural background have been later subjected to the process of evaluation⁷, through which Greek tragedy came across as the more valuable of the two. The criteria, however, were contemporary, which makes the whole evaluation pointless. Nevertheless, it has been widely accepted by both classical philologists and theatre-makers who, as a consequence, deal almost exclusively with Greek tragedy, putting the Roman one aside.

Hana Burešová, contemporary Czech theatre director, is the second one⁸ to oppose the neglecting of Seneca on the Czech stages. She is one of the few Czech directors who are not afraid of bringing strong emotions and *pathos* on the stage. It is, therefore, no surprise that she was able to find a suitable strategy for putting Seneca's *Phaedra* on stage of Divadlo v Dlouhé (The Theatre at Dlouhá Street) in 2007. The 85 minutes long performance has been played many times since its first staging both in the Czech Republic and abroad, and is still on the repertoire of Divadlo v Dlouhé. Although demanding high esthetic and intellectual requirements

⁷ Roman tragedy did not match the requirements of classicism for the well-balanced structure and austere ideology, as presented by (their reading of) Aristotle.

⁸ For the first one see the first footnote of this paper.

from its recipients, the performance became extremely successful – it gained praising responses from both the critics and the audience, and Helena Dvořáková was awarded the Alfréd Radok's Prize⁹ for the role of Phaedra.

The reason for that success should be seen in Burešová's approach to Seneca's play. She did not intend to modernize or adapt the original text or its meaning in any way. In other words, she rejected the method of actualization and tried to be as faithful to the meaning of the play as possible¹⁰. This tendency resulted in several concepts employed in the performance: (1) rejection of the realism-game in depicting the plot and characters on the stage; (2) use of naturalism in the depicting; (3) influence of the director Ariane Mnouchkine.

The influence of Mnouchkine, the famous contemporary French stage director, can be traced in the whole concept of the performance as well as in the singular components. Burešová took inspiration e. g. from Mnouchkine's *Oresteia (Les Atrides)*¹¹, in which Mnouchkine applies the concept of language in the theatre presented by Meyerhold¹². According to his

⁹ It is an annual prize of Czech theatre critics awarded to the best theatre achievements (the best performance, male actor etc.)

¹⁰ I am aware of the fact that "fidelity to the original meaning" is rather a tricky expression. Burešová, in my opinion, tried to understand and consequently present on the stage the basic concepts inherent in the text of the play and to emphasize the qualities of the text by the scenic actions.

¹¹ See http://www.lebacausoleil.com/SPIP/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=16 for the pictures from the performance.

¹² Vsevolod Emilevich Meyerhold (1874-1940), Russian director, actor and producer.

theory¹³, language in the theatre is hardly more than the means of decorating the design and the movement. That is, words on the stage should serve other components (music, motion, etc.) of the performance rather than evoke some narrative and dramatic meaning on their own. Inadequate as the theory may seem when applied on a playwright such as Seneca, Burešová creates on its grounds the performance in which the words are not the most important component, as is usual with the performances of ancient drama as a whole. On the contrary, she employs the design, the costumes and especially the style of acting as the components similarly important for creating the meaning of the play as the words are.

Concerning the costumes and the style of acting, the inspiration by Mnouchkine leads Burešová to the non-western cultural tradition, especially to the tradition of the Asian theatre. The inspiration by the Asian ways of acting is clearly visible in the actions and movement of the chorus and stylized acting of the characters. As the choice of these particular devices is motivated by the pursuit of the unrealistic projection, the style of acting will be dealt with later. Costumes also remind us of Mnouchkine's *Oresteia* in the use of clear distinctive colours (e. g. red, white, gold), which characterize the persons (e. g. white Hippolytus is a virgin) as well as serve as symbols (e. g. red as a colour of love and blood). Another similar feature of the two performances is the masks used in both of them, covering only half of the

¹³ Braun, E. 1998: 347.

actor's face (Eumenides in *Oresteia*, Theseus in *Faidra*).

The non-western inspiration also appears in musical component of the performance. There are two sources of music in the performance: recording and the live music performed on the stage. The latter is produced in the non-western way by a non-western character – a dervish. Man in a long red dress with a wide skirt executes several functions in the performance. First, he delivers particular speeches, such as that of the Messenger or some parts of the chorus' songs. Second, he is the musician – he has several kinds of strange musical instruments at hand, such as a metal bowl, which produces high-pitched tones when struck on the edge by a wooden pestle, or a wooden tube, which produces the sound of rain when turned upside-down. These instruments create sounds strange to the ear of the European audience, which feels something unfamiliar and distant is happening on the stage. As a result, Burešová widens rather than narrows the gap between the text and the audience and does not strive to make the play actual in the temporal or spatial sense. However, by this approach its ideological and intellectual proximity appears crystal clear. Third, the dervish creates an ideological alter-ego to Phaedra herself. The whole performance ends with his whirling dance. The man starts turning around slowly and then quickens the pace until a rapid frenetic movement, his red skirt flying around his body while the lights slowly turn down. This state of ecstasy reminds us of Phaedra's mindless outbursts and the previous idea of passion ruling all human deeds seems to be confirmed by this final image.

As mentioned above, one of the basic concepts of Burešová's performance is the unrealistic projection of the plot and characters of Seneca's play. This strategy is, in fact, inherent to the text itself, because ancient theatre did not have anything similar to the 'realistic' or 'psychological' acting. The actions on the stage were depicted and perceived as imaginary and were thus performed in a stylized way. This is particularly true of Roman tragedy, which was extremely emotional and 'expressionistic' and was obviously performed as such.

