

# Transformation in Action:

## Transformation through Theatre

Fabio Tolledi<sup>1</sup>

In the cultural tradition of the West, tragedy has been considered as an absolute point of reference, so to become incontrovertibly one of the founding ‘topics’ of culture. Human suffering was poignantly taken up by the Greek dramatists, especially by Sophocles and Aeschylus who immortalized through their illustrious dramas. It was Aeschylus who introduced more reforms into Greek theatre and established drama as a performance that moved the spectators. His *Agamemnon*, the *Eumenides*, *Prometheus Bound* were all indeed spectacular plays though he was defeated by the master tragedy dramatist named Sophocles. It seems that 96 of Sophocles plays out of 123 won first prizes among which are the illustrious *Antigone*, ‘*Oedipus Rex*’ etc. Aristotle the philosopher, was a n admirer of *Oedipus Rex* and wrote *Poetics* in order to explain the dynamics and influence of tragedy on human mind and culture by arousing an emotional surcharge and thus capable of healing known as catharsis. This performing art is now rediscovered to contextualize war, separation, fear, anxiety and other emotional experiences and thus to heal and make aware about people, cultures on the futility of war, conflict, that are plaguing many parts of our own world even in the twenty first century.

It is through the intuitions of Vernant and Vidal-Naquet<sup>2</sup>, to highlight the complex universe turning round tragedy, considered as an integrated system that even in the organization of the space of theatre included inseparably the acropolis, the agora, the temple and the theatre. For them, theatre is not a ‘domestic’ place of performance, setting apart that the naturalistic context;

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<sup>2</sup> VERNANT JEAN-PIERRE, VIDAL-NAQUET PIERRE, *Mito e tragedia, due. Da Edipo a Dioniso*, Einaudi, Torino 2001

it is not the emblem of the interior of a bourgeois house or the multilayered condominium of the United States scene of the XXth century. Tragedy is the place where *polis* and *techne* were connected giving a sense to community.



Astràgali Teatro is a theatre group that was established in 1981 in Lecce, in Italy. Since 1992 it is directed by Fabio Tolledi. Astràgali Teatro is recognised by the Italian Ministry of Culture as an innovation theatre company. It is founding member of the Italian Centre of the International Theatre Institute of UNESCO. It is also a member of Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures and of European Cultural Foundation. Since its founding, Astràgali Teatro has been working all over Europe and the Mediterranean area implementing international projects (among the many, it was Leader of 8 projects supported by the European Union “Culture Programme”. The last one *WALLS- Separate worlds* is of recent approval) with artists, theatres, universities in Greece, Cyprus, Turkey, Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Albania, Kosovo, France, Belgium, Great Britain, Spain. Its actions aim to practice the possibility of a multi-language theatre, emerging from the encounter of different languages and experiences, standing against the idea of frontier and separation as principles of conflict. A possible place of meeting of thoughts, and, on the theatrical side, the never tired challenge of life

in theatre, a challenge that lead Astràgali to visit theatrically, and practically as pioneers, some of the most fascinating or obsolete or forgotten architectonic and natural places in Italy and to open to a syncretic practice of cultural exchanges and crossings, above all in the Mediterranean countries.

The theatre group, does not work on productions alone as normally other European companies do. The group team is engaged in a daily work of artistic training and we also work on the organizational level such as on the design and, of course, implementation of international projects. So the theatre life in the group is very much shared and the theoretical research runs parallel to the practical one. They are really inextricably intertwined. The group started working on ancient tragedy in 2001 with 'Antigone'. This came out as a necessity, as the context of the theatre group is Mediterranean and live in an area which is so marked by the conflicts. In work, the group do not use to make only tournée of performances, but together with performances they make other activities, workshops, artistic residencies that enable the cast and the theater group can create a closer relationships with people and artists. For the first time the group worked in Cyprus, where they had the striking experience of performing Antigone and could very well come to encounter the first hand experience of war and its destruction and how it affects people's psyche and culture. It is the story of all wars and armed conflicts which is tragically experienced by many regions of the world even today. The work on tragedy is indeed related to conflict, and to the resistance of beauty and of bodies. This was strictly intertwined with the possibility of transformation that has to go first through the body of the performer as a pre-condition for a wider 'transformation'. Furthermore Fabio Tolledi , the director of the drama, has been working at University of Salento since long, carrying out a research on 'trans' in 'popular traditions' and in relation to the actors and actress' experiences.



The scenes presented here are from **PERSAE** a multi lingual drama, adapted from *The Persians* by Aeschylus and *Four hours in Chatila* by Jean Genet. It is produced in 2008 and enacted all over Europe. It is written and directed by Fabio Tolledi, assisted by Ivano Gorgoni. The cast are Gaetano Fidanza, Lenia Gadaleta, Francis Léonési, Iula Marzulli, Eleonice Mastria, Manuela Mastria, Antonio Palumbo, Roberta Quarta, Fatima Sai, and Serena Stifani.

The subject of the tragedy *Persians* by Aeschylus (472 b.C.), is a historical event- the defeat of the Persians by the Greek coalition, in Salamis. Two fronts, two armies standing the one against the other as usual in any conflict and war. Aeschylus chooses to tell the story from the defeated side, assuming the point of view of the defeated. The assumption of the "defeated sight" allows the confrontation with the otherness- not exclusively with an enemy otherness.



The bodies of the Persians, defeated, slaughtered in the sea, all lost. "Persae", persi, perdus, means lost. "Persae", the performance, is a reflection on conflict as a principle of destruction, on frontiers as principles of separation of the individuals, on migration. It also means migrant people that cross frontiers to escape from war, from poverty, migrant bodies getting lost in the sea/frontier, and it will really evoke the recent tragedy of the hundreds of people who lost their lives recently in their migration from Africa to the West in the Mediterranean sea. "Persae" melts different languages and sounds, Italian, Cypriot, Greek, French, Albanian, Maltese, Arabic, choosing the way of syncretism, of multiplicity, of poetical diversity realised and experienced

through the encounter. The objective of this work is to elaborate a meridian perspective, which, aware of the complexity of dynamics, could enhance the great syncretic potentiality, allowing combinations and contaminations.

The performance during the years saw the participation, together with the Italian theatre group of Astràgali Teatro, of actors and actresses from Syria, Jordan, Cyprus, Albania, France, Greece, Malta, participating to the work in progress of Astràgali Teatro on the creation of a nomadic international theatre company. “Persae” was performed in Athens, Zakynthos (Greece), Paris (France), Nicosia (Cyprus). It participated to the International Festival of Ancient Greek Drama in Ancient Odeon, Paphos, Curium Ancient Theatre, Limassol, Makarios III Amphitheatre, Nicosia (Cyprus), to the International Festival of Ramallah (Palestinian Occupied Territories-West Bank), to the International Festival of Erbil (Iraq) with a site-specific performance at the Ancient Citadelle. It was performed in many relevant Italian theatres, cultural and natural sites and in Festivals evoking popular response in a striking way transforming their consciousness on conflicts and wars.

<http://www.astragali.org/meeting&id=212>