

“Oedipus Aiee’s: The Use of Ancient Greek on the American Stage”

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***Oedipus’ Aiee’s: Using Ancient Greek on the American Stage***

May 19, 2004, I had the rare experience of watching opening night of a play for which I had been the vocal director and being so proud of having been one small part of the production, I wept. The play was *Oedipus*, directed by Robert Woodruff for the American Repertory Theater at Harvard University.<sup>1</sup>

Well before rehearsals started, I began to hear what the project would entail. The vocal elements seemed daunting. Robert Woodruff had chosen Stephen Berg’s highly poetic translation.<sup>2</sup> Evan Ziporyn, Head of Music and Theater Arts at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was composing an eight-part operatic sung chorus and musical underscoring for the spoken text to be played by an electronically amplified band. The Loeb Drama Center Mainstage was to be

stripped to bare concrete walls. Segments of the text, as well as all the choruses, were to be in Greek—Ancient Greek.

Since I do not read Greek, understand Greek, nor speak Greek, I wanted to prepare as much as possible before rehearsals began. But director Robert Woodruff wanted to read the play with the actors before he made any decisions about the Greek. This way, he could discover, as he heard the text, which sections would be most powerful spoken in an ancient tongue. The cast began probing the play on April 7<sup>th</sup>. For a week, they read, re-read, discussed, and experimented, often comparing Berg's poetry with Hugh Lloyd-Jones' more literal translation,<sup>3</sup> and occasionally with Sophocles' words themselves. A lean and muscular cut version emerged.

Robert then chose several lines of the Priest's opening plea to Oedipus to save Thebes. He asked me to teach this section to all the actors. He wanted to know what the Greek would actually sound like. He also wanted to give the actors a chance to wrap their mouths around these strange sounds before delving into the lines in their own roles that would be spoken in Greek. The result was not a complete success. I transcribed the text from the Greek into the International Phonetic Alphabet by listening to our dramaturg Gideon Lester (who had learned Ancient Greek as a student at Oxford) read the lines. I attempted to make a phonemic version for the actors. As we struggled to speak the lines as a group, provocative questions arose. What is the rhythm of Ancient Greek? All of us instinctively wanted to make each line iambic pentameter. What are commonly agreed upon pronunciations of sounds? Since the language has been "dead" for centuries, no one actually knows how it sounded. How can one act while concentrating on making such unusual mouth shapes? This first pass at the text was a good test for me. How do I learn the Greek? How do I best transcribe it for the actors to learn it? How am I going to accommodate the learning styles of each actor? How do I teach it with inflection and rhythm to inform meaning and, therefore, action?

The composition of the choral music had begun by this point. Previously, Evan Ziporyn had recorded Harvard classics professor William Allan reading the choruses in his version of Ancient Greek. Evan used fragments of the Greek that appealed to him, often not in the order of Sophocles' words, often only parts of words. He was interested in the essence of the text and the sounds that reverberated with him as he wrote. He wove these fragments into a dense, canonical musical structure for eight voices. As Evan was composing, he transcribed the sounds he had heard on Professor Allan's recording, creating a lexicon of his own that best described to him what he had heard. This transcription was printed onto the score.

By the second week of rehearsal, director Woodruff and the cast had made preliminary choices of which lines were to be in Greek. In addition to the fragmented choruses, five sections were identified. They had decided on a section of the Priest's complaint to Oedipus about the devastation of the plague on Thebes, Teresias' final curse upon Oedipus, Jocasta's denial of the importance of dreams, the Messenger's crucial revelation regarding Oedipus' birth, and Oedipus' climactic aria after he has blinded himself.

