

NOTES ON PROBLEMS OF STAGING SOPHOCLES' ELECTRA

For three months drama students of Bennington College and the semi-professional Theatre Studio group have been rehearsing a new English version of Sophocles' Electra with a danced epilogue which is scheduled for production June 9th and 10th in the Bennington College Theatre. The production is being staged by a professional staff, composed of members of the Bennington College faculty: Francis Fergusson, translator and director; Arch Lauterer, scene designer; Helen Forrest Lauterer, director of costume design; Martha Hill, choreographer; and Gregory Tucker, composer of sound accompaniment and music for the danced epilogue. The following notes on the problems of staging have been written by members of this production staff:

* This production is not intended to reproduce a production of Electra as it might have been done in Sophocles' time. Our knowledge of Greek staging is so conjectural that it does not help us much, especially in production on a modern stage. The English version tried to be very faithful to the original, and to grow out of the dramatic exigencies of each situation, as the words in the original do; but the language is frankly that of our own day. We have studied the background of Greek religion, ritual and social custom, not in order to reproduce an unfamiliar set of conventions, but only to nourish the life of the characters on the stage. A Sophoclean tragedy is a beautiful dramatic machine, a fine creature which seems only to need the stage to reveal its life. And it epitomizes so much human experience that it can move us subtly and powerfully even through the strangeness of ancient legends and beliefs.

The motifs used in the setting are based on the archaic rather than the classical style of Greek art. The simplicity of the archaic, which yet allows for the individual and the particular, seemed to us to be close to the style of Electra. The action and movement of the play hover between the palace and the altar. All the forms on the stage are designed to make or intensify this one statement of locale. A similar principle has been used in designing the costumes; they are based on and inspired by the archaic.

** In the choruses, we have attempted to build patterns of movement which may aid in revealing the meaning of the words through a medium other than that of speech. The movement is meant not as an actual reinforcement of the words as such, but rather as an overtone or undertone, less specific than the words themselves. The style employed does not aim at a supposed historic authenticity, but springs from our conception of the play today and the forces which molded it.

In content and style, the Danced Epilogue bears the same relationship to Electra as does the movement for the Choruses. In general, its content is derived from those ritualistic sources of Greek drama which in their interpretation of human experience and their revelation of human emotion are timeless. Ritual modes of death and re-birth especially have been used, because of their relation to the content of Electra.

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The form of the dances has evolved from this content, the locale, and the spatial significance of the forms in the stage design. The style of the movement has grown out of this content, being in one sense archaic, in another, contemporary.

*** The sound for Electra has a two-fold purpose: the creation of an atmospheric difference between chorus tension and that of the dialogue, and the accentuation of the dynamic rhythms of the text. We use a small percussion set playable by two or three people. Melodic instrumentation in the operatic sense has been avoided as being too descriptive.

The score for the danced epilogue is a simple tonal background and employs an orchestra of four percussion instruments and two woodwinds. While there is no attempt at a reconstruction of Greek music, there is a consistent economy of melodic and rhythmic means, which is strictly in accordance with the broad outline of the dance form.