



The Reception of Ancient Drama Values by the modern audience: “Seven against Thebes”- Audience Research

Theodore Grammatas¹

¹ Emeritus Professor of Theatre Studies, Department of Primary Education, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

Abstract¹

This research aimed to examine not the dramatic text itself and the values and messages originated from it, but its rendition on stage as a composition of the artistic spectacle that is the performance, and therefore the spectator's reception of the transcribed values and messages conveyed by the stage rendition.

*The dramatic text indeed acquires meaning as a sight, not as a reading. Several creative and sociological criteria, as well as variables of other nature, such as directing, acting, scenography, music, visual framing, stage space, and time, must be considered for this to occur. These elements influence the way that the message is delivered to the audience. As a result, if we wish to examine the **Past of Values** in Ancient Greek Drama and Theater, we should consider both the values enshrined in the texts and how the spectator receives and perceives them.*

Keywords: Ancient Drama, Play, Theatrical Performance, Methodological

1. Selection of a Play for Analysis

The research team's initial concern was to find an appropriate play / theatrical performance that was sufficiently well-known and recognizable by general theatrical spectators, contained rich conceptual context and values, and has been well-received as an artistic rendition by both critics and audience. Furthermore, the performance had to be realized by a director who had a balanced approach in the rendition of ancient drama. Finally, the performance should be streamed on the internet, and the research team should obtain projection rights as well as access rights for the research participants.

The viewing of the performance was done online, at a time and place that was convenient for the participants, and not live, primarily due to the extreme conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic and the SARS-Cov-2 virus, but also to enable people from different parts of Greece to participate in the research and express their opinion since we were aiming to include a sample of adult individuals that was as representative as possible, with different demographic and cultural profiles.

Following our revised methodological approach, we listed the available theatrical performances. However, the majority of them had to be rejected for a variety of reasons, including the research team's inability to obtain projection rights, poor video recording quality, and numerous reservations about the director or actors in the play. The play *Seven against Thebes* by Aeschylus, directed by Cezaris Grauzinis and produced by the National Theater of Northern Greece in 2016/2017 was chosen since it matched all of the criteria. With the help of the Program's partners (VAST), we were able to obtain appropriate permission to show the play from the body that held the rights, it was then posted on the appropriate platform, and all screening conditions were prepared, in order to be presented to the spectators who would participate in the research.

2. Methodology and Structure of the Questionnaire

The second parameter of ancient Greek theater research (rendition analysis) had been decided to be investigated to make use of quantitative analysis. Our team of specialists prepared an audience questionnaire to provide an understanding of how modern spectators perceive a theatrical rendition of an ancient drama.

¹ This text is the product of a research conducted by the NKUA within the frame of the European program VAST – HORIZON 2020 “Values Across Space and Time” on “Ancient Drama Values-Past of the Values”

In light of the foregoing, the questionnaire to be distributed had to be sufficiently broad in terms of context and questions to allow respondents to express their opinions on issues relating to the text (drama), the performance (stage rendition), and the conditions of its reception (sociology) in general.

In order for this to be achieved, participants were invited to answer cognitive recall and recognition tests, and semi-structured interviews on different time periods.

The procedure was the following:

Ethics approvals:

Although an ethics approval is *not* required for these activities, the local Ethics Committee from VAST project, decided to inform all participants about the methodological protocol. To this end, before joining the survey, all participants were kindly asked to fill in an online consent form in the framework of which they were informed and agreed on the following:

The objectives of the research

The description of the research activity

The time needed

The voluntary character of their participation

The strategy followed (data protection, compensatory, data exploitation)

Following that and with the collaboration of specialists we prepared a questionnaire that consisted of three categories:

a. Multiple-Choice questions. For example:

How do you understand the importance, the symbolic connotations of the ladders the two brothers, Eteokles and Polynices use?

[You can give more than one answer]

Rise and fall of power

Changes in human life and happiness

The significance and bravery of the two Theban brothers, the sons of Oedipus

The rise and fall of the Theban Royal cycle

The arrogance and the ambition of the two Theban brothers

Other (specify) _____

b. Multiple questions of critical and comparative nature:

How do you judge the stage handling of the scene with the seven shields?

[More than one answer is possible]

Very original and performative; it enlivens the play's static and verbal action.