Burešová adopts this strategy and instructs the actors to play in a highly stylized way to emphasize the emotional and pathetic character of Seneca's text. The way in which the actors deliver their speeches reveals the non-dramatic features of the play. There is not much dialogue, rather long lyrical monologues that are recited by the actors with a deep emotional empathy manifested by frequent changes in the melody and pitch of voice. Speech power is also used elaborately to express the changing emotions. Furthermore, the movement is carefully measured: each gesture has its particular meaning and the slowness, with which it is often executed, emphasizes the meaning.

The actions and speeches of the chorus are even more stylized than those of the characters. The four female members of the chorus are present on stage practically throughout the performance. Sometimes they are only silent observers of the actions performed by the characters. More often, though, they participate in one way or another in the action, either by movement

(e. g. rolling on the stage, performing strange dances) or by singular utterances (usually echo responses of single words accompanying choral parts delivered by the 'dervish'). They also recite several choral songs employing alternatively single- or multiple-recitation. The tone of their voice is by no means colloquial – it is rather high-stylish, pathetic and full of emotions. The same can be said about their movements, which do not seem to be influenced by any particular tradition (neither western nor eastern one).

This accentuated way of acting is highlighted by the similarly non-realistic stage design. There is only one object present on the stage: square transparent crystal in the center that can be lit with different-coloured lights. At the back of the stage, a high wall, which can also change colour, made of glass or transparent plastic is erected; drops of water reminiscent of tears appear on it at the end of the performance. Apart from this, the whole stage is empty and covered with black. The acting comes very much to the fore with such an indistinct and meaningless backdrop, which is exactly what Burešová intended. The changes of coloured lights, mirrored on the crystal and the wall, serve to depict and emphasize the exaggerated emotions presented in the scene.

The third concept of Burešová's *Faidra* to deal with is the extreme naturalism of the depiction and imagery of the performance. This feature is once again inherent in the text of the play, as Seneca's audience wished to see terrible deeds and shocking actions presented on the stage, or at least hear about them in

detail. Therefore, there are several scenes in the play, in which the naturalistic description of something terrible is presented. The most terrible of them all is the Messenger's speech reporting with surgical accuracy the process of Hippolytus' death. Burešová understands very well the impact of every word on the audience and does not support their meaning by anything else other than music (its presence or non-presence by contrast). On the other hand, she uses naturalistic way of depiction in other scenes, where there was originally no explicit violence or shocking effect. One of them is the scene in which Phaedra reveals her naked breast to Hippolytus in the last desperate attempt to gain his affection. Taking into consideration how close the audience is to the actress¹⁴, the impact of seeing a woman's naked breast for rather a long time is definitely powerful.

There is another set of scenes with a similarly powerful impact. These are connected with the motive of blood. In the first of these scenes, Theseus finds his son's sword in Phaedra's bedroom and is finally persuaded to believe it was Hippolytus who seduced her. In this moment, he grabs the sword and holds it strong in his hand. After a few seconds, his hand starts bleeding as if cut by the blade and the streams of his blood flow down the blade. Then the Messenger's speech comes and at the end of it, streams of blood flow down from Theseus' eyes once again. The motive of blood is thus amplified to bring many connotations and possible

¹⁴ The audience is sitting right on the stage having extremely close contact with the actors.

meanings. The climax is the scene in which the bloody parts of Hippolytus' body are brought together in a white cloth. Both Theseus and Phaedra dip their hands into the bloody mass and blur the blood over the glass objects on the scene. Again, the connotations brought by this action are extremely powerful in the context of the whole play.

Putting together the concept of naturalism with the realistic strategy, it seems Phaedra is definitely too passionate a heroine, at least for the contemporary Czech (European) audience, which is not used to seeing such strong emotions and *pathos* presented on stage. However, it is not a sufficient reason for expelling Seneca's *Phaedra* completely from playhouses. Burešová's performance proves the possibility of staging this play with success. She creates the convincing image of the situation, in which it is adequate to ask: *Shall the world hear of strange prodigies, shall nature's laws give way, whenever a Cretan woman loves?*¹⁵

¹⁵ *Natura totiens legibus cedet suis, quotiens amabit Cressa?* (Seneca, *Phaedra*: vv. 176-177).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Braun, E. (1998), *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*.
Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- (2007) 'Faidra', *The Database of Staging of Greek and Roman Drama on Czech Scenes*. [Online] Available:
<http://drama.olympos.cz/> [Accessed 22th June 2009]
- Lawall, G.; Kinkel, G.; Lawall, S. (1982), *Seneca. Phaedra*. Mundelein: Bolchazy-Carducci.
- McDonald, M.; Walton, J. M. (2007), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Theatre*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (5th Dec 2008) "The Performance of Faidra", *The Official Web Page of Divadlo v Dlouhé*. [Online]
Available: <http://www.divadlovdlouhe.cz/index.php?show=predstaveni&id=155> [Accessed 22th June 2009]
- (30th May 2005) "The Performance of *Les Atrides*", *The Official Web Page of Le Théâtre du Soleil*. [Online]
Available: http://www.lebacausoleil.com/SPIP/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=16 [Accessed 22th Jun 2009]