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## Book reviews

G. Van Steen. *Theatre of the Condemned: Classical Tragedy on Greek Prison Islands* (Classical Presences), Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011. xiv + 354 pp., 5 figs. ISBN 978-0-19-957288-5.

Theatrical context generally and the particular context of theatrical productions in Greek prison camps of the post-war period is the subject of this meticulously researched and excellently written new volume. Based on hundreds of interviews the author conducted with ex-inmates and guards at the prison camps as well as ordinary Greeks and supplemented by contemporary secondary research, *Theatre of the Condemned* employs a sophisticated mix of reception theory and theatre studies, a mastery of Classical tragedy and a keen sociological eye to reconstruct an overlooked aspect (theatrical production) of a well-studied period (post-war Greece). The first chapter addresses the political and historical background of the prison camps and the role of tragedy in them, while chapters 2, 3 and 4 focus on the productions of *Antigone*, *Philoctetes* and *The Persians* on the prison islands of Makronisos, Ai Stratis and Trikeri. The concluding two chapters offer perhaps the book's most exciting and lasting contribution: an introduction to and bilingual edition of the Leftist playwright and poet Aris Alexandrou's version of *Antigone*, stage ready for contemporary theatre companies. Each section—the historical and political orientation of the first chapter, the literary and theatrical analyses in the middle chapters and the concluding chapters on Alexandrou's *Antigone*—would by itself offer a significant contribution to modern Greek political history, Classical reception studies and modern Greek theatre in English: taken together, however, the total is even greater than its parts.

In the opening section, Van Steen demonstrates how, for political prisoners, dissidents and others who, often for no real reason at all, were sentenced to “internal exile” to the island prisons, Classical tragedy “... invite[d] analysis of the aspirations and anxieties that the detainees projected onto the broader myths in which they saw their own experiences mir-

rored” (p. 2). The aim of Van Steen's book, then, is to explore the symbolic power Classical tragedy held for prisoners who found in it a mythological analogy to their own experiences: “For all inmate players, the seminal model of the tragic hero, of Antigone, Philoctetes, and Prometheus, became a meaningful exemplum: they saw overwhelming force vanquish merely the body of the hero but not his mind” (p. 14). For many Leftist prisoners undergoing torture and deprivation in the name of ideological “re-education,” these heroic exempla allowed the prisoners “to believe in personal and moral victory” (p. 14). But her book is more than an analysis of this theme. It is through “the study of the *cultural* forms in the history of the Greek Civil War and its aftermath and, in particular, the analysis of ancient Greek drama in the modern contexts of Greek (hyper)nationalism, history making, and memory” that Van Steen provides new insight into the history and political culture of the Greek Civil War and also, from a more scholarly perspective, their performance context, what Van Steen calls “the metatheatrical or symbolic nature” of the plays and their engagement with “issues of censorship, supervision and the appropriation of classical tragedy as cultural capital” (p. 16).

As much as it is a study of Classical reception and theatre, it is also a study of power dynamics and the complex psychological maneuvering which characterize all relationships between prisoners and imprisoners, between powerless and powerful, complicated ideas which Van Steen objectively and expertly describes, while simultaneously remaining sensitive to the human cost of these interactions. When, decades later, Van Steen interviewed the prisoners, they viewed their work primarily through the lens of ideological dissidence. The guards, wardens and intellectual overseers of the camps, however, by choosing which plays to perform and selecting the actors, producers and directors from among the ranks of prisoners (some of whom had substantial theatrical training), believed they were performing these dramas in the service of “*ethniki agogi*, or ‘national education’” (p. 18). The malleability of these classical exempla is all the more fascinating

because of the often opposing meanings imposed on the performances by prisoners and guards: “theatre as tyranny” and “theatre as torture” on the one hand, “theatre of reawakening (*théatro ananíspeos*)” and “theatre of absolution (*théatro apolymánseos*)” on the other” (p. 18). There was ideological disagreement among the prisoner population as well: the more committed Marxists wanted nothing to do with a Classical past at all, while even among prisoners more sympathetic to the project, many felt that the actors had become pawns of the camp administration.

