

EXCHANGE LECTURE WITH THE ACADEMY OF ATHENS

MODERN PRODUCTIONS OF ANCIENT DRAMAS

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BBROADLY speaking, we can distinguish two sorts of theatre, that of Convention and that of Illusion, and though both involve pretence, the degree to which it is admitted differs greatly. Whereas in the Theatre of Illusion, to which most modern plays belong, playwright and producer desire to present an exact picture of life, and demand of their audience that they should assume the role of invisible spectators of tragic or comic events given in terms of the environment in which we ourselves live, in the Theatre of Convention, to which ancient drama belongs, the direct imitation of reality is the last consideration.

Of course, illusionist drama can never imitate life exactly, for its problems are too many and too confusing to be pressed into clear-cut issues divided into acts animated by a heightening of interest as the modern stage demands; none the less, 'verisimilitude' is its target and this stands in direct contrast with the aims of the theatre of convention, which refuses to be the slave of 'reality', and by enjoying the advantage of much greater freedom can make points both faster and more clearly.

Each of these two types of theatre has come into prominence at different times and in different countries.

There can be little doubt that the most celebrated example of a Theatre of Convention is that of the classical world, for though in the course of the fourth century BC playwrights grappling with new problems imposed on the Greek stage something of a realistic pattern, for the most part the ancient tragedians found that they could treat their elevated moral themes, and the comedians their penetrating inquiry into political and social conditions, by leaving themselves unbound by the fetters of illusion. The methods they employed sometimes seem strange to us, but it is largely through such methods that Greek drama emerged.

The question of the origins of Greek drama is, of course, highly controversial and has exercised the minds of some of the most distinguished philosophers and scholars of the ancient and the modern world. As all the information we have prior to Aristotle is so confused and so confusing, there is no point in repeating it here. But no matter exactly how Greek drama arose and how it developed into a great artistic achievement, one thing is clear—that its roots were religious; and no matter what changes it underwent, how humanized or how secular it became from the fourth century BC onwards, it never fully lost its religious colour or its mission as the teacher of the people.

The religious origins and the religious colour of Greek drama are responsible for a number of the basic conventions that determine its structure and its style, and these pose the gravest problems for any modern producer.

First and most fundamental is the *Chorus*, the *bête noire* of all producers, ancient or modern, which, as we are always told, 'can make or break the production'. Its exact purpose in tragedy—and let us set aside comedy for the moment—has been a matter of much discussion among scholars, but I believe most would agree that it had a dual function: it could be both actor and narrator, participant and spectator. Standing in a sense between spectator and action, it identified itself now with one and now with the other.

There were, of course, three basic means through which the tragic chorus expressed itself, words, song, and dance; and as nothing of the music which accompanied the songs and the dances, and nothing of the dances themselves has survived, the modern producer is faced with the major problem of finding suitable substitutes to put in their place.

Though we know nothing about ancient music, which the Greeks themselves regarded as a most important art—of some fifteen more or less fragmentary scores, only one is perhaps earlier than 200 BC and that consists of a few very incomplete lines from the *Orestes* of Euripides—one thing is certain: that the chorus sang in unison, whether as a whole or divided into parts, and singing in unison is a natural process, and can be most effective if properly done. Today, however, because only the words of the chorus-songs have survived, many modern producers train their choruses to *speak* in unison, which is an unnatural process that mangles the words and prevents the audience from hearing the poetry and the elevated thoughts of so many chorus-songs. Or alternatively they split up the song into sections, and have

individual members of the chorus speak one each, a practice which sacrifices the volume and the dignity of a common delivery. And a third practice is to add new music to the words, or snatches of music between the stanzas, both of which are inexpedient, because the quality of the music is usually bad and has concert-hall associations, because of the instruments on which it is played. None of these feeble alternatives is a suitable substitute for the ancient sung choruses with their powerful emotional impact at crucial points in the development of the plot.

The problems created by the loss of the ancient music are indeed grave, but do not compare with those caused by the loss of all ancient religious dancing. This is perhaps the main stumbling-block for the modern producer, who would like to retain something of the religious character of an ancient chorus performance. For the chorus, that basic component of ancient tragedy, was also the major religious vehicle in the plays, expressing its reverence for the gods through religious dances which were often vigorous, a practice that can be traced as far back as the origins of tragedy.

