

The proposed paper discusses a production of Euripides' *Helen* that took place in February 2004 in Santa Barbara, California. This staged reading was the crowning point of an interdisciplinary seminar team-taught and co-convened by the authors of this paper. The actors and directors were graduate students in Drama and Classics and professors who taught the class and took part in a workshop and panel discussion that preceded the performance. Central to our effort was a desire to open a dialogue between theater historians and practitioners, as well as classicists, and to create a space where the tension between “authenticity” and “relevance” could be not so much resolved as acknowledged.

In this paper we address the creative process behind the production and discuss the effect of the debate and tension between our source text and our own sensibilities on the final product: a Greek tragicomedy with a 2004 agenda. The script (which Dr. Dutsch prepared) stressed Helen's intellectual prowess and presented her success as a triumph of feminine intellect; the staging situated the characters in a space that was both contemporary (the actors wore modern costumes) and classical (the stage props evoked ancient Greece). The focal point of our paper centers upon what we found to be the most efficient means of conveying the tension between modern sensibilities and ancient drama—the chorus. In fact, our performance featured two choruses: one, clad in black and minimally choreographed, chanted abridged choral songs that set the tone for the exchanges between the characters; the other was an original interlude which Dr. Fishman directed.

Dr. Fishman took the music and dance pieces for this second chorus from traditional music and dances of the Middle East (cf. Marcus, 2007) and from the Sephardic songs of the Mediterranean (cf. Armistead, 2007). The interlude included folkloric dances from Egypt, a *Raqs Sharki* (“dances of the East”) solo, and a solo inspired by classical Persian paintings and dance. These pieces referenced the Egyptian setting of the play and symbolized the various aspects of Helen herself: the Spartan Helen who was worshipped as a goddess of trees and vegetation (*Nadya*), Helen who, according to one version of the Greek myth, spent years in Egypt in Proteus' court (*Ghawazee*); the exotic, “Orientalized” Helen (*Azizam*); and finally, the sensual, exuberant, ultimately triumphant Helen (*Aziza*).

The split chorus, part Euripidean, part artistic commentary, embodied the double desire to reconstruct and reinvent Greek drama at the same time. By giving these two aspirations distinct forms (rather than merging them) we made the audience acutely aware of the tension between accuracy and relevance. In retrospective, we have come to think that this tension was in fact the most productive aspect of our efforts, and that the gap between our text and our performance context, instead of being an impediment, turned out to be a precious stimulus for creativity.

## Select Bibliography

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