Now my preparation began in earnest. With the help of assistant director Bryan Doerries, a classics scholar himself, I identified exactly which lines in Sophocles' text were to be spoken in Greek. This was difficult because Berg had translated very loosely, often so poetically there was little comparison to the original. Using Lloyd-Jones' verse, we were able to determine exactly which of Sophocles' lines were meant by Berg. For example, in the Berg version, Jocasta says, "See your dreams for what they are—nothing, nothing at all."<sup>4</sup> Lloyd-Jones translated the same line, "It is he to whom such things are nothing who puts up with life the best."<sup>5</sup> It took the assistance of someone who could actually read the symbols of Ancient Greek

αλλα ταυθ οτω παρ ουδεν εστι ραστα τον βιον φερει  
 a la / 'tauθ / ho 'to / par / 'u dɛn / 'ɛs ti / 'ras ta / ton / 'bi ɒn / fe 'rei<sup>6</sup>

to identify "nothing" as the only word common to both translations.

We approached the choruses in a similar way. By sounding out Evan's lexicon, we were able to locate each partial word or phrase in Sophocles' Greek. We then compared Berg and Lloyd-Jones to get a rough translation of the fragments. In order to convey the sense of the text to the singers, we often included longer phrases. Again, without the assistance of someone who could decipher the symbols of Ancient Greek, this task would have been impossible.

With my newly underlined original Sophocles Greek text in hand (not the translation), I made more recordings of Professor Allan speaking Ancient Greek. For the actors, he read once at normal speech rate for the natural poetic rhythm (which was quite syncopated and not at all the iambic pentameter we longed for it to be), and a second time at a much slower rate for individual word pronunciation. What made this doubly interesting was Professor Allan's beautiful, rich, and quite heavy, Scottish accent. We made a similar recording for the chorus: again, Professor Allan spoke the identified fragments both quickly and slowly. The pulse was not as critical as pronunciation in this version because the music as written would dictate the rhythm. I also recorded him saying all the proper names in the text (characters, gods, locations), many of which we eventually had to Americanize for better recognition. Each of the actors and chorus members received a CD of these recordings.

I listened extremely carefully to the recording of the actors' lines, transcribing it sound by sound into the IPA. I paid particular attention to the complexity of the rhythm and to the sense of phrasing that Professor Allan brought to the text. Assistant vocal director Michael Cobb did the same for the chorus fragments. Michael and I then met with Bryan to double-check our work. We spoke aloud all the sounds we had transcribed noting any errors (for example, where we had heard a [θ] that was actually a [f]). We also adjusted sounds affected by Professor Allan's Scottish accent. We discovered that what we had often heard as one word on the tape was actually several small words elided together which helped our understanding of the rhythm. We also realized that Evan had had some of the same difficulties that we had hearing sounds correctly from Professor Allan's recording.

Michael created a guide for the chorus members. This included Evan’s transliteration of each sound, the IPA transcription (which, as opera singers, most of them could read), a non-IPA phonetic transcription (with a pronunciation key), the Berg translation of each fragment, and the Lloyd-Jones translation:

EVAN: Zdeus haduepes / Fati pote tas polucrusu  
 IPA: 'zde us / ha 'du ε pɛz / 'fa ti / 'pɒ te tas / pɒ lu 'χru su  
 PHON: ZDAY oos / hah DOO eh pehz // FAH tee / PAW tay tahs / paw loo HKROO soo  
 SB: Voice, voice, voice, voice who knows everything, o god glorious voice of Zeus ...  
 bathed in gold<sup>7</sup>  
 HLJ: Sweet speaking message of Zeus, what are you ... rich in gold<sup>8</sup>

I made a personalized guide for each of the actors. I included a basic IPA transcription, a non-IPA phonetic version and, with dramaturg Gideon Lester’s help, a simplified translation.

Iocaste:	ee OO ee OO	doo STAY neh	TOO toe GAR
	i 'u i 'u	du 'ste nɛ	'tu to 'gar
	ahhh ahhh	wretched one	for that is all
	say OOHKH	MOH nohn	prohs ay PAYN
	se 'uχ	'mɒ nɒn	prɒs e 'pen
	I	can	say to you
	AH loh	DOO poh <u>th</u>	oo DAYN
	'ɑ lo	'du pɒ <u>t</u>	u 'den
	and	nothing	more <sup>9</sup>

We finished these guides by the end of the second week of rehearsal.