Too much and unnecessary for a tragic play in which the performativity of logos is paramount.

Superfluous, given the fact that the original text gives no instructions of this sort.

Original and Functional, because it introduces an ironic aura that intensifies the tragic situation.

Other: (Specify) _____

c. Open type questions where one can make a point and support it. For example:

If you have read the particular play of Aeschylus or if you have seen a stage production, how do you judge the director's work in this production?

d. Evaluation questions on a scale of 1-10:

What values, ethical, mental, political and social, are expressed by the heroes of the play; Evaluate on a scale of 1-10 (ten as excellent)

People's discipline and self-control are important assets in handling difficult political situations and crises

Parity and equality between men and women (gender equality)

Respect of gods and faith in their help as the ultimate salvation

Dialogue, as characteristic of democracy

The destructive consequences of power manipulation and ambition

Reason and dialogue are the means of solving differences

The value and uniqueness of human life

Respect of the personality of the other

Moderation as a way of life

Respect of the dead and the holistic right of burial

e. Question of a YES and NO answer:

In the performance you have watched do you believe that the director adequately projected the evils of war and the need for peace?

YES

NO

3. Preparation of the Content of the Questionnaires

The compiled and distributed questionnaire contained three distinct parts. The first was solely demographic as we were interested in detecting the participants' characteristics — educational level, age and gender, professional status, previous theatrical experience — and their relationship with ancient theatre. Men and women of different ages (average 42 years old) and professions (teachers, civil servants, postgraduate students, etc.), from different areas, with a high level of education (70,5%), mainly with a background in humanities (78,1%) (the majority were women, 76,2%), took part in the research. Moreover, they had different experiences in watching plays, but preferred Ancient Greek Drama, tragedy and comedy (67%), Contemporary Greek drama and international drama (79%).

The second was an examination of the play's content (dramaturgy). With relevant questions, we aimed to extract from the participants their essential understanding and interpretation of the play; namely, their perception on the values and messages included within, the actors (heroes) and dramatic situations, the manner in which the specific author delivers his values and messages, and the way in which ancient theater values were established in the past.

The third section was a representational analysis, which attempted to highlight the performance's unique morphological aspects, such as the performers' acting, the visual framework, the role of music and lighting, and, most importantly, the director's point of view. Through all these questions, the aim was to highlight the qualities of Ancient Drama as they were defined by the authors and presented to modern theatrical audiences through their rendition on stage.

4. Conducting the Research

The first phase of the survey started at the beginning of summer 2021 and was completed at the end of June 2021, and two more will follow: one after a period of 6 months and another after 12-18 months, in order to draw conclusions on whether the audience remembers and registers the basic values of the performance they watched. After the completion of the three phases of the research, the reception and registration of the values of the ancient Greek civilization by modern audiences will be detected.

In our effort to have a wide range of participants, we collaborated with scientists, statisticians, sociologists, psycho-educators, and theatrical professionals to specify numerous sociological criteria, such as coming from varied social, educational, and professional backgrounds, and being in various age groups. With their support, we defined the criteria based on which we should select spectators to watch the show and answer a relevant questionnaire that we would distribute to them. We contacted approximately 380 persons, using lists from NCSR-D (Democritus), the Athens Festival, postgraduate students at the NKUA (University of Athens), and other resources (such as professors) from past relevant research. We informed them about the purpose of this research and the use of its results for solely scientific objectives and sent them a consent form to acquire their written consent to participate in the study. We obtained a signed statement from 180 participants who saw the play and participated in the study by filling out the questions. We received 105 responses in the time allotted for them to watch the presentation and complete the questionnaire. The answers were sent to the scientists, collaborators, and members of our research team for processing and further analysis of the data (June 2021).

5. Collection and Analysis of Results

following this stage and right after watching the performance online, the participants filled in a questionnaire specially created for the theme and the aim of the project. The main purpose of completing the questionnaire was to record and analyze the participants' opinions regarding the performance they had watched. Initially, that is, to detect and evaluate the basic ideas and values of the play as they are given by the playwright in the text and (consequently), the way in which the audience interacted with these values through the performance. More specific aims were to investigate the perspective of the director regarding the actions of the protagonists of the performance, but also the opinions of the audience about the role that the codes of the performance play in conveying the messages of the play to a modern audience.