In the middle section, Van Steen analyzes the performance history of the plays themselves. In a world in which prisoners of conscience and jailers upholding the law struggled to claim the cultural capital of antiquity, it is not surprising that Sophocles’ *Antigone* would loom so large. Hegel understood the play to be about the conflict between two equally valid moral claims: the right of an individual to follow her conscience and the right of the state to enact laws and enforce them. To the prisoners of conscience and their jailers, each side, then, could see the play as offering mythological exempla justifying their own particular ideological positions and relation to state power: a “theatre of ideological complicity” (p. 66). In 1948 on Makronisos, the most notorious of the prison islands (and today a protected Civil War monument), for example, the guards permitted the staging of *Antigone*, in which “The prisoners’ political reading of the tragedy brought out the ‘democratic’ elements of a common, popular interpretation hostile to the tyrant Creon. Conservative onlookers, however, found their own measure of ideological satisfaction in a firm, consistent Creon, devoted to the state and to law and order” (p. 66). Van Steen rightly notes, however, that unlike the two other great dissident heroes in tragedy, Prometheus and Philoctetes, who could take some solace in “the promise of a future victory that they live to enjoy, complete with the rewards of exoneration, recognition, and restored memory,” the severity of Antigone’s death offered a harsher possible future. As one of the interviewed detainees is quoted in the book, “Yes, and Antigone dies and Creon counts his losses. But he goes on living. That seemed to me to be the moral of the story” (p. 66).

The heart and soul of the book is not its analysis, however, but her bilingual edition of the Leftist dissident Aris Alexandrou’s adaptation of *Antigone*, written in response to the state-sponsored performance of *Antigone* on Makronisos. Van Steen demonstrates how this “eternal *persona non grata*” came to his own perspective on the *Antigone*. As a Leftist, he was hated by the Right; as a Leftist critic of the Left, however, he was equally hated by them. His *Antigone*, therefore, emphasizes the appalling levels of internecine strife, beginning with the double fratricide with which the play opens and ending with the double deaths of Antigone and Haemon at the hands of their father/father-in-law/uncle. Then, wisely,

Van Steen lets Alexandrou’s play and its characters speak for themselves, in Greek and in her own English translation. In the larger context Van Steen has provided in the rest of the book, Alexandrou’s play stands out for the way in which it engages with the larger theme of the political authority bestowed by the appropriation of Classical symbols. In the interchange between characters with Byzantine and Classical names speaking in the ancient and modern Greek language about contemporary events (the play is set during World War II), Alexandrou’s characters seem to exist in a Greece for all times.

For Alexandrou, a critic of Right and Left, of past and present, the Classical heritage is the common inheritance of all Greeks of all periods, regardless of political persuasion. *Theatre of the Condemned* shows us how the appropriation of Classical literature was a site of nationalist contestation in post-war Greece. It should also remind us, however, that it has become the common currency of world civilization, a notion which Alexandrou identifies in his prologue: “Any similarity with persons who have lived, are living, or will live is entirely coincidental. ... Therefore, any theatre company, professional or amateur, has the right to produce the entire play or scenes of it, without asking permission of the author” (p. 239). The same can be said of the Classical tradition writ large, and Van Steen has provided a valuable service to Classicists, historians and those in the theatre by illuminating this interesting aspect of the reception of tragedy.

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N. Papazarkadas, *Sacred and public land in ancient Athens* (Oxford Classical Monographs), Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011. xii + 395 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-969400-6.

This volume is extremely ambitious, and is based on the author’s Oxford dissertation in 2004. Nikolaos Papazarkadas (henceforth, NP), examines the presence of non-private land in Athens, i.e. sacred and public land, as the title suggests. The structure of the work resembles that of a systematic catalogue (or dissertation), which makes reading the volume from cover to cover difficult, in spite of the seven appendices which include hard facts. On the other hand, this outline allows the reader to find specific areas of interest, which may be preferable. A larger issue is that, generally, the text is too loaded with concentrated facts discussed in detail according to conventional scholarly manner and at the same time too colloquial. For the interested, but non-specialist scholar of the field, it is sometimes hard to