As I began individual sessions with the actors, I found that each had a unique way of learning the sequence of sounds. Michael Potts (Messenger) could easily read the IPA and so learned the sounds through visual cues. Stephanie Roth-Haberle (Jocasta) learned by ear. Novella Nelson (Teresias) processed slowly and deeply in an emotionally connected way, pressing me for a more specific word-for-word translation so that she could track the inner journey of the character. Tommy Derrah (Chorus Leader) found that if he created a story from homonyms, he could remember the order of the syllables. For example, ['mɛ las / 'dhai des] (Black Hades) became “mail us die days,” with a story behind it to remember the sequence. John Campion (Oedipus) carefully transcribed each syllable into a personal phonemic version. This provided him a visual stimulus. At this point, each of the actors received another recording from me: my voice, clarifying both rhythm and pronunciation. We continued our individual sessions with careful drill and repetition. We decided, in great good humor, that Ancient Greek sounds a lot like Klingon (the guttural language created for Star Trek).

Rather than have the actors struggle to remember the Greek sounds during staging and acting rehearsals, Robert Woodruff wisely asked them to use the English text until they were confident

enough to use the Greek. They could thus focus on specificity of action in the moment without the distraction of the seemingly random combination of syllables they eventually would speak.

Then Michael and I sat down with choral director Pam Murray. We reviewed Michael's pronunciation guide, speaking out loud each fragment so that she could incorporate the correct pronunciations into choral rehearsals. But these rehearsals were progressing slowly. Not only was the music complex, dense, atonal, and canonic, the singers were using the sound fragments without a sense of meaning or story, i.e. how each particular chorus fit into the moment of action. In addition, there had been transcription errors throughout Evan's original printed score that needed to be corrected sound by sound. Michael's document was invaluable. But the struggle to learn the music itself of necessity prevailed over correct pronunciation and connection to text.

It was now glaringly clear to me that I needed to provide an exact word-for-word literal translation of the segments of Greek text that we were using, not just the poetic version. Both actors and chorus members had to be able to THINK in Greek; it wasn't good enough simply to speak with the correct sound and rhythm. I appealed to Gideon and Bryan (dramaturg and assistant director). We delved more deeply into the structure of the language. As the grammatical form emerged, we dubbed it "Yoda speaking Klingon." Some wonderful words and rhetorical structures were revealed. For example, when Teresias begins to lay out the truth to Oedipus, the words are ['kzɛ nɒs / lo 'go / mɛ 'tɔi kɒs], literally, "a stranger, words are, he is," and poetically, "now people think he comes from Corinth."<sup>10</sup> Novella was thrilled when we found that the word [tʰɛ 'bai nɒs] at the end of the next phrase meant "Theban." She could now drive home the antithesis: Oedipus would be [fa 'nes ɛ tai / tʰɛ 'bai nɒs] (revealed as a Theban), instead of being "spoken of as a stranger." Her emphasis could now organically fall on ['kzɛ nɒs] (stranger) and its opposite, [tʰɛ 'bai nɒs] (Theban). Also, with the help of Bryan, words like [hɒ 'mɒ spɛ 'rɒs] in the same speech took on a deeper meaning. Berg translates this as "the lover who slept with his father's wife,"<sup>11</sup> Lloyd-Jones as "a sharer in his wife."<sup>12</sup> The ancient meaning is literally "same seed" or "sown together." So when Teresias spells out the discoveries to come, [kai 'tu / 'pa trɒs / hɒ 'mɒ spɛ 'rɒs], she could feel the words, "and to his father, the SAME SEED," as more elemental and primal than any English translation could be.

Individual sessions now included language structure and word meanings. Since several sections were two-person scenes, I also needed to drill cues by syllable so the actors could recognize the Greek sounds in order to respond as if they understood the language. I rehearsed with Michael and John (Messenger and Oedipus) and Tommy and John (Chorus Leader and Oedipus) together so they could learn what their fellow actor was actually saying as well as what it sounded like in Greek. In this way, we began to build the acting back into the scene with the sounds of the Greek as action.