As evaluation criteria for the ancient drama performances they had watched, they mentioned that they mainly focus on the content of the play and the artistic contributors a play might have, while they also stated that the director and actors hold the biggest responsibility when the performance does not meet their expectations.

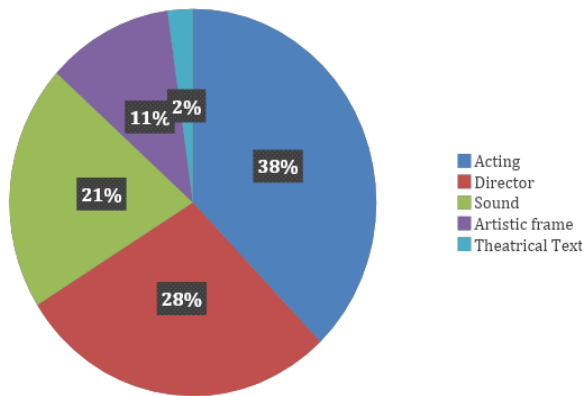


Figure 4: Diagram 1. Responsibility of the performance based on audience's expectations

Based on the results of the study, the Cezaris Grauzinis performance mainly received positive feedback by its audience who watched the performance online.

The director was considered to have supported the self-worth of the text well and to have balanced the poetry of the tragic verse and the transition of tragedy to modern times, thus enabling the viewer to grasp the basic ideas that Aeschylus expresses in his particular play: the

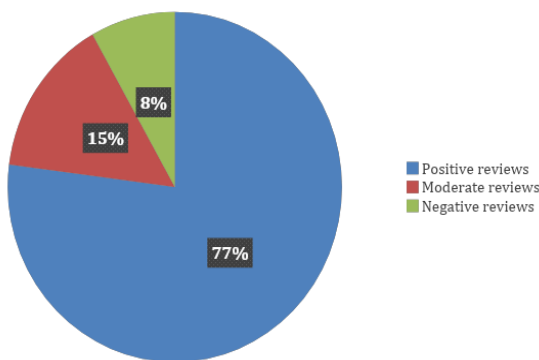


Figure 6: Audience's feedback on Cezaris Grauzinis performance

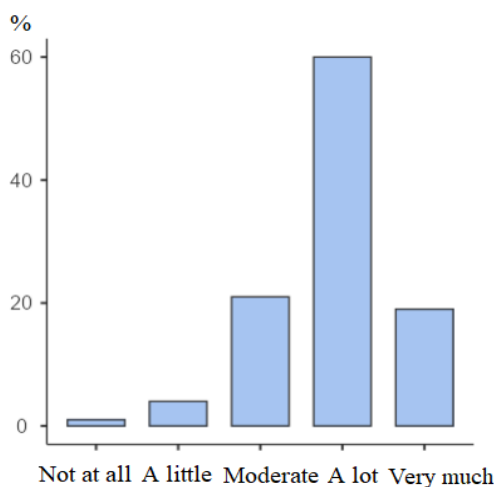


Figure 7: Tragedy as a means of the dominant projection of the divine will

a degrading way, placing the fatalistic approach of the women in contradistinction to the dynamic approach of men.

Generally, as the audience, the participants (as they stated) seem to have the tendency of thinking about what they have watched and discussing it with other people who watched the play. As for their interaction with the play *Seven against Thebes* by Aeschylus, opinions differ, as some people were more concerned with it and some people less.