Pre-dramatic dances were, of course, very old and very widespread in the Greek world in archaic times. They can be traced in the Peloponnese, Attica, and Boeotia as well as in the Greek cities of Asia Minor back to the early seventh century, and even before they were presumably taken by Greek colonists to the West. It is also true that similar dances survived long after the institution of the Athenian dramatic festivals, when, however, they became sub-dramatic.

There can be little doubt that much of the emotional appeal of early tragedy resided in the religious dancing of the chorus, and this element, too, in spite of all the changes drama underwent in the Alexandrian Age—the *embolima* choruses, the raised stage, etc.—can be traced to the end; for no matter how curtailed the role of the chorus may have been, choruses that were present during the episodes and were not strangers to the action continued to exist in the Hellenistic Age. And this is attested by the titles of plays like *The Men of Marathon* or *The Men of Pherrae*, which were called after their choruses, from inscriptional evidence, from Plutarch (*Crassus* 33. 3), and from other sources. Nor, of course, could a *palaia*, an old classical play, be revived, as was often done, without the participation of a trained chorus.

Moreover, it is possible to construct long series of illustrations from vases and reliefs, which show identical dance-steps

perpetuated for centuries: women dancing with linked hands, muffled walkers, pyrrhic dancers, padded dancers, prancing satyrs, and the rest, which is some confirmation that the survival of rhythms in choral poetry also means the survival of dance steps. It is clear that a great many units of dance movements, which are also metrical units controlling the sung words, were traditional, and that much of the art of the choral poet lay in finding new combinations of those traditional units, side by side, of course, with the invention of new ones, an ability for which we know Phrynichus and Aeschylus were much admired.

The metres of the chorus songs, as we see them in the texts of our tragedians, seem to indicate not only a walking and stately tempo, but also a striding or dance tempo, and an excited tempo that can be clearly distinguished from the dance time, and dominates many of the agitated choruses. How agitated and how lively the religious dancing of the ancient choruses could be can also be seen from the lines attributed to Phrynichus:

σχήματα δ' ὄρχησις τόσα μοι πόρεν, ὅσσ' ἐνὶ πόντῳ
κύματα ποιεῖται χεῖματι νύξ ὀλοή.

Dance gave me as many figures as a deadly night gives to the waves of the stormy sea.

These agitated choruses engaged in vigorous religious dances, whose steps, gestures, and postures are, alas, irretrievably lost, are the nightmare of the modern producer, a challenge that cannot be met by putting something analogous in their place, for there is no living tradition of religious dancing in the Western world. So as a substitute we are usually given tame movements and graceful groupings inspired by Greek vase-painting or Greek sculpture, or even sometimes borrowed from modern Greek folk-dances, none of which, with the possible exception of the *syrtos* (which appears in an inscription of the first century AD), can be traced back to antiquity. Or, in the rare cases when these pale romantic substitutes are not given, we are presented with a chorus whose unbridled, unruly movements are baffling and have nothing religious about them and little to commend them, like those of the chorus in a recent production of the *Seven against Thebes* by Mr Koun, which was much praised in both France and Sweden.

The suppression of religious dancing and its replacement by ineffective and often insipid movements and groupings have a further disastrous effect in that in a sense it removes the final

and most emotionally charged plane on which tragedy moves. For, as has been observed, Greek tragedy develops on three planes, that of the spoken word, that of song, and that of religious dancing, and as the situation becomes more and more charged, it often shifts from the spoken word to song and finally to religious dancing, and this last and culminating stage is totally suppressed in all modern productions, which are unable to evoke religious elation through dance.

But though vigorous religious dancing was clearly practised in antiquity, none the less to us today it appears strange, almost improper, that choruses of dignified old men like the elders of Thebes in the *Antigone* or the *Oedipus Rex*, or the Argive elders of the *Agamemnon*, should suddenly abandon their solemnity, so suitable to their age, and break out into more or less vigorous dancing, moving arms and legs in an unrestrained manner that hardly seems compatible with their elevated moral and religious utterances, without losing their dignity, without damaging the traditional *σεμνότης* of tragedy.

It is, of course, different when we are dealing with choruses of young men and women, such as the Salaminian sailors in the *Ajax* or with Maenads as in the *Bacchae*, where vigorous movements are suitable and can be beautiful and attractive. But it is quite another matter with serious, stately, elderly men.