Then the exciting day arrived for the actors to use Greek in rehearsal. Although memorization and pronunciation were sometimes rough, the effect was thrilling. Everyone in the rehearsal hall

could sense how visceral and dynamic this ancient language could be. Once the word-for-word translations were being utilized, this odd sequence of sounds freed the actors from their various typical vocal habits. Voice came from the center of the body. Actors used wider pitch range. This language seemed to provide more emotional depth than either English translation.

The play began to take shape. The band (cello, bass, keyboard, and percussion) joined rehearsal. The aural landscape developed with musical underscoring of the text, often the Greek sections. Each actor and chorus member was assigned a personally designated microphone. With all the instruments and voices amplified and mixed, my new task was keeping the Greek text precise and meaningful.

The work with the chorus intensified. Although the singers were still struggling with the complexity of the music, choreography became the focus of rehearsal. Whenever the opportunity for a non-movement rehearsal arose, I listened for discrepancies in pronunciation. Sometimes a singer had learned a phrase incorrectly; sometimes technique got in the way of pronunciation. We agreed upon adjustments when a singer needed to reshape a vowel in order to hit a particular note. I also now stressed the specific word meanings of each phrase, as well as the function of the text in each of choral pieces.

Four weeks into rehearsal, I Nyoman Catra, a Balinese master singer/dancer, joined the chorus. I was handed the Berg lines that Catra was to sing. By this time, my word meaning and symbol recognition had developed enough so that I could find the Greek lines in Sophocles that corresponded to Berg's poetry. Once identified, Professor Allan recorded them. I transcribed the pronunciations and added both translations to a document. Michael and I created tapes from that material for Catra. He learned the pronunciation completely by ear and incorporated the meaning of the text into the movement sequences he created in his Balinese dance.

After five weeks, rehearsals moved from the church basement in which we had been working to the Loeb Drama Center theater. I continued to help the actors fine tune pronunciation of the Greek text, but by now they were speaking the language as if it were their own. The scenes were alive with nuance, the personalization of thought and action well on its way.

A new challenge arose with the chorus. Even with individual microphones, the sung text was getting lost on the big open ART stage. Because these singers were highly skilled operatic performers, they were treating the electronic amplification of their voices as if they were in a recording studio. They used subtle consonants, very little lip movement, and soft endings on words. I needed to convince the singers how critical it was for them to really open their mouths, use dynamic consonants, and strongly finish each word and each phrase. Not only that, I knew that the audience would want to know WHO is singing what phrase. With voices coming only through speakers, the only way to perceive this was through motion in mouth and body. I encouraged each singer to start each phrase with a physical shift and end each phrase with dynamic use of articulators.

Since I had been living with the Greek for six weeks now, I could hear that the singers were not yet using the sounds with meaning. Their major focus was making the choreography and score work together in the new space. I asked Robert if I could offer suggestions to bring more specificity to the choral work. He supported my offer with a new focus on the acting of the singers. I helped them understand phrase by phrase what they were doing (pleading to the gods for help, celebrating Oedipus' past, deluding themselves, waiting for the worst, etc.); he helped them bring out their personal connection to each moment. As the personality of each singer emerged, the chorus changed from an anonymous cluster to a group of individuals with specific reactions to the events on stage.

A large screen on the bare back wall of the stage displayed the English translation whenever Greek was spoken or sung. The problem with these super-titles was twofold. First, the stage manager had to know exactly when to call the cue for each title. I went over the Greek with him line by line to help him identify exactly which sound would be the correct one to bring up the next title. The second problem emerged when the spoken Greek line itself was significantly shorter than the Berg translation used for the super title. Whenever this happened, either the actors would have to pause to create enough time for the audience to actually read translation, or the super-title would have to switch too quickly to read in order to keep pace with the actors. My closeness to the literal translation helped our dramaturg trim the Berg line to match the pulse of the spoken Greek. For example, the Messenger says to Oedipus, [ 'lu / o / se 'χpn ta / di 'a tɔ rus / po 'doin / 'ak mas]. The Berg translation reads, "I cut you free. Your feet were pierced, tied together at the ankles with leather thongs strung between the tendon and the bone."<sup>13</sup> The literal translation, "I loosened you, possessing pierced feet at the points," was rhythmically closer, but would have been difficult for an audience member to comprehend. The solution, "I cut you free. Your feet were pierced and tied together," fit rhythmically AND poetically.