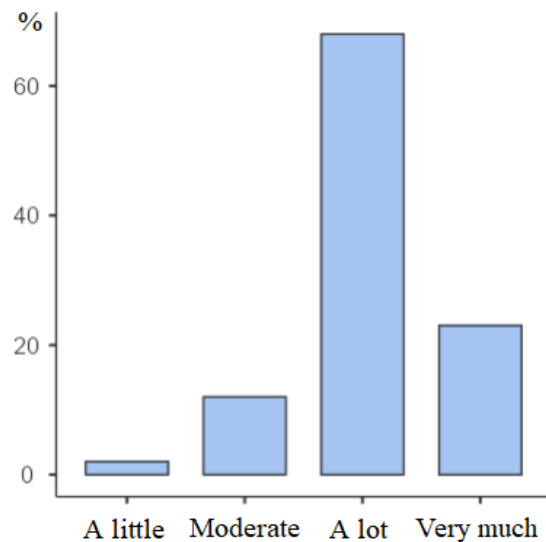


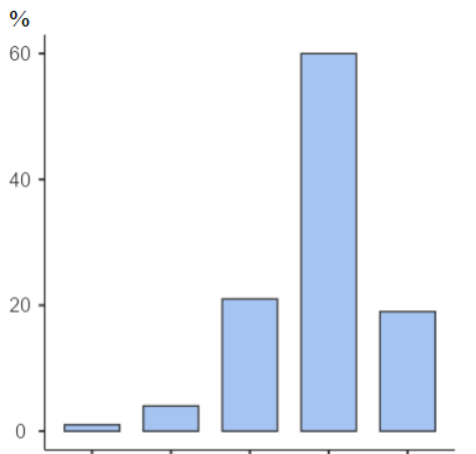
Figure 5: Diagram 2. Degree of highlighting the conceptual/value content of the Aeschylus text

dominance of divine will over human will, the values of ethical/mental and political/social content that are expressed by the characters of the play and in the dramatic text, such as the adversity created by a civil war, the value of human life and the need for reconciliation.

Other important values (for the audience) that the play brings out are respect for the dead, the common right to a burial, the catastrophic consequences of obsession with power and ambition, but also the advantage of self-restraint when dealing with difficult political situations and crises.

This specific direction of the play (always according to the answers of participants), respects the basic structure of the original text and presents the events that define the structural axes of Aeschylus' play. However, at the same time, it creates original compositions and stage settings, for example, with the use of a ladder and by placing seven shields on stage, a more complex interpretation of the Aeschylean meanings and values is achieved. For the audience, the use of a ladder in the beginning of the play, was an excellent symbol of the rise and fall of authority and the scene with the seven shields was considered original and functional, as it introduced an ironic and comic element that intensified the tragedy of the situation.

Based on the participants' answers, the way in which the director chooses to present the scenes of the performance in combination with the expression of the messages and values of the original text to a modern audience, is its special feature. The audience found that Eteocles treated women, their chorus and their reactions in



Not at all A little Moderate A lot Very much
Figure 8: Existence of contrast of the fatalistic approach of the women in contradistinction to the dynamic approach of the men

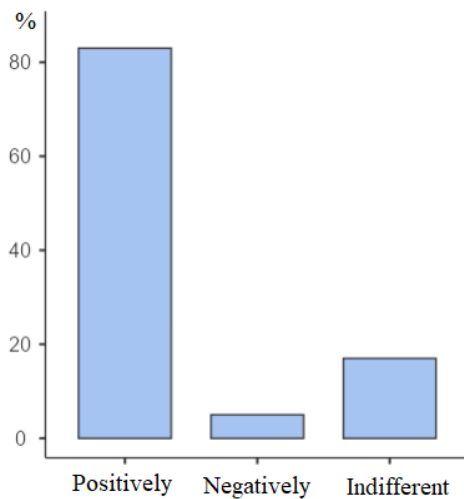


Figure 9: Opinions about the stage presence of Polynices

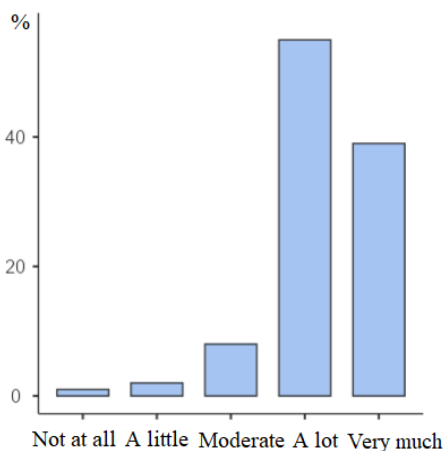


Figure 11: The dramatic text of Aeschylus as a carrier of values for the Greek and European citizen today

Furthermore, Eteocles addresses the chorus and says that these women should ‘*be quiet and stay at home*’, confirming that the silence of women is not just about their presence or absence of voice, but also about the opposition of the patriarchal society to the presence of women outside home. However, according to the answers given by the participants, through the direction and the performances of the actors, the unequal and biased relationship between the two genders was presented in a degrading way, a fact that reflects the urgent need for equality in modern society.

