Thoughts on Greek Tragedy

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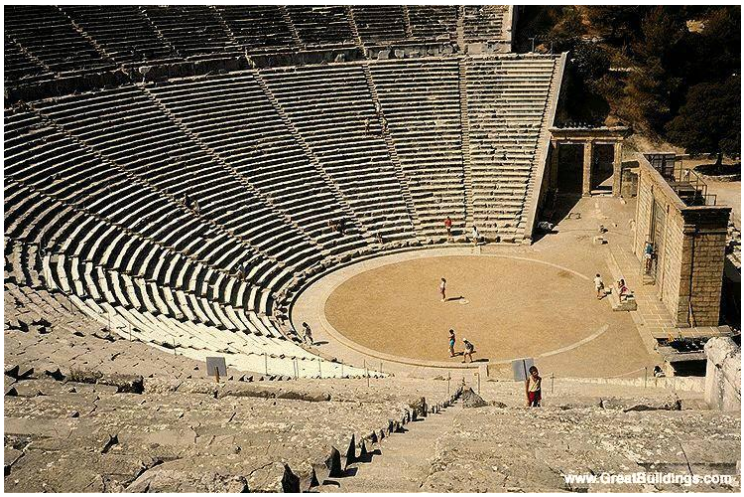
In 1872 the young Friedrich Nietzsche burst onto the German intellectual scene by publishing The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music. Others had speculated on the origins of ancient theater, starting with Aristotle in the fourth century B.C., but no one before Nietzsche had conceived of it as a "birth," and a metaphysical one at that.

For Nietzsche, Greek tragedy was the child of a strange marriage between characteristics of the Greek gods Apollo (associated with singing, poetry, and the arts) and Dionysus (god of wine, the "sap" of life released into its ecstatic and destructive potential). On one side was the Apollonian spirit of distinct individual existence, the egotistic "dream" that each of us (particularly me) uniquely matters. On the other side, we find the Dionysian "ground-swell of Being," the life force that cares nothing for the birth and death of individuals per se. The Dionysian reflects impersonal and irresistible forces that inevitably lead to individual oblivion.

Whatever we think of this heady mixture of philosophy and metaphor, Nietzsche helps us admire the ancient Athenians for inventing an art form that confronts unpleasant truths head on (here, of course, tragedy draws heavily on the Homeric poems, particularly the Iliad). Greek actors would play out such deadly myths as the Trojan War, the murders in the house of Atreus, Oedipus's self-inflicted blindness, Medea's slaughter of her children, and Pentheus' dismemberment by his mother. In doing so, they created a genre that has come down to us today. Not only do we continue to attend performances of

plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes, but many of our theatrical forms and devices also owe a direct debt to ancient drama.



The Greeks adopted Dionysus as the god of their theater, and tragic and comic performances took place at city-sponsored festivals held in his honor. The biggest festival, held at the City Dionysia, took place every spring in Athens, where large audiences gathered over several days. The theater of Dionysus lies on the south slope of the Acropolis, on whose heights rose Athens's most sacred temples. Open to the sky, and looking down over the southern part of town, the theater belonged fully to the political and social world of its audience—unlike our indoor theaters, which cut off the outside world.

The beginnings of Greek theater were associated with another radical invention of the ancient Athenians: democracy. Our first secure date for tragic performances at the City Dionysia comes shortly after the expulsion from Athens of the Pisistratids—a dynasty of tyrants who ruled the city in the sixth century B.C.—and the institution of democracy in 508/7 B.C.

The tragedies themselves are profoundly concerned with social with social and political problems. Even while dramatizing age-old myths, they raise important civic questions: What makes a good leader? Should citizens resist illegitimate authority? How can a society develop fair laws and administer justice equitably? How should society treat women, slaves (substitute "workers"), and immigrants? What can we learn from the excesses and failures of others?

For those interested in seeing Greek tragedy in an outdoor venue, keep your eyes out for Stanford Summer Theater's upcoming Electra Festival, which will include a professional production of Sophocles' great tragedy Electra, playing this coming summer on the Stanford Campus.

An actor, director, and professor of drama and of classics, Rush Rehm publishes in the areas of Greek tragedy and contemporary politics. Along with courses on ancient theater and culture, he teaches courses on contemporary politics, the media, and U.S. imperialism. He also directs and acts professionally, serving as Artistic Director of Stanford Summer Theater (SST), a professional theater that presents a dramatic festival, film series, and symposium based on a major playwright each summer. 2008 marks the tenth anniversary of SST, featuring a festival of plays by Brian Friel. An activist in the peace and justice movements, Rush is involved in anti-war and anti-imperialist actions, and in solidarity campaigns with Palestine, Cuba, East Timor, and Central America.

His courses include "Antigone: From Ancient Democracy to Contemporary Dissent," "Performance and Politics," and a seminar titled "Noam Chomsky: The Drama of Resistance," which presents information and analysis to encourage action and activism. For Stanford Summer Theater 2003 Festival, he directed Amy Freed's adaptation of Aristophanes' "Lysistrata," the classic anti-war comedy in which the women stage a sex strike to stop their men from waging war.