The balance of the aural landscape now became the focus. Vocal volume was to be controlled by the sound operator once the relative levels were set. As a team, Pamela Murray (choral director), David Remedios (sound designer), and I would listen and discuss best solutions for the aural relationships between singers, between singers and band, band and actors, and actor to actor. These discussions were often lively as Robert Woodruff, composer Evan Ziporyn, and the "sound" team sometimes had very different and often conflicting ideas. Levels were tweaked and even microphones changed to bring out the aggressive aural dynamic that Woodruff sought.

And then came opening night. I was as nervous as if I was on stage myself. In the audience were Greek dignitaries, both religious and political, representatives from the various Greek foundations funding the performance, Harvard classics scholars, as well as the usual number of critics and reviewers. I felt that my work was really on the line.

Tommy Derrah (Priest/Chorus Leader) spoke the first Greek words of the performance. He slipped easily into his Greek text, the intensity of his plea to Oedipus heightened by the visceral nature of his sound use. The chorus called for help from the gods in the Parados. Each chorus

member brought a framed photograph downstage making a contemporary style shrine to the Theban dead. The super-titles told the story, but soon became extraneous as the singers acted the text. When the soprano voice soared above the rest in a longing arc on the word ['el pi: dos] (hope), we ached with her.

When Novella Nelson (Teresias) began her prophecy, the effect of the Greek was stunning. She had internalized the sounds deeply. The ancient words came out as a trance-like curse. Her voice dropped to the bottom of her range or curled high into the upper reaches. She lengthened vowels, some words approaching a musical note, and gutturalized the consonants. When she spat out the last sounds [fas 'ke na / me / dei / 'man ti ke / 'me den / fro 'nen]<sup>14</sup>, her challenge to Oedipus, “allege my prophecy has no wisdom,” was chilling. The chorus, in response to Teresias’ words, used a Middle Eastern ululating sound with foreboding dissonant harmonies on extended vowels. They then pleaded with Oedipus not to harm Kreon, the Greek sounds punctuating their fear.

After Jocasta and Oedipus learn more about the murder of Laios, yet still have not put the whole picture together, Jocasta begs Oedipus to stop the inquiry. Oedipus and Jocasta moved upstage and Catra began his lament. His mournful, cracked voice in Indonesian-accented Greek over a deep legato bass line complemented his ritualized dance. When he came to the word “hubris,” his physical gesture with this word told us everything. Behind Catra, against the back wall of the bare stage, in opposition to his sorrowful sounds, we watched Jocasta reach out to Oedipus with longing, saw Oedipus roughly take her sexually, and then discard her as he storms away.

The next Greek we heard was Jocasta’s (Stephanie Roth-Haberle). She has unraveled. In a wild champagne-soaked celebration at the news of the death of Polybos (Oedipus’ supposed father), she told the audience that dreams of sleeping with one’s mother mean nothing. Her use of these words was guttural and desperate. The Messenger (Michael Potts) arrived. The fifteen-line interchange between Oedipus and the Messenger revealed the pith of the mystery. John and Michael used the rapid-fire rhythm of the stichomythia as if the language were their own. They moved upstage, and drumbeats filled the theater until we could no longer hear the words. The super-titles took over communication of text while we watched Jocasta’s disintegration in response to the horrific new information. When her knowledge drives her to her death, Stephanie crawled upstage on her hands and knees, repeating over and over in an agonized hoarse whisper the one word [du 'ste: ne]. The sounds of the English word, “wretched,” would not have had the same profound reverberations as the Greek.

The Chorus triumphantly sang of Oedipus’ birth: they assumed he must be the son of a god. The repetition of gods’ names built to an abruptly ended orgiastic climax. When they finally know the truth, their music disintegrated into a spare canon of repeated syllables ['poŋ / ai / pa 'tro // ai / 'sa lo keZ / fe 'rein / ta 'las]<sup>15</sup> (“how could your father’s furrowed field bear it”), breaking down to just the syllables [sa sa sa sa lo lo lo lo fe fe fe fe rein rein rein rein], and then to nonsense syllables as their fears are fulfilled.