According to the reports given by the participants, even though there are no dialogues in the scene of the last confrontation between Eteocles and Polynices, the meanings of the tragedy are conveyed through the physical movement of actors. Violent embraces, people embracing and then freeing themselves in relief, till they reach their final union – death, draw the dynamic of the scenic image. The heroes die standing, in a strong embrace. The director chooses to convey the meanings of the tragedy, to emphasize on its timeless and global character by using a code of communication that is understood by everyone. Regarding Eteocles’ final decision to fight his brother Polynices, it was considered a necessary act by the audience, since the tragic destiny had to prevail, thus defining the hero’s acts as a combination of fatal command and free will. This feature is extremely interesting, since the relationship between the element of the divine and the human will is a prominent one in Aeschylus’ plays.

The on-stage activation of a mute Polynices and his conflict with Eteocles which is performed with physical movement, the stunning performance of the actors, the symbolisms, the direction and the use of music during the performance – according to the answers –

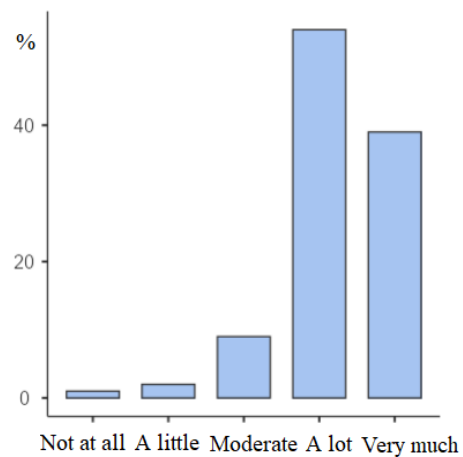


Figure 10: Music as a means of culminating the dramatic intensity

seem to have affected the dramatic tension and influenced the way messages and values of the dramatic text were conveyed.

Other visual/sound elements that the audience mentioned for their impact on the tragedy of the dramatic text, was the choice of both men and women as members of the chorus, and its general management, as well as the costumes and the set design.

Finally, the majority of the participants agreed that Aeschylus’ dramatic text, with the special and particular reading of the director, its stage modification and the use of all the stage codes, deals with values and presents issues that

concern Greek and European citizens of today; its content is timeless and universal, and does not ignore the similarities between the authoritarian language of the protagonists of the play and modern politicians.

There is a special reference to the semiotics of the direction of the last scene of the play, in which the chorus cannot walk and move on stage, while Antigone and Ismene leave, carrying the bodies of their two brothers and the audience understands that the chorus is trapped because of the choices and the actions of their leaders.



Figure 12: Adaptation of ancient texts to the present through the theatrical performance

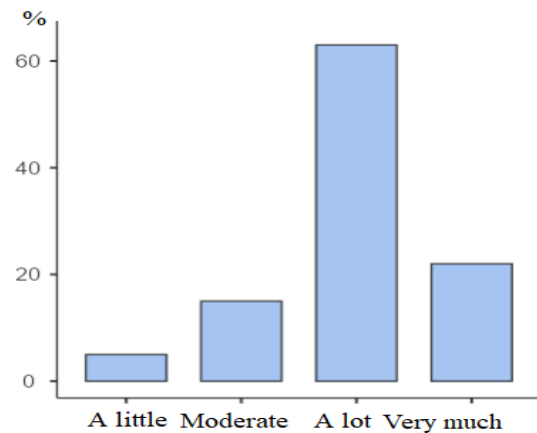


Figure 13: The theatrical performance as a trigger for reading

In conclusion, the responses show that the performance was successful in presenting the meaning/value archetype content of Aeschylus' play, it conveyed the values and messages that are present in it ('*Past of Values*') and created a need for the public to re-read the original text.

Conclusions

Our goal was to underline the presence of the Ancient Greek Drama values in a live performance and also measure the impact of the playwright's discourse following the intermediary role of the director and those involved in the production. At this level, the research showed that past values still maintained their meaning and value and were well received and comprehended by contemporary audiences.

For the completion of this research about the reception of these values and the way they function in the audience's consciousness, we still have to examine how this viewing experience has registered in the audience's memory. What do they still remember from the performance? To this end the same research with the same audience will be repeated six months later and a third time after 12-18 months so that by the end of the program there will be enough well supported evidence related to the past values and their present value.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101004949. This document reflects only the author's view and the European Commission is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.