A possible answer to this problem was given to me from a most unexpected source, one that has nothing to do with Greek drama. I do not maintain that this is 'the' answer to the problem, but as deriving from a similar parallel phenomenon it is one well worth considering.

Prince Peter of Greece, who had spent some time in Oxford studying anthropology, had travelled to Tibet—I believe in 1962—to further his field-work there. Returning to Oxford the following year, he showed us several most interesting films which he had taken. In one of these a line of elderly Tibetan priests appeared, all wearing different animal masks, who were approaching the altar of their god with a stately, processional step. But from the waist upwards they were in a different world, as though caught in a religious ecstasy. Such were their lively gestures, the throwing back of their heads, the beating of their breasts, and yet, because of the stately, calm manner in which they moved from the waist downwards, they lost nothing of their dignity. They were a most impressive and moving sight.

Could it be that some of the more or less vigorous religious dancing of stately older men in Greek tragedy was also limited

to lively movements from the waist upwards? This would also be in keeping with the important part that *χειρονομίαι*, gestures, played in ancient drama; and it is only lively movements of the lower part of the body that are unseemly and incompatible with the dignity of serious older people, no doubt because of their sexual associations. However, though this may have been the case in some instances, it could not always have been so, for the metres in our texts suggest vigorous movement of the legs in several cases.

But no matter what the exact appearance of an ancient chorus dancing religious dances may have been, the religious colour they added to the plays is now completely lost.

The dance movements and the groupings of the chorus bring us to a further point of great significance—the shape of the theatre in which a classical play is performed. For if we exclude the rare occasions when an ancient theatre, a modern copy of one, or a College garden is used, it is on the picture-frame stage of our modern theatres that ancient plays are given, and this is totally unsuitable for the performance of classical drama.

The classical dramas were composed with a very definite style of theatre in mind, one that placed three distinct levels at the playwright's and the producer's disposal, an orchestra (a round dancing-floor), on which the chorus moved, a slightly raised stage for the actors (even if in the classical centuries they occasionally descended from the stage to the orchestra and mingled with the chorus), and a third and highest level, the *theologeion*, on which the gods appeared. The audience was, of course, seated in an amphitheatre around roughly two-thirds of the orchestra.

This division into three distinct planes existed in the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens from the very beginning, from its pre-Periclean days, long before the stone fourth-century structure of Lycurgus was erected, some of whose ruins we now see at the foot of the Acropolis. And this threefold division continued to the end, even though the stage was considerably raised shortly before the Alexandrian Age and the role of the chorus severely curtailed.

The structure of an ancient theatre gave the producer great freedom in the handling of his chorus, which, moving on the lowest level, the orchestra, did not obscure the view of the actors who performed on the higher stage. At the same time it enabled the spectators to follow clearly the pattern of the dance executed by the chorus, the figures it created, because, seated at a higher

level, they looked down on to the dancing-floor and the performing dancers.

As opposed to this, in modern productions on the picture-frame stage, the audience looks up at the chorus, and all it can see is moving legs, but not the pattern of the dance they are dancing; and the producer is faced with the major problem of getting his chorus out of the way as soon as their part is over, so that the actors can be seen clearly once again, and the play continue. Thus, rushed from side to side of the stage and with never enough space at its disposal, the chorus loses its dignity, and much of the beauty of the songs and everything of the dance disappear.

Moreover, the associations of the modern picture-frame stage are entirely secular and often vulgar—one is even reminded of the music-hall—whereas in the ancient world the associations of a theatre (I am speaking about the building) were primarily religious, for they were structures dedicated to Dionysus or built within a holy precinct, in which performances were given as part of a religious festival, performances held in the presence of the statue of the god.

But even on the occasions when classical plays are revived in ancient theatres, as at the modern Festivals of Epidaurus, Philippi, or Dodona, a religious tone is never achieved, because of the totally profane spirit with which a modern audience approaches the theatre. All they demand is to be entertained and they care little whether they are improved or morally inspired by the play they will follow. No elevated religious emotion is involved. And this stands in direct contrast with the Athenian fifth-century performances, where poet, actors, and audience were conscious of a higher presence, that they were gathered there in an act of worship, all sharing the same experience. Moreover, the ancient audience was prepared to use its imagination and take an active part in the creation of a work of beauty presented as part of a majestic religious festival.

A further important religious element of the ancient theatre, and one of its most basic conventions, was the use of the mask. This most modern producers are inclined to abolish, in a desperate effort to strike a compromise between the theatre of convention and that of illusion. But by doing so they not only remove an intrinsic feature of the Greek theatre with all its religious and idealistic associations, but also the grand style of acting which accompanies the mask, as we shall presently see.

The origins of the mask, like the origins of the pre-dramatic

choruses that wore it—from the chorus it passed on to the actors—were also religious. Anthropology has shown that the mask was not only seen as a means of ‘changing your personality’ in order to act, but also as a symbol of reverence and a means of protection. For in primitive societies to approach your god, or what symbolized him, with head uncovered was considered irreverent and dangerous—dangerous to approach such demonic powers with head unprotected. A relic of this can even be detected in the synagogue of the Jews, which they never attend with head uncovered, and in the practice of the Roman Catholic church, which till recently requested that women should wear some covering on their heads when entering a church.

The origins of both the tragic and the comic mask lie in the Mycenaean Age. In fact, in early pre-dramatic performances all the essential elements of the Athenian dramatic costume can be found—mask, sleeveless chiton, and the boots of tragedy, as well as the tights and the padding of comedy. Of course masks were later developed as a conscious device on the part of the actors—Thespis, for example, the ‘originator’ of drama in the sixth century, is said to have painted his face—and we know that masks underwent a very significant evolution in the course of the Classical and Hellenistic Ages.

But whether primitive or evolved, the mask always retained something of its original religious colour and at the same time performed two further significant functions. Firstly, it enhanced the idealizing tendency of great tragic poetry, a feature, in fact, common to all great classical poetry. For the great tragedians, believing that what is of importance in us is what we share with all, proceeded to simplify and idealize the portraits they presented on the stage—the accidental and the trivial were suppressed—and masks served them well in this process. And secondly, the mask stressed the remoteness and the grandeur of those mythical heroic figures with whose destiny the tragedians were concerned.

The mask, together with the large open-air ancient theatres, obliged the actors to develop a special acting technique, quite different from the largely naturalistic modern style of acting. For in the modern theatre emotions are indicated mainly by the facial expression of the actors—by a smile, a frown, a sneer, etc.—made clear by the artificial light that concentrates upon them, and also to a certain extent by gestures deriving from those of real life.

But in those large open-air theatres which could hold anything up to 16,000 spectators, the actor, acting in broad daylight, dwarfed by his surroundings and wearing a motionless mask, could not rely on small or gentle movements to put across his emotions. Actions and gestures had to be large and sweeping to be effective. The style of his acting had to rely on the grand gesture and the grand posture, which to us, whose taste has been largely shaped by a theatre of illusion, appear artificial and melodramatic, if not ridiculous.

So most modern producers in their efforts to strike a compromise between the theatre of convention and that of illusion, remove the mask, and with it brush aside the traditional grand style of acting, and in its place introduce some form of naturalistic modern acting. Thus by removing the mask and by introducing naturalistic acting they hope to help the modern audience in its effort to identify with the heroes of the ancient plays and not to feel that they are watching the suffering and destiny of outsize, remote, strange beings with motionless faces and grand artificial gestures and postures, figures almost that have suddenly landed on the stage from outer space.

Of course this compromise has been tried out in a variety of ways, of which I should like to single out one that I found very successful, and which was practised by a group of students of the University of Paris in an excellent production of the *Persians* given before the war at the Odeion of Herodes Atticus in Athens. The masks they used covered the whole head but only part of the face, leaving mouth and chin free to be seen moving and alive. This gave the face of the actor both the impersonal and idealizing quality the tragic mask evokes, and at the same time a feeling of reality and life. It also made it possible for those half-masks to be accompanied by a style of acting which was formal and elevated enough but at the same time restrained and realistic. It was, both impressive and convincing.

Closely connected with the style of acting is another nightmare of the modern producer: the long speeches we find in ancient plays delivered by a more or less motionless actor. A static figure, he feels, on the stage, speaking, and speaking with no interruption, sends the modern audience to sleep and is bound to ruin the production. That is, of course, true in the theatre of illusion, but it is otherwise in the theatre of convention, of which long static speeches are an important part. Reality is not what that theatre is after. Blind Teiresias, hurling his fury at Oedipus in the *Oedipus Rex*, or bound Prometheus,

addressing with titanic endurance 'the pure ether and the shimmering waves', were certainly not meant to move about and change positions in the course of their long speeches; and this holds good for a great number of other long monologues or set speeches we find in tragedy—including messengers' speeches—even though in those instances the speakers were neither blind nor bound to a rock.

In order to understand the appeal of long static speeches to the ancient audiences we should remember that the citizens of Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries, especially those resident in the capital, gave a great deal of their time to attendance of speeches at the Assembly and the Courts of Law, and thus acquired the taste for them and the ability to judge their arguments and their structure. The taste for Rhetoric—that wily child of Democracy—increasingly developed in the fourth century and many more of its elements invaded drama. But the reverse is also true, for histrionics, as developed on the stage, began to influence the delivery of speeches at the Assembly, the Council, and the Courts of Law—more prominently, of course, in the days when tragedy degenerated from a poet's to an actor's play.

A further difficulty with which a modern producer is faced is that in Northern Europe and the United States there is no real tradition of lamentation as opposed, of course, to the Mediterranean world, where this is still a living practice. In the Mani, for example, at the tip of the Peloponnese some of the dirges still composed by women—men do not join in the lamentation of the dead—are of extreme beauty, indeed are some of the best poetry composed in twentieth-century Europe.

Lamentation is, of course, an important part of ancient tragedy and according to one school of thought is closely connected with its origins. But quite apart from the usual and most impressive lamentations we find in so many Greek tragedies, such as the *Persians* or the *Oedipus at Colonus*, attention should be drawn to those occasions on which a tragic hero chants his own lamentation—or something equivalent to it—shortly before his exit, because he knows that nobody will be allowed or even willing to lament him after his death. Such is the case with Antigone, who during her final exit in her beautiful exchange with the chorus chants her own 'dirge', which contains an element of self-pity so different to her earlier heroic character; or the lament which Oedipus chants in *Oedipus Rex*, when he emerges blinded from the palace. These are not to be seen as

the usual 'farewell' to life and to the sunlight we often meet in tragedy, but quasi-dirges chanted by the heroes themselves while still alive, because they are convinced that nobody will dare to lament their death; and not to be lamented after death was considered the greatest calamity by the Greeks in antiquity—as it is still considered in certain mountain villages in Greece today—for it was seen as a proof that your passage through life was of no consequence and that nobody would miss you. Thus chanting your own lamentation while still alive is, in a sense, the peak of the tragic situation in an ancient drama.

We have been told repeatedly—and rightly—that if a play is to come to life the *script*, the *actor*, and the *audience* must be brought together. What I wish to underline is the unbelievable effect the audience has upon the script when they establish full contact with a gifted actor. For the great classical plays were composed to be heard and seen and not to be read. Aristotle, I am afraid, is wrong when he plays down the significance of the spectacle in tragedy and maintains that reading a play in private could be just as effective as seeing it performed on the stage. Of course, we know of plays that were written to be read and not to be acted, and Seneca's tragedies are perhaps the most important surviving example, but these authors clearly betray their medium, and that is the basic reason of their weakness.

The script comes truly to life only in that strange, charged atmosphere of a performance in which the audience, having established full contact with the actors, silently but forcefully urges them on to call out of their lines every shade of meaning and life, creating gripping mood after gripping mood as the play moves from scene to scene. Only those who have been lucky enough to follow a great performance of an ancient tragedy at the theatre of Epidaurus with 16,000 spellbound spectators in breathless awe, urging Madame Paxinou to get every particle of horror out of Euripides' *Hecuba*; or Mr Minotis as Oedipus discovering step by step that he had killed his father and married his mother, can really understand what I mean. It is a kind of benumbed mass-hysteria, all the more powerful because it is breathless and silent, sweeping the theatre and infusing new life into the script through a great actor; and this can never be achieved when reading or studying the plays on our own, or even under the guidance of the greatest of scholars. It is the real thing.

But for an audience to be able to identify with the agents of the play and to have that stimulating effect upon the actors,

it must be able to understand what is being said on the stage. And this brings us to the terrible barrier of the classical languages and to the major problem of translations. For no general public, however educated, can follow the classical plays in the original, and I doubt even if specialized audiences of teachers and students of classics can follow a performance with ease and all its shades of diction unless they have previously carefully studied, almost learnt by heart, the particular text. Nor should we forget the major difficulty presented by the many different ways in which the classical languages are pronounced today.

This leads us to the inevitable necessity of using translations of the plays if we wish to bring script, actor, and audience together. The necessity of translations, not only for the production of ancient dramas, but for our general acquaintance with the classical world, is becoming increasingly obvious now that Greek and Latin are no longer as widely taught as they used to be. Indicative of this demand are the half-million copies Gilbert Murray is said to have sold of his verse translations of ancient plays, and the million and a half copies sold of Rieu's translation of the *Odyssey*. The late Professor Dodds, in his recent attractive book *Missing People*, even expressed the opinion that 'a poet translator [he was referring to Professor Richmond Lattimore] renders more important services to classical writers than a dozen textual critics'. This recognition of translators today by distinguished scholars would have been unthought of some fifty years ago.

But it is also true that although one can learn a great deal—although not everything—about ancient thought and ancient society through the medium of translation, it is otherwise with poetry. For in every successful poem words and meaning are, as Dodds puts it, twin-born and inseparable, and all our ancient plays are in verse. A considerable part of the dramatic power of the *Oedipus Rex* or the *Hippolytus* may well survive even in an inferior translation, but their poetry defeats the best. For a great thought can live for ever passed on from tongue to tongue, but a great style lives only in one language.

So we must be conscious that by translating the ancient plays we are sacrificing a great deal, some would say the very soul of poetic drama, the poetry. But on the other hand, through good translations we can enable modern audiences to follow comfortably plot, thought, and character-drawing, and thus make it possible to exercise that stimulating influence upon the actors

that will bring the script to life, even though the translated script is poetically much inferior to the original. This to a certain extent counterbalances, at least partly, the damage caused. Good acting-translations of the ancient plays are unfortunately absolutely necessary if those masterpieces are to be part of our contemporary living theatre, and not museum pieces rarely and unconvincingly acted in a few schools, colleges, and Universities of the Western world. Of course every generation must provide its own translation of the classics, because few things become so swiftly dated.

The problem of translation inevitably leads to Aristophanes and to Old Comedy, about the production of which I should like to say a few things. On the production of New Comedy—we now have one complete and two almost complete plays of Menander—and of Roman Comedy I will not enter, because time does not permit.

I must admit that on the whole I find the production of Aristophanes on the modern stage a much more difficult undertaking than that of any tragedy, for Old Comedy, in spite of the fact that certain of its scenes are still uproarious more than two thousand years later, because dealing by and large with the personal and the topical, is bound to be less enduring than tragedy, which deals with eternal themes and carries a message for all ages. In fact, the more topical a comedy is, the less likely it is to endure. Athenian audiences no longer find much humour in Aristophanes' *Knights*, a satire on late fifth-century Athenian politics, whereas the *Birds*, a more general attack on the problems of empire-building, continues to amuse.

Quite apart from these general considerations, in Old Comedy it is the translation of the exquisitely delicate lyrical passages and of the obscenities and vulgarities that pose the greatest problems, and not, strangely enough, the handling of the chorus. A further insuperable difficulty is, of course, those jokes about whose targets we know very little or nothing at all.

For the rowdy, unruly choruses of Old Comedy, in which the religious element, though not absent, is not stressed, are easier for the modern producer to handle without offending the sensitivity of the modern theatre-goer than those of tragedy. For though superficially there are more vestiges of ritual, of processions and masques and feasting in comedy than in tragedy, they are only on the surface; comedy was in no proper

sense a ritual drama, and the absence of formal religious elements and the possibility of putting non-religious substitutes in the place of ancient non- or quasi-religious elements make the producer's job much easier. If, however, instead of the ridiculing of ancient religious practices, which also appears in the Aristophanic plays, we proceed to ridicule modern equivalent Christian practices—and this has been done—the result is lamentable, shocking to both believers and non-believers in the audience.

The translation of the exquisite lyrical passages of Aristophanes' comedies, such as those found in the choruses of the *Birds* or the *Clouds*, is of course impossible. The most we can hope to give is a rough modern equivalent, and this is a great loss, as those lyrical passages, apart from their poetic beauty, also serve in a sense as a foil for the many obscene and vulgar outbursts that punctuate the plays and which acquire their full power and effect in contrast to the magnificent delicacy and nobility of the lyrics.

But even harder still is the translation of the obscenities and the low vulgarities themselves, which are somehow purged in the original by the genius of Aristophanes. For he has succeeded in charging them with a new, and somehow acceptable, emotional feeling that softens their crude obscenity and vulgarity without eliminating their vigour. They sound different in his plays than when heard in the street or the gutter, without, of course, acquiring anything of the dead, cold, unemotional content of the medical terms for the same thing. This unique Aristophanic achievement is absolutely untranslatable, this lifting into the realm of great poetry of objectionable words, which he achieves through a variety of means: by the position given to them in the line, by the metres and rhythms of the whole passage in which they occur, or by placing them next to suitable 'pure' or 'powerful' words that can carry them. Aristophanes has thus given to his obscene and dirty vocabulary new, literary associations which have somehow altered their common, vulgar colour without, I should like to repeat, depriving them of any of their vigour.

No modern translation of these obscene and dirty passages can preserve anything of that unique Aristophanic quality. All translators can do is to give a crude, vulgar, modern equivalent, or to cut out the obscenity altogether, in both cases irreparably damaging the script. For one can enjoy plays as pure fantasy, in which clever obscenities appear. But if the language

becomes gross, as it does in most translations of Aristophanes, the licentiousness has passed out of the realm of fancy into that of fact, and in the realm of fact it is disgusting. For, as Gilbert Murray has stressed, the escapades and adventures of comic characters, however unedifying, are make-believe, but the words of the characters are reality spoken and there is no getting over it.

If we now turn to the jokes we find in Old Comedy, we observe that a modern audience misses the majority of them through knowing nothing or too little about their targets. Producers usually try to put modern equivalents in their place, which are always incongruous, and nearly always flat or silly. On the whole, by replacing the ancient topicalities by modern ones we lower the quality of the plays and deprive them of much of their sting.

For all these basic reasons and for many more into which we have no time to go—not least among them the difficulties presented by the traditional costume of the actors and the chorus of Old Comedy, with its tights, its padding, and its phallos—I maintain that the revival of an Aristophanic comedy is a much harder undertaking than that of any ancient tragedy. In fact, I have yet to see a truly satisfactory modern production of an Aristophanic play which will give something of that superb combination of satire, humour, abuse, buffoonery, obscenity, slapstick, exquisite lyricism, patriotism, and deep insight into human nature that go to make Aristophanic comedy.

Now that, Cassandra-like, I have listed so many difficulties—some of which are truly insuperable—with which modern producers of ancient dramas are confronted, what are the conclusions we are supposed to draw? Should we limit ourselves to reading and studying these masterpieces on our own and abandon all efforts to present them on the stage, because it is clear that a true revival is impossible? Should we stand like mourning Aphrodite clasping Adonis dead in her arms, remembering his exquisite beauty, but knowing that she can never bring him back to life?

Certainly not, for there is still very much that is meaningful and beautiful that we can get out of a good modern production which we cannot get from reading the original or laboriously studying it on our own. But we should be clear in our minds that what appears on the stage is far from being an exact revival of the ancient play. As we should also bear in mind

that we do not get *ipsissima verba* of the ancient dramatists, even when we study their texts on our own, for the magic and the vigour that the charged atmosphere of the theatre adds to them is missing, and that is an integral part of their emotional content, of which their authors were well aware.

Perhaps most important of all is that we should not use the ancient plays as a vehicle for presenting our own problems, often so different from those of antiquity, on the stage. We should not read into them things that are not there—as is so often done—but approach them as a means of exploring the great problems of antiquity which they deal with and of the solutions they give—whenever solutions are given—many of which are, of course, eternal and common to all ages. Finally—and this cannot be stressed enough—it is well to avoid the modern picture-frame stage for such revivals and the addition of cheap contemporary music.

I must admit that I have been lucky enough to have seen some very successful modern productions of ancient tragedies in Greece, given by the Greek National Theatre, in ancient theatres and in modern Greek translations, in which a great part of the dignity, the nobility, and the elevated didactic spirit of the originals was retained, even though much of their poetry and of their religious glow was sacrificed. As opposed to tragedies, all the productions of Old Comedy I have followed I unfortunately found highly unsatisfactory.