After the Servant recounted the death of Jocasta and Oedipus' self-blinding, we heard [ai 'i: ai 'i:] in a piercing cry from behind an upstage right curtain. It pulled back to expose Oedipus facing away from us into a mirror, eyes gone, face, hands and body drenched in blood. John Champion's voice now revealed every color imaginable. As he spoke in Greek, his sadness, rage, self-hatred, self-disgust, pleading, were fully expressed, expanding vocally far beyond how we had heard him use English. ("How else to speak this text?" I thought. "How else to experience and express everything that Oedipus must.") When he arrived at the lines ['e / dɛ / 'ti / prɛs 'bu: tɛ 'rɒn / e ti / kɑ 'ku: / kɑ 'kɒ:n // tut / e 'lɑ:χ / 'ɔi di 'pu:s]<sup>16</sup> (literally, "and if there is greater than evil evil, that's the lot of Oedipus"), his utter despair was transmitted to us from his darkest parts through the muscularity of his consonants and the shapes of his vowels. I had heard nothing like this from him before: sometimes soft, sometimes rough, sometimes high, sometimes rumbling in the belly, but always an open channel to the center of his soul.

One more word in Greek was left for us to hear. After everyone had deserted him (the Chorus Leader, Kreon, his daughters), Oedipus was left entirely alone on the stage in absolute silence for what seemed eternity. Then all of a sudden, we heard the extended cry ['pɑ: tɛə]. Before the word had ended, the enormous bright yellow curtain surrounding Oedipus dropped to reveal Antigone (fourteen-year-old Eliza Rose Fichter), suitcases in hand. The longing, despair and rebellion in her voice bounced off the bare walls of the stage and shocked us into thinking of the future in store for this child and her father. Oedipus turned to her. Lights out.

The moment of dead silence that followed was a director's dream. The richness of sound, the visual starkness, and the intense, unrelenting progression of the story had mesmerized us for ninety minutes. Then deep heartfelt applause arose, which became a standing ovation. I was, by now, weeping.

The reviews came out praising the power of the production. The use of Ancient Greek was mentioned as one factor that made it such a moving theatrical experience. The native Greeks in the audience were thrilled to see their cultural heritage so richly portrayed, and to hear their language spoken on the American stage. Professor Allan was delighted that his help had meant so much to the theater. The actors and singers gained enormous vocal freedom from the wonderful, alien sounds they fully embodied. Approaching such a difficult text with this huge challenge only enhanced the audience's appreciation of the power of Greek drama. It was a difficult journey for me, and for every member of the collaborative process, but one that revealed that great vocal sound is the primal and fundamental element of great theater.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Oedipus* by Sophocles, translation by Stephen Berg & Diskin Clay, directed by Robert Woodruff at the American Repertory Theater, Harvard University, May 15 - June 13, 2004. For further information about this production please go to [www.amrep.org](http://www.amrep.org).

<sup>2</sup> Berg, Stephen & Clay, Diskin, Trans. *Oedipus the King* by *Sophocles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Lloyd-Jones, Hugh, Trans. & Ed. *Sophocles: Ajax, Electra, Oedipus Tryannus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Berg, p.67, ln.1239.

<sup>5</sup> Lloyd-Jones, p.425.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.424, ln.982-983.

<sup>7</sup> Berg, p.30, ln.183-186.

<sup>8</sup> Lloyd-Jones, p.341.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.436, ln.1071-1072.

<sup>10</sup> Berg, p.44, ln.622.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.44, ln.631.

<sup>12</sup> Lloyd-Jones, p.371.

<sup>13</sup> Bag, p.69, ln.1304.

<sup>14</sup> Lloyd-Jones, p.370, ln.462.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.454, ln.1211-1212.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.466, ln.1365-1366.



Stephanie Roth-Haberle, John Campion. Photo: Richard